FROM CHALLENGING BEHAVIOUR TO BEHAVIOUR THAT CHALLENGES US TO DO BETTER:

A RECONSIDERATION OF EXCLUSIONARY DISCIPLINE

by

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Dedication

To Pip and Rebecca, thank you for all the joy and magic you bring to my life and for trusting me to be your guiding compass.

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"Never underestimate the big importance of small things" Matt Haig, *The Midnight Library*

Abstract

School counsellors are uniquely positioned within schools to support students and staff because while they typically do not take part in disciplinary processes, one of their primary roles is to support vulnerable students. Despite evidence over the past two decades demonstrating the ineffectiveness and harmful impacts of exclusionary discipline, schools continue to use lunch-time detentions, in- and out-of-school suspensions, and expulsions to punish students for behavioural transgressions. The purpose of this capstone is to review the literature to explore discipline through a biopsychosocial lens in order to understand the factors that contribute to continued reliance upon exclusionary discipline and what is at stake for students. Key findings of the capstone are that student early experiences have the potential for influencing their nervous systems and attachment relationships in such a way that they are primed for conflict within the education system and that new understandings of student behaviour provide rationale for renewed emphasis on relationship-focused student-centred practices in order to create school cultures and climates where discipline supports student growth and development as people. At the same time, it is apparent that internal beliefs and external pressures play a role in maintaining the status quo. School counsellors have a unique opportunity to support administration in shifting discipline practices to make them congruent with new conceptual frameworks.

Keywords: attachment, exclusionary discipline, power, school climate, school culture

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Chapter 1: Introduction

Introduction

> With the change in nature of behaviour problems in today's children and youth and the changing structure of families and communities, out-of-school suspension as a discipline measure may not have the same effect as it once had. Rather than reducing the problem behaviour, suspension may in some situations have no effect or even increase the likelihood of the behaviour recurring (Ministry of Education, 1999, p.2).

In 1999 the Ministry of Education in the provincial government of British Columbia, Canada, published a report entitled *Focus on Suspension: A Resource for Schools.* The authors remarked that schools in B.C., and North America in general, face increasing difficulty in managing problem behaviour and suggested that traditional disciplinary techniques may no longer be sufficient for managing behaviour (Ministry of Education, 1999). Despite these wise words, schools in BC have continued to rely on exclusionary discipline measures like suspensions to correct students deemed to have transgressed boundaries. Meanwhile, research into the neurobiology of trauma, neuroception, and positive behaviour support methodologies continue to reveal how counterproductive such practices are (Berlowitz, et al., 2017; Delahooke, 2020; Gilzene, 2021; Gregory et al., 2021; Huang, & Cornell, 2021; Irby, 2014; Lane-Garon, et al., 2012; McNeill et al., 2016; Mendelson et al., 2015; Sanders, 2024). Indeed, much of the literature regarding exclusionary discipline demonstrates that even though it is intended to increase safety by deterring future misbehaviour, exclusionary discipline practices are ineffective

at doing so because they do not address the underlying reasons that contribute to behavioural incidents, nor do they create opportunities to learn new approaches to communicate or resolve conflict (Leung-Gagné et al., 2022). Educators increasingly face challenges connected to children's unfettered access to the Internet and social media alongside a decline in access to unsupervised outdoor free play (Haidt, 2024) which contribute to the increased reports of dissatisfaction and of teachers leaving the profession as well as poorer mental and physical health (BCTF, 2023). Children and youth bring their personal and private experiences with them into the classroom, making much of what happens in the classroom beyond the control of adults in the education system, and yet, how we respond to students is within our control. A hard truth we must face is that through our own choices we can needlessly add hardships and contribute to poorer outcomes.

It is incumbent upon those involved in the education system to critically examine practices we take as normative in order to determine if they truly benefit students and represent best practices. To this end, in this chapter I will establish the central research focus and set out the key questions that provide the foundation of this examination of exclusionary discipline. In chapter 2, I will review the relevant literature and present the findings that elaborate on the importance of neuroception, student feelings of safety, and the impacts this can have on students and schools before connecting these recent insights to the social-emotional connections that influence sense of self and attachment to others. Finally, I will explore the historical and philosophical context of punishment, in order to understand the continued use of exclusionary discipline. My discussion of potential next steps will form the basis of chapter 3 as it is in this chapter that I will outline small and realistic changes that could prompt meaningful change.

Background to the Issue/Problem

The B.C. Ministry of Education published *Safe, Caring and Orderly Schools: A Guide* (Ministry of Education, 2008) in order to help make schools places where students were free from harm, where clear expectations of acceptable behaviour are held and met, and where all members of the school community feel they belong. This ought to be the way that students experience school but it is unfortunately a goal that can be surprisingly difficult to reach. Even now it is possible to observe the continued prevalence of suspension as an inherent and dominant disciplinary practice so many years after *Focus on Suspension* (Ministry of Education, 1999) was published (Department for Education, 2025; National Center for Education Statistics, 2021). Statistics for use of suspension in B.C. schools are typically not publicly available and are therefore difficult to obtain (Steffenhagen, 2011), but there is some data to give a sense of the continued use of this well-known form of exclusionary discipline. In the 2010-2011 school year, the total number of suspensions in Abbotsford schools rose from 754 in the previous year to 766, and like Abbotsford, in 2010-2011, the Richmond school district reported 381 suspensions (Steffenhagen, 2011). Recently, in one Fraser Valley middle school with a population of approximately 800 students there were 114 referrals to the office and 21 student suspensions in the first month of the 2023-2024 school year (J. Gill, personal communication, October 10, 2023).

Possible interpretations of the limited data are that students are simply poorly behaved and/or that challenging behaviours are happening because staff are not harsh enough with discipline. Indeed, this sentiment is expressed in message boards and is evident in many comments left on news sites featuring stories relating to education where exhortations abound for

schools to implement harsh, often exclusionary, punitive measures to address this trend (Reddit, etc.). Some of the current difficulties in the classroom can be traced to negative impacts from the COVID-19 pandemic. Research into post-COVID classroom incivility suggests that years of interrupted learning has contributed to poorer educational and social skill attainment amongst children and adolescents which also shows up as a rise in classroom incivility (Spadafora et al., 2024). The Human Early Learning Partnership at UBC has also identified significant increases in vulnerabilities in young children, particularly in emotional maturity and social competence following the three years of social and economic instability of pandemic restrictions (Guhn & Janus, 2025). Pandemic impacts highlight the potential that stress and disruptions to connection to translate into classroom behaviour but alone do not account for current classroom challenges. Instead, they suggest disconnection as a foundational issue.

Research into student-teacher relationships demonstrates that level of student-teacher conflict influences bullying-related behaviours in students (Marengo et al., 2021) while research into the efficacy of Mentalization-Based Interventions in classrooms show that teachers' abilities to recognize and reflect on underlying student thoughts, feelings, and intentions during interactions mitigate disruptive behavior or emotional dysregulation in classrooms (Chelouche-Dwek et al., 2025). In this way we can begin to see the centrality of relationship quality to classroom experience. In these disparate lines of research, we can tease out a connection between a lack of consistent, warm engagement inclusive of student perspectives and greater potential for student dysregulation and/or externalizing behaviours.

School counsellors often work with students that experience emotional and behavioural challenges and can intervene or influence the system of discipline used by administration or by

teachers within classrooms. We can help set the tone and broaden awareness or rationale of a different way of approaching students and their behaviour at school. The use of exclusionary discipline practices to reduce or correct undesired behaviors has been a mainstay practice in schools despite the harms that they create, both systemically and individually. Suspensions and expulsions create negative school climates that have negative consequences for all students, especially those receiving them (McNeill et al., 2016). What is more, students that identify with marginalized groups are disproportionately the recipients of these exclusionary discipline practices (Berlowitz et al., 2017; Gilzene, 2021; Gregory et al., 2021; Huang & Cornell, 2021; Irby, 2014; McNeill, et al., 2016; Lane-Garon et al., 2012). Thus, we find ourselves in a position where the practices we employ contradict the purpose we serve because traditional disciplinary practices often lead to, or compound, inequity.

Those in the education system have been given the specific mandate to enable learners to develop their individual potential and to acquire the knowledge, skills, and attitudes needed to contribute to a healthy society and a prosperous and sustainable economy (Ministry of Education and Child Care, 2024). Government expectations include more than critical thinking and communication; they include our participation in assisting the development of citizens who are creative, flexible, self-motivated and who have a positive self-image (Ministry of Education and Child Care, 2024, D-118). It is not possible to truly meet these goals when our disciplinary practices make it so that students are academically further behind, stigmatized and become more likely to drop out or involved in the criminal justice system (Bacher-Hicks et al., 2019; McNeill, 2016). If the methods used to teach students how to participate safely in classroom or school settings put them at risk for poor outcomes, then it is necessary to critically evaluate their use.

The evidence of the negative impacts from exclusionary discipline practices have prompted researchers and educators over the past twenty years to look for alternative disciplinary practices. Three key alternatives to traditional approaches feature prominently in the literature: Restorative Practices, Positive Behavioural Intervention and Support, and Collaborative and Proactive Solutions (Lodi, et al., 2021; Oxley & Holden, 2021). Sometimes labelled 'positive discipline', these varying programs and practices have been increasingly adopted by schools in an effort to align discipline with social justice principles. This approach focuses on positive reinforcement and connection rather than punishment, being proactive rather than reactive, and collaboration rather than top-down decision-making (Oxley & Holden, 2021). Restorative justice and restorative practice interventions are often at the forefront in discussions of school discipline reform. While there is great potential for shifting from a punitive lens to one based on relationship, repair and community reintegration, restorative justice and restorative practices are frequently misunderstood, and all too often, well-intentioned people attempt to implement restorative justice and restorative practices without proper training (Wang & Lee, 2019).

Unfortunately, these situations have the potential create more harm than good since lacking fidelity with established restorative practices, stemming from perceived time pressures or lack of adequate training, may fail to lead to expected outcomes, impacting perceptions about efficacy of restorative justice and restorative practices, thereby contributing to decisions to continue with traditional practices (Cama, 2019; Gilzene, 2021; Lodi, et al., 2021; Payne & Welch, 2017; Wang & Lee, 2019). Success also depends on achieving significant buy-in from the staff, without this, implementation of restorative practices and establishment of effective systems can prove difficult (Gilzene, 2021; Goold, 2024). There are similar barriers in the

implementation of Positive Behavioural Intervention and Support (PBIS) with particular importance placed on administrator support of the program and staff buy-in (Kuh, 2021), however there are also growing concerns for the potential for PBIS to label, punish, and surveil students, activities that are antithetical to trauma-informed education and the goals of discipline reform (Kim & Shevrin Venet, 2023). Therefore, the issue is not that there are no alternatives to use in place of exclusionary discipline, rather it is that inertia has a powerful hold – our schools are in a state of rest with insufficient external force or too many impediments to prompt a change in state.

Purpose of the Capstone

The purpose of this capstone is to review the literature to understand the factors that contribute to our reliance upon exclusionary discipline and explore alternatives that can be realistically implemented in the BC education system in order to create small, meaningful change. The hope is that those in the education system who read this capstone, are motivated to take steps to become more intentional and effective in supporting students by creating a context where discipline supports student growth and development as people. This would also help mitigate behaviours that intrude upon their own learning and those of other students.

Research Question

The key research questions this paper will address are: Suspensions are often seen as a method of modifying one student's behaviour but how do these suspensions reverberate beyond the individual and shape school culture? How can we understand the students we have in front of us better? How do the adults involved in students' lives facilitate and maintain in-effective practices? What principles, as opposed to specific programs, can school counsellors adopt to

support a shift away from exclusionary discipline?

Each of these individual questions create the foundation for answering the fundamental problem: How can we begin to meet our students' needs for safety, care, and effective learning spaces without giving into the systemic pressures towards reinforcing self-defeating narratives through disciplinary practices? In other words, what can we as school counsellors do when there is an inclination or standard practice of suspending our way to obedience?

Significance of the Capstone

The education system changes slowly for many reasons, including diversity in populations served, variation in teaching philosophies, and teacher autonomy to facilitate student interaction with the provincial curriculum. Despite personal idealism and a sense that change is urgently needed, the capstone is expected to have a limited sphere of influence – indeed, it is unlikely that few members of the BCTF or the BCPVPA will read this capstone and there are no illusions that this capstone could achieve what the Ministry of Education's own report could not.

In his 2015 TEDx Talk on the bystander effect, Ken Brown referenced the quote famously attributed to Margaret Mead, "Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed citizens can change the world; indeed, it's the only thing that ever has" (TEDx, 2015). Brown goes on to share that his initial impression exhausted him as he imagined one small group of people working late at night trying to change the world, and then went on to elaborate that he understands it to be the potential that each of us has to become a galvanizing force, a catalyst for others to follow. This fits with his argument that the bystander effect is more complicated than originally posited; that diffusion of responsibility does occur when bystanders are passive but that we see a helper effect when at least one person actively helps. It is this belief that small

changes have ripple effects, and that real impacts can begin with one active helper, that is expressed in the capstone.

Lack of exposure and direct impact does not mean that this project is without any importance -- this capstone is not intended to propose a new positive discipline program or to push for wide-scale adoption of those already in existence -- instead, its value is as a call to others to recognize the opportunities they have to make small changes, which can in turn shift school culture and climate. Putting insights gleaned from research into neurobiology, attachment, and dynamics of power in one place for budding school counsellors to consider may precipitate an appetite for confronting assumptions and traditional practices when they step into their new roles and help them create shifts in school culture and climate that are in alignment with the goals of making truly safe and caring schools.

Theoretical Orientation

This capstone approaches exclusionary discipline via a biopsychosocial lens. The biopsychosocial model (Engel, 1977) posits that biological, psychological, and social factors interact in reciprocal ways to influence individual health and well-being. Reflecting this, in chapter two I will explore Polyvagal Theory, Attachment Theory, and Foucault's discourses on power. Attachment Theory refers to John Bowlby and Mary Ainsworth's work investigating the emotional bonds between children and their caregivers and how these early relationships shape emotional regulation, social functioning, and mental health throughout life (Khadka, 2022). Polyvagal Theory, known colloquially as the science of safety, emphasizes the role the autonomic nervous system, especially the vagus nerve, plays in regulating our health and behavior given that our physiological state forms the foundation for our sensations, thoughts,

emotions, and behaviours (Porges & Onderko, 2025). The theory explains how the autonomic nervous system regulates our physiological state and affects our behaviour -- viewing trauma, illness, disorders, and life experiences as having the ability to retune the nervous system away from homeostasis and resilience to become trapped in a state of threat and defensiveness. Historical contextualization of the purposes of punishment is also included as a means of investigating our persistent use of exclusionary discipline in the school system despite evidence against its use. This will be achieved through including a brief consideration of Michel Foucault's discourses on power, as it provides a lens for understanding ways power functions in institutions and as a relationship between individuals where one person can direct the behaviour of another or determine the behaviour of another by resorting to a number of tactics (Foucault, 1995).

Positionality Statement

My interest in challenging the continued reliance upon exclusionary discipline in many areas of the education system developed organically from my first assignment in the School Counselling program at City University. For this assignment, we were tasked with exploring an issue relevant to our school setting and working through a process for resolving it. One of the most pressing issues I saw in my school, and in my district as a whole, was the ongoing impact of bullying and so I chose to explore the roots of bullying behaviour and the best practices to have a sustained impact. What stood out the most at the time was the importance of empathy, specifically the lack of empathy, as a causal factor in bullying behaviour, and thus, I began to be curious about how individuals and systems are complicit in bullying through the ways that we respond when bullying occurs. While the literature made clear that the deep roots of bullying

behaviour in social and family systems meant that successful treatment of bullying behaviour needed to involve extending empathy to those who bully, what I saw occurring in my day-to-day school experiences was a hardline approach to addressing behaviour concerns among students.

This disconnect between what the literature described as a necessary and beneficial approach and traditional disciplinary practices taking place in actual school settings was disconcerting. Indeed, teaching grade seven students about cyberbullying prompted me to put into practice my own theoretical understanding of justice and empathy for all in real time. This meant maintaining a difficult balance of perspective taking, providing fresh starts, and encouraging accountability in a school climate where firm responses to behaviours were the accepted norm. Yet even behaviourism demonstrates that punishment alone is insufficient – it can teach us what not to do, but it is reinforcement that propels change in a particular direction.

In some ways, my topic is still a small surprise to me because I lack personal experience with suspensions, detentions, or other forms of behaviour correction beyond a single lunch hour of garbage duty. Moreover, as a cisgendered, white, middle-aged, moderately middle-class woman who has a reasonably high level of education and grew up in a family that had more strengths than stretches I am the recipient of much privilege. Indeed, exploring this capstone topic has highlighted something that I took for granted for much of my life – a secure attachment with my parents built on a foundation of affection, parental interest/attention, guidance, encouragement, play, respectful boundaries, imagination, expectations, and time spent together. As a child and as an adult, I had an inner confidence in my own independence and in my ability to access support if needed — I had a visible and sturdy safety net. All these varying influences have left me attuned to and uncomfortable with aggression and defiance but also aware of the

importance of being supported through challenges.

Definition of Terms

Attachment: The bond felt by a care seeker for a particular individual who is thought to be better able to cope with the world (Bowlby, 1998a, p. 27 as cited in Riley, 2010, p. 12). It is a drive or relationship characterized by the pursuit of and preservation of physical, emotional, and psychological proximity (Neufeld & Maté, 2024, p. 311).

Exclusionary discipline: Describes any type of school disciplinary action that removes or excludes a student from his or her usual educational setting and typically takes the form of expulsion and suspension from the school community. This includes both in- and out-of-school suspension since in-school suspension removes students from their classroom setting (Lamont et al., 2013; McNeill et al., 2016).

Neuroception: Nonconscious, neural process distinct from perception capable of distinguishing environmental and visceral features that are safe, dangerous, or life-threatening (Porges, 2022). Subtle cues rapidly relayed between the body and the brain, determine how we react by reflexively altering our autonomic state – safety engages the parasympathetic system and threat, the sympathetic system (Olson, 2014; Porges & Onderko, 2025).

Peer Orientation: The phenomenon of children and youth turning to each other for instruction, modeling, and guidance -- children being brought up by immature persons who cannot guide them to maturity because of an orientation void created by economic, social, and cultural shifts since the mid-20th century (Neufeld & Maté, 2024, pp 7-8).

Power: Fundamentally the exertion of influence or control over another's thoughts or behaviour but considered as something which can take several forms, and which can appear as

possessed/non-possessed, relational, and contextual depending on the philosophical orientation one holds (Christensen, 2024). Thus, it can be seen to be held by an individual, culture, state, or society which exercises it in a repressive way over someone else while it can also exist from the ground up in a way where it makes the subjects their own governors (Christensen, 2024).

School Climate: The perception of the organizational environment by individuals within the school arising out of the characteristics of the total environment in a school building (Owens & Valesky, 2015).

School Culture: The behavioural norms, belief systems, values, and ways of thinking that are characteristic of the people in the organization that provide the identity and set the standard for behaviour (Owens & Valesky, 2015; Stolp & Smith, 1995).

Social Engagement System: The Social Engagement System is formed through the connection of cranial nerves V, VII, IX, X, and XI, a grouping which contains afferent and efferent nerves affecting our social, emotional, and physical functions. This cluster of functions orchestrates our capacity to interpret and express social behaviours as appropriate such as suppressing defense systems and promoting behaviors like vocal prosody, facial expression, and gaze stabilization when neuroception detects safety (Porges & Onderko, 2025).

Chapter Summary

Exclusionary forms of discipline, such as suspension and expulsion, persist as common forms of dealing with student misbehaviour despite recognition that socio-cultural shifts have made these forms of behavioural correction no longer effective (Department for Education, 2025; NCES 2021). There is also robust evidence that exclusionary discipline harms students and is disproportionately applied to vulnerable student groups (Bacher-Hicks et al., 2019; Berlowitz

et al., 2017; Gilzene, 2021; Gregory et al., 2021; Irby, 2014; Huang & Cornell, 2021; Lane-Garon et al., 2012; McNeill et al., 2016). The biopsychosocial model provides an effective and comprehensive means for exploring some of the significant dynamics involved in continued reliance on exclusionary discipline and explanations of the negative impacts of exclusionary discipline. In the next chapter, explorations of Attachment Theory, Polyvagal Theory, and Foucauldian discourses on power relations are placed alongside each other to provide an opportunity to better understand intangible features of classroom relationships and practices that interact and influence each other. Each of these theoretical approaches highlight the importance of relationships and provide distinct processes in which relationships inescapably function in reciprocal yet non-conscious ways.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

Introduction

Disciplinary practices like suspension or exclusion from the classroom remain common and preferred amongst some educators who are inclined towards a school culture typified by desire for compliance. Despite its ubiquity, there are many schools where open conversations questioning this approach do not occur, or if conversations do take place, conversation is dominated by those who prefer strong penalties as a means of punishing students into positive behaviour. However, it is worthwhile remembering that being a common practice makes something a norm; it does not necessarily mean that it is natural or healthy.

In this chapter I will explore Attachment Theory, Polyvagal Theory, and Foucauldian discourses on power relations in order to make sense of why this practice continues and why it is harmful. I will also touch on ways educators may contribute to the behaviours they seek to change (or punish) by exploring research into teacher misbehaviour. These three approaches were chosen because applying a holistic lens allows greater breadth and depth. The biopsychosocial model represents a sophisticated and multi-faceted view of individual health and interaction with social and political systems. Following the review of selected literature, there will be an exploration of potential avenues for educators to intervene intentionally for the benefit of students, staff, and the system itself, such as through creating school culture of safety. Note that the term ‘educators’ is used throughout the capstone to provide inclusivity. Although teachers hold primary responsibility in the classroom, there are many different roles beyond that of teacher, therefore, ‘educators’ is used to refer to individuals such as Educational Assistants, teachers, school counsellors, youth workers, Indigenous Liaison Workers, and administration.

Theoretical Frameworks

Conceptual framework: Biopsychosocial Model

First developed by Drs. George Engel and John Romano (1977), the biopsychosocial approach was proposed as an alternative model to the narrow pathophysiological and biological approaches to disease dominant at the time. The biomedical model was criticised as being limited for its focus on disease as essentially biological/molecular when instead there ought to be consideration of the person who has the illness; their experience of, account of and attitude towards the illness; whether the person or others regard the condition as an illness; care of the patient as a person; the effect of conditions of living on onset, presentation and course; and the healthcare system itself was conceptualised as a social factor (Bolton, 2019). Engel pointed out that even with the application of rational therapies, the behaviour of the physician and the relationship between patient and physician powerfully influenced therapeutic outcomes for better or for worse (Engel, 1977).

Although Engel (1977) specifically situated the genesis of the biopsychosocial approach in the contemporary debates over the inclusion or removal of psychiatry from medicine (a crisis that highlighted the need for a new model), the approach is a systems model and can be applied in other similar contexts. It has become one of the main approaches in psychology and can also be used to understand the education system (Moreira et al., 2021; Taukeni, 2025; Woods, 2019). The biopsychosocial approach has been chosen as the theoretical framework for my capstone because it explicitly delineates multiple factors that interact in reciprocal ways to cause and maintain cognitive, affective and behavioural experiences for people existing in social systems. Student behaviour in the school setting is often viewed or dealt with as the product of a moment

with the infraction being seen to originate in the individual. Sometimes allowances are made for family dynamics, but it seems to be that infractions are primarily viewed through a behaviourist lens where schools can punish students into compliance. We have traditionally viewed behaviours in our culture through the lens of compliance and non-compliance without regard for an understanding of why behaviours are adaptive (Delahooke, 2020). Thus, the limitations of such an approach are analogous to the limitations that Engel identified in the biomedical model.

The biopsychosocial model does more than articulate a rationale for challenging the biomedical model as it also guides practitioners to develop new ways of providing care. In fact, clinicians that apply the biopsychosocial approach actively recognize that relationships are central to providing care, contextualize patient history in their life circumstances, decide which domains (biological, psychological, or social) are most important to understanding and promoting an individual's health, and provide multidimensional treatment (Engel, n.d.). This broadening beyond the molecular view of disease or disorder is similar to the broadening beyond the paradigm of compliance and non-compliance that permeates our education system. Some have characterized the education system as working from an outdated model that views behaviours in isolation of the totality of the holism of the body, mind, and most importantly, of children's relationships when, in fact, we need to be viewing children's behaviour as messages about safety (Delahooke, 2020). It serves to resituate the issue or problem from originating within the individual to existing within the context around the individual, which also shifts how we approach incidents and students themselves.

Biological underpinnings: Polyvagal Theory. On the surface, the responsibility the education system has to enable students to develop their individual potential and to acquire the

knowledge, skills and abilities needed to contribute to a healthy society and a prosperous and sustainable economy (Ministry of Education 2025) appears to relate to students' social or cognitive domains. If biology is considered, it is usually in relation to substance use/addiction, illness, neurodivergence, or hunger/nutrition which suggests that it is only on a case-by-case basis that biology is a concern of the education system. However, the biopsychosocial model is predicated on the reciprocal nature of these three domains and when one or more is disturbed, there are direct impacts on the other domains and the person as a whole. In fact, the biological domain is a significant influence on all students' experiences of the education system, and how they behave within it. As psychologist David Myers (2014) points out, "To live is to take in information from the world and the body's tissues, to make decisions, and to send back information and orders to the body's tissues" (p. 86). In other words, despite all the achievements and ephemeral complexities of being human, our sense of self and our presence in the world originates in the biochemical processes of neuronal or cellular communication.

Polyvagal Theory is a is a fitting means of exploring exclusionary discipline because it offers a method for understanding how our nervous system responds to different situations, like stress, danger or safety and provides a comprehensive explanation of psychological safety that is grounded in neurophysiology, psychology, and evolutionary theory (Morton, et al., 2024; Polyvagal Institute, 2023, Porges & Onderko, 2025). Polyvagal theory positions the nervous system at the centre of the human experience and contends that when humans feel safe, their nervous system supports the homeostatic functions of health, growth, and restoration while simultaneously being accessible to others (Olson, 2014; Porges, 2022).

Stephen Porges developed Polyvagal Theory in the mid-1990s when he was exploring

psychophysiology – the relationship between mind and body, or representations of mental activities in our own physiology – through observations of heart rate and heart rate variability (Polyvagal Institute, 2022; Porges, 2025). The theory then progressed from initial examination of physiological signals coinciding with anxiety, attention, mental effort, and focus and enervation, to becoming almost synonymous with trauma and trauma-informed practice (Polyvagal Institute, 2022). The theory has much broader applications given that it makes explicit our hard-wired threat detection system and how that system influences our behaviour and our responses to others. In this way, we can meaningfully begin to explore some of the non-conscious mechanisms involved in reciprocal classroom interactions and relationships, including how they prompt certain behavioural responses from students and staff.

The human nervous system is comprised of the central nervous system (CNS), the brain and spinal cord, and the peripheral nervous system (PNS), which gathers information and transmits messages from the CNS to other body parts (Myers, 2014). The PNS itself is separated into two main components: the somatic nervous system, which enables voluntary body movements, and the autonomic nervous system (ANS), which regulates involuntary functions such as glandular activity, heartbeat, and digestion (Myers, 2014). The ANS is further differentiated into the sympathetic nervous system (responsible for the “fight-flight-freeze" response) and the parasympathetic nervous system (responsible for “rest and digest” functions) with both systems working together to support the body and maintain a steady internal state. When a threat is detected, the sympathetic nervous system activates and accelerates heartbeat, raises blood pressure, slows digestion, raises blood sugar, and cools us with perspiration, then once the threat has passed, the parasympathetic nervous system produces the opposite effects of

calming the body by decreasing heartbeat, lowering blood sugar, etc. (Myers, 2014).

The primary component of the parasympathetic nervous system is the vagus nerve, known as the tenth cranial nerve or CN X. The vagus nerve is unique among cranial nerves because it extends beyond the head and neck, and is in fact, the longest in the body. It extends into the abdomen and connects with all internal organs, serving both motor and sensory functions thereby affecting several organ systems and regions of the body, notably the heart and gastrointestinal system (Kenny and Bordoni, 2022; Porges & Onderko, 2025). The significance of this is underscored when we consider the fact that 80-90 percent of the information that the vagus nerve transmits travels from the body to the brain, rather than from the brain to the body, contradicting the notion that the brain governs the body (Porges & Onderko, 2025). Just as new research into how our gut microbiome influences neurological and mental health upsets long-held assumptions about the relationship between the brain and the rest of the body, Polyvagal Theory induces us to see the power of embodied emotions and sensations shaping our behaviour.

Polyvagal Theory represents a shift away from a binary understanding of the ANS where the sympathetic and parasympathetic branches are seen to function in opposition to one another. Instead, polyvagal theory divides the parasympathetic branch into two subbranches -- a ventral vagal system and a dorsal vagal system -- which exist alongside the sympathetic nervous system (Wettstein, et al., 2024). This is the basis for the three main psychological, emotional and behavioural responses or states occurring from real or perceived sensations of threat or safety; described as safe, mobilized, and immobilized (PVI, 2023).

According to the Polyvagal Institute (PVI), the ANS is constantly scanning for cues of safety or danger, and when in a state of safety, people feel calm, relaxed, and connected to those around them. This corresponds to the ventral vagal parasympathetic state. The mobilized state

occurs when the ANS detects danger with adrenaline and cortisol is released to increase heart rate, breathing rate, blood pressure, pupil dilation, and blood flow to major muscle groups. Such physiological changes enhance chances of survival through fighting or fleeing danger and correspond to the sympathetic nervous system activation (PVI, 2023). This is the response popularly known as 'fight or flight' first coined by Walter Cannon in the 1920s (Schmidt, et al., 2008). Exploration of 'freeze' responses began in the 1970s, and this forms the basis of the immobilized response of the dorsal vagal parasympathetic state (PVI, 2023). Freeze responses occur when there is danger so great that one is unable to fight or flee successfully leading to a decrease in heart rate, blood pressure, and body temperature, and an increase in endorphins to inhibit pain (PVI, 2023).

The ventral vagal state is the default mode because it allows us to stay in connection with one another and co-regulate each other – it is active until we lose a felt sense of safety (Olson, 2014). The ventral vagus nerve inhibits sympathetically controlled fight or flight behavior, regulates the heart rate, and acts to prevent the sympathetic nervous system from influencing the heart's activity. The ventral vagal nerve is essential to activating the Social Engagement System through the perception of safety about the internal or external context (Porges, 2022; Wettstein et al., 2024), in part because it integrates regulation of blood pressure and heart rate with vocalizations, hearing acuity, posture, and facial expressions, all of which is critical to fostering social interactions, cooperation, and trust (Porges & Onderko, 2025). It can be thought of as a brake mechanism that is engaged in slowing heart rate when activated through a felt sense of safety, and this engaging and releasing of the ventral brake fluctuates throughout the day to respond to situations we encounter (Porges & Onderko, 2025). The dorsal vagal pathway on the

other hand, fosters digestion and supports calm and safe bonding behaviours in a state of safety, and is linked to fainting, fear-induced defecation, shutting down, and dissociation in response to overwhelming threats (Porges & Onderko, 2025).

Although they were originally described separately, additional research led Porges and others to further refine the concept as a continuum of states and identify specific blended or hybrid responses. For example, the hybrid state of ventral vagal pathway and dorsal vagal pathway leads to meditative quiet and moments of intimacy, whereas the hybrid of the sympathetic nervous system and ventral vagal pathway supports play, dance, sports, and other performances (PVI, 2023; Porges & Onderko, 2025). Trauma and chronic stress can lead to a miscalibration or dysregulation of ANS sensitivity and put one into a state of survival or defensiveness which in turn impacts physical and mental health (PVI, 2023; Porges & Onderko, 2025). Defensiveness or cycles of activation and shutdown typical of those who have experienced complex trauma is of particular importance when considering the dynamics of a school environment. Here, each student's felt safety, or internal sense of being secure, will be highly influenced by the environment, and if there is miscalibration, it will increase the likelihood that students will react to a sense of threat and bring themselves into conflict with educators and fellow students.

Psychological Underpinnings: Attachment Theory. Attachment Theory is a powerful means of understanding individuals and their responses to others given that it provides a structure for conceptualising and explaining human behaviour from the cradle to the grave (Bowlby, 1969). At its core, attachment involves a drive or relationship characterized by the pursuit and preservation of physical, emotional, and psychological proximity (Neufeld & Maté,

2024). The origins of Attachment Theory can be traced back to the 1930s with John Bowlby's initial interest in the connection between maternal loss/deprivation and later personality development and Mary Ainsworth's observational studies of infant-mother attachment in Uganda in the 1950s (Bretherton, 1992). Bowlby and Ainsworth helped move developmental psychology beyond its early psychoanalytic roots by establishing a scientific way of investigating and conceptualising what Freud described as the "...significance of the mother - unique, incomparable, unalterable throughout the whole of the individual's life...she is the first and strongest love-object, the paradigm for all later love relationships – for both sexes" (Freud, 1939, p. 43).

Instead of viewing this in terms of an early, instinctual bond that forms the foundation for later unconscious desires and conflicts, such as the Oedipal complex, Bowlby articulated caregiving relationships through the language of cognitive and biological systems, even going so far as to consider attachment as equally a genetically based instinct as eating and sexual behaviour, perhaps even taking precedence over either (Bowlby, 2022). Just as the bodily functions of temperature regulation or blood pressure are maintained between appropriate limits for good health, attachment is a system of the regulation of "...distance or accessibility … to clearly identified persons … maintained by behavioural instead of physiological means" (Bowlby, 1988a, p. 29 cited in Riley, 2010). Thus, Bowlby's initial work in attachment explored how children inhibit exploration and play when faced with stress, illness or threat, that at these times, children engage in reciprocal 'goal-corrected' feedback with an 'older wiser' figure, 'secure base' or safe haven for protection until the danger has passed (Holmes, 2024). The concept has been further refined over the years and attachment can be thought of as the bond felt

by a care seeker for a particular individual who is thought to be better able to cope with the world (Bowlby, 1998a, p. 27 as cited in Riley, 2010).

Ainsworth's observational studies of infant-mother interactions in Uganda in the 1950s laid the foundation for her later work investigating attachment styles. Ainsworth observed distinctions in the quality of mother-infant interaction, particularly in what she termed maternal sensitivity, that corresponded to three infant attachment patterns observed: securely attached infants cried little and seemed content to explore in the presence of mother; insecurely attached infants cried frequently, even when held by their mothers, and explored little; and not-yet attached infants manifested no differential behavior to the mother (Bretherton, 1992). In this initial study Ainsworth noted infant use of mothers as a secure base in connection with evidence of secure attachment which provided a powerful basis for her later work in the Baltimore project, a longitudinal study of attachment (Ainsworth, et al., 2015).

Drawing on Jean Arsenian's (1943) study of mothers and children in the insecure situation of incarceration in a state reformatory for women, Ainsworth decided to develop a separation-reunion procedure for the Baltimore study (Waters, et al., 2015). Ainsworth and Wittig (1969) used an innovative strange situation procedure that structured shared presence, separation, and reunion identifying three attachment styles distinguished from each other by the various attachment behaviours shown by infants. The Strange Situation Test provided researchers the opportunity to observe the balance of attachment and exploratory behaviors under conditions of novelty and alarm (Ainsworth & Bell, 1969). Ainsworth et al. observed that the presence of the mother was found to encourage exploratory and play behaviour while her absence decreased these behaviours and increased attachment behaviours such as crying and

searching for the caregiver (Ainsworth & Bell, 1970). Proximity seeking and contact-maintaining behaviours were seen when there was a reunion of mother and child, yet there was a substantial proportion of infants who demonstrated contact-resisting behaviours alongside contact-maintaining behaviours (ambivalence) and another proportion of infants who demonstrated proximity avoiding behaviour in the reunion. The ability for the infant to resume exploratory behaviour or to return to a pre-separation level of calm or connection with the caregiver was dependent upon the quality of attachment that was built through the pattern of parental responses to the infant.

Through the observed individual differences of toddlers noted during reunion behaviours, Ainsworth et al (1978) created separate categories of attachment security: secure, avoidant, and resistant/ambivalent classifications (Waters, et al. 2015). When the mother returned to the room, *secure* children quickly rebounded. *Avoidant* children seem to reject the mother, displaying little affect as though their attachment behaviours were inert. In contrast, *resistant/ambivalent* children were dysregulated for a significantly longer period, with the mother unable to co-regulate them. A key strength of this research was that it provided a means of investigating how different patterns of strange situation behavior indicate differences in the way infant-mother attachment became organized. Ainsworth, et al. (1978) demonstrated that there was more meaning and insight to be had by correlating maternal behaviours with qualitative outcomes once attachment was established rather than correlating them with the age of attachment onset; in this way, maternal behaviours could be investigated for their potential to provide a good outcome toward the end of infancy (Waters et al., 2015).

A later category of attachment, disorganized/disoriented, was added by Mary Main and

Judith Solomon (1986) to the Ainsworth and Wittig (1969) original three-part classification system. This category was developed through an effort to account for observations of children whose responses did not fit within the behavioural descriptors of the three traditional classifications but who were nonetheless assigned into such categorizations (Main & Solomon, 1986). Main and Solomon (1986) re-evaluated strange situations that were initially labelled unclassifiable because of inconsistent approach-avoidance behaviour, for infants in both the regular, white middle-class sample and those in the maltreatment and high-risk sample, finding indications of conflict between behavioral systems, or mutual inhibitions of systems. Examples of such behaviours included falling prone on reunion, showing dazed behavior when in contact with the parent, approaching with head averted, approaching with arms outstretched before turning and standing still in center of room, crying while moving away from parent, as well as leaning head on wall and facing away while crying (Main & Solomon, 1986).

The data from reviewing reviewed several studies of high-risk populations suggested that the difficult-to-classify infants might be even more insecure than those in the traditional two categories of insecure attachment (Main & Soloman 1986). These infants appeared so overcome that they could not develop any coherent strategy for achieving proximity with their caregiver in the strange situation, thus Main and Solomon (1986) came to reconceptualise ‘approach-avoidance' behaviour that combines proximity-seeking with suddenly veering away, not as an extreme form of avoidance but as a distinct classification (Landa & Duschinsky, 2013).

Further research by Mary Main and Erik Hesse (1990) investigated the role that fear of the parent played in the genesis of disorganized attachment. Main and Hesse (1990; Hesse & Main, 2006) found that (frightened/frightening) parental behavior inherently places infants in

behaviorally irresolvable situations since the attachment figure simultaneously becomes both the haven of safety and the source of the alarm. Hesse and Main (2006) termed this a situation of "fright without solution" because unlike other frightening situations such as separation from the parent which can has a solution, it can create an irresolvable approach-flight paradox for the infant. In this way, we can see the disorganized attachment patterns resulting from being caught between needing a secure base in the form of a parent or teacher to retreat to when threatened or experiencing duress and being threatened by or frightened of the person that is supposed to be that secure base. Although attachment disorganization was related to high fear of the parent or exposure to severe trauma, loss, or abuse, Hesse & Main (2006) also observed a disorganized attachment pattern amongst infants outside of maltreatment samples in low-risk populations which led them to consider disorganization to also be a result of a second-generation effect of the parent's earlier trauma.

The attachment behaviours demonstrated in the strange situation studies (Ainsworth & Wittig, 1969; Ainsworth & Bell, 1970; Ainsworth et al., 1978) are rooted in separation anxiety, a normal rather than pathological response to environmental circumstances, and can be understood as separation protest (Riley, 2010). In this way, we see that attachment is the connection that is felt, the desire to remain close to the care seeker, particularly in times of stress, which persists across time, while attachment behaviours are the various behaviours that the care seeker uses to remain in close proximity to the caregiver and are triggered by actual or imagined separation from the caregiver (Holmes, 1993). These care-seeking behaviours appear to be innate whereas the relationship bond formed between infants, children, or youth and their caregivers is created through repeated exposure to each other (Riley, 2011).

Crucially, strength of attachment is not static but changes throughout the lifespan in response to experience, meaning that attachment strength or characteristics are not due to an innate quality of the child but arise out of reciprocal experiences. Moreover, the attachment system appears to be naturally hierarchical, generally with the parents at the top, closely followed by grandparents, siblings, aunts, and so on (Riley, 2010; Neufeld & Maté, 2004) and when primary attachments compete, only one will prevail as a guiding force, a powerful influence on and individual's behaviour and their relationships with others (Neufeld & Maté, 2024). The importance of attachment is also shown in longitudinal studies such as the Minnesota Longitudinal Study of Risk and Adaptation where attachment history was shown to be clearly related to the growth of self-reliance, the capacity for emotional regulation, and the emergence and course of social competence, among other things (Sroufe, 2005). Those with insecure attachments were more likely to respond to social problems with frustration behaviour and aggression and were more likely to fall to pieces under stress.

According to Attachment Theory, we have all learned to form and maintain relationships by our accumulated experience of relationships with our inner working models helping us to predict others' behaviours (Riley, 2010). Jeremy Holmes described the inner working model as "...a map of self, and others, and the relationship between the two … The map is built up from experiences and is influenced by the need to defend against painful feelings" (Holmes 1993, p. 221). The personal model tells us about our place in the environment and our place with others and once built, these models tend to persist and are so taken for granted that they come to operate at an unconscious level (Bowlby, 1988a as cited in Riley). Evidence suggests that being securely attached allows one to amend and update the working model over time as relationships with

others change, while being insecurely attached makes one less able to change an internal working model (Riley, 2010). In this way, initial approaches to new relationships are shaped through previous experience, which means that there is much for teachers and students to navigate before instruction even begins.

Social Underpinnings: Foucault, Power, and the Panopticon. Full consideration of Michel Foucault's conceptualizations of power and discursive practices, as well as the bulk of the scholarship into his works, is beyond the scope of this capstone. However, it is fruitful to use the ideas of Foucault as a point of reference, particularly since Foucault explicitly analyses education and schooling as an apparatus of modern disciplinary power in *Discipline and Punish* (Gallagher, 2013). Foucault (1995) begins his discourses on punishment, surveillance, discipline, and power with a gruesome description of the torturous drawing and quartering of a prisoner in 1757 juxtaposed with a time-table of monotonous prison existence eighty years later; in this way he highlights the shift from punishment as spectacle to administrative practice.

Foucault was interested in the origins of industrial and post-industrial expressions of power after centuries of monarchical rule drawing much of his theorizing around power from the historical moment in which sovereign power transitioned to a different form: disciplinary power (Jefferson & Smith-Peterson, 2021). Foucault (1995) argued that tortuous examples of punishment like public executions formed, "...a policy of terror: to make everyone aware, through the body of the criminal, of the unrestrained presence of the sovereign" (Foucault, 1995, p. 49). These actions did not merely inflict physical, bodily pain upon criminals as a form of punishment, rather, such spectacles taught wider society norms about crimes punishments (Cho et al., 2024). In this way, individuals were punished and the public was disciplined while cueing

them to authority. In contrast, disciplinary power was more subtle, distributed, and continuous proliferating through institutions such as prisons, hospitals, schools, and the military. Such institutions provided the means and mechanisms to discipline society through the regulation of individuals, which was achieved through surveillance and the encouraged internalization of norms (Jefferson & Smith-Peterson, 2021).

According to Foucault (1995), our contemporary experience of power is as a force that permeates all situations, all people, all classes and castes; it is not something that is held by individuals but circulates being produced and reproduced by and through relationships, with its effects becoming internalized (Jefferson & Smith-Peterson, 2021). Power is not monolithic or stable; power relations must be constantly reiterated in order that they are reproduced in their prevailing form (Done & Bamsey, 2025). Foucault stated that power is not a thing, but is instead, a relationship between two individuals where one person can direct the behaviour of another or determine the behaviour of another by resorting to various tactics (Foucault, 1996). Foucault (1995) situated this discourse within the historical context of the rise of the prison with particular emphasis on jurist and social reformer Jeremy Bentham's model of the panopticon.

Originally described in a series of letters sent throughout 1787, Bentham (1995) envisioned an ideal prison, a theoretical inspection house, wherein prisoners would be contained within individual cells partitioned such that each prisoner is secluded from all communication with each other. These cells would encircle a watchtower from within which a single supervisor would be able to see inside each cell. Bentham (1995) expected that this contrivance of seeing without being seen would ultimately remove the need for any kind of external supervising presence since prisoners would begin to shift their own behaviours. Preventing interaction

amongst inmates while making everything prisoners did observable to authorities was central to Bentham's design. Since the tower could be seen out of, but not into, prisoners would be unable to discern when they were being watched and when they were not, thus they would begin to behave as though they were being watched all the time (Gallagher, 2010). Foucault concerned himself with shifts in historical phases to demonstrate how modes of punishment carry meaning in the context of a moment's dominant features and tensions (Schwan & Shapiro, 2011), hence it was this use of individuals' consciousness of the potential for being constantly seen that Foucault saw as a vital turning point in the history power and punishment. Foucault (1995) argued that such knowledge would maintain their disciplined behaviour and produce subjected or 'docile' bodies.

Themes and practical applications of theory

Safety in the Education System

Safety and inclusion serve as the first in a hierarchy of needs for a student to succeed in their educational pursuits and it goes beyond physical aspects but includes psychological and emotional security including validation and a sense of mattering (Lain, 2018; Strange & Banning, 2001; Strange & Banning, 2015). In *The Invisible Classroom: Relationships, Neuroscience and Mindfulness in School,* Kirke Olson reminds us that "[w]hen the fear circuits of the brain are active, clear-headed decision making and new learning is difficult or even impossible. What is needed in addition to physical safety is emotional safety" (Olson, 2014, p. 14). This is why the quality of the relationship between students and staff in the education system is of critical importance.

In a safe environment, mammals typically adapt using the Social Engagement System;

however, risk exposure in the environment may cause activation of the sympathetic nervous system triggering the fight-or-flight response, which may be part of the pathophysiology of trauma (Hanazawa, 2022). Student physiological responses impact their readiness to learn, and if we want to best support our students, we must cue safety to prevent students from entering a fight or flight state. Doing so requires instructors to shift perspectives around behaviour, particularly 'undesirable' or challenging behaviours from being inherently bad or oppositional and see students as being influenced in some way by their experiences (Delahooke, 2020; Walker & Flaherty, 2024). Higher behaviour functions, which are frequently intentional, are dependent on the functioning of the more survival focused foundational systems embedded in the brainstem (Porges, 2022). It is specifically this dependency of higher cognitive functions, including intentionality, upon nervous system regulation that forms the argument for reconceptualizing student behaviours.

The ability of the prefrontal cortex to interpret a stress response as a false alarm and restore balance is slowed, and sometimes completely stopped. This creates a situation where someone who is trauma affected is quick to interpret an event or environment as threatening and is quick to enter into a fight or flight state. Unfortunately, typical approaches to student behaviour and discipline are predicated on an understanding of behaviour through a moralistic lens of willful non-compliance (Delahooke, 2020) which is why the linguistic shift of challenging behaviour to behaviour that challenges matters. Language has power for shaping our understanding of a concept and when we broaden the focus of what a child or youth is doing to a view that accepts that these behaviours hold meaning and impacts for youth themselves not just those affected by their behaviour (Bristow, et al., 2022).

Students living in fight or flight mode have diminished capacity for higher order processing of nuanced emotion and information (Walker & Flaherty, 2024). Sadly, when educators and administrators discuss the fight or flight system, there tends to be a bias towards giving allowances for flight. Flight, taking the form of avoidance responses, is more likely to elicit sympathy and support than fight which tends to be viewed solely as bad behaviour in need of punishment. In this way, we are holding students accountable for their nervous system response as if they were making a conscious and deliberate decision to cause harm, thereby applying behaviour policies to children regardless of their abilities to conform to them (Emerson, 2022). This is similar to the issue of disproportionate use of exclusionary discipline with students with disabilities, particularly learning disabilities and attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (Couldry, 2024; Knudsen & Bethune, 2018) where students are being punished at higher rates higher numbers for behaviours that connect with their neurodivergent profiles. Punishing students in this way impedes the goals the BC government has set for the education system (Ministry of Education, 2024) and the best interests of children and youth because students who regularly experience executive functioning impairments frequently find themselves in a pattern of reprimand where poor behaviour is highlighted, which in turn contributes to increased anxiety and anxious responses including absenteeism and school refusal (Emerson, 2022).

The most recent McCreary Centre Society report (Smith et al., 2024) demonstrates why educators need to approach students and classes with an awareness that those they work with may be trauma affected. According to the report, 45% of youth went to bed hungry at least sometimes, 9% of students reported being forced into sexual activity (7% by another youth and 2% by an adult), 15% of youth report being physically abused, 35% of youth experienced

discrimination, 23% of BC youth have seriously thought about or attempted suicide while 24% of youth have cut or injured themselves on purpose without trying to kill themselves (including 17% who self-harmed on multiple occasions) and 25% felt staff did not expect them to do well, 33% felt they were treated unfairly by staff, 37% felt unsafe at school, and 39% felt their teachers did not care about them. When it comes to creating a culture and climate of safety in the classroom, it is incumbent upon educators to think in terms of felt safety being necessary for some but beneficial for all and recognize that we will rarely know who which of our students experience these barriers.

Students who experience trauma or chronic stress develop less resilient nervous systems because trauma induces persistent changes in the nervous system (Porges, 2025). Porges (2025) highlights the role that early adversity − including neglect, trauma, or inconsistent caregiving − can have in biasing neuroception toward threat, leading affected children to often display emotional lability, behavioral dysregulation, attention difficulties, or social withdrawal. Chronic autonomic dysregulation may develop from remaining physiologically anchored in defensive states, manifesting as hypervigilance, dissociation, anxiety, depression, or a range of somatic symptoms (Porges, 2025). If neuroception is dysregulated, inappropriate signaling may occur, such as perceiving danger when actually safe, or safety when actually in danger. For example, students with a history of severe adversity may find themselves habitually hypervigilant in anticipation of threats which increases the likelihood of externalized emotions through behaviours such as aggression, defiance, impulsivity, and rule-breaking (Bristow et al., 2022). The benefit of a polyvagal lens is that viewing behaviour through the lens of nervous system functioning transforms an understanding of behaviors from signs of willful misbehavior or

cognitive deficit to expressions of a nervous system that remains trapped in defensive mode (Delahooke, 2020; Emerson, 2022; Howard, 2013; Porges 2025). It also highlights the influence that educators have as partners in student experiences in the classroom.

Teaching is a highly emotionally charged task and has one of the consistently highest stress levels amongst the helping/caring professions (Riley, 2010; Wettstein et al., 2024). Teacher stress and burnout are connected to internal and external stresses like perfectionism, exaggerated parent or administration expectations, and diverse learning needs in the classroom but one especially difficult stressor is aggressive student behavior (Evers et al., 2004; La Marca et al., 2023; Tsouloupas, 2010). Student aggression includes any verbal or physical behavior directed toward another individual with the intent to cause harm to another person who is motivated to avoid the harm and takes various forms like hitting, insulting, or mocking others (Kühne et al., 2024). It is often these behaviours that will prompt exclusionary discipline to be meted out. However, student aggression is not an isolated event with a single actor but rather a complex process involving students, teachers, their interactions, as well as their individual stress experiences (Wettstein, et al., 2024).

Neuroception does not exist for only one person in the room – each individual is scanning for signals of threat or safety, students and staff alike. This is why educators' response to students when they present behaviours that challenge ought to take into consideration a much broader context. Kühne et al. (2024) measured teacher heart rate and heart rate variability in both face-to-face teaching and leisure contexts observing physiological signs of stress, including anticipatory stress prior to lessons and in response to student aggression. In discussion of their results, Kühne et al. (2024) suggest that teachers seem to be less able to deal flexibly with

challenging student behavior via communication in moments of student aggression and that their repertoire of coping strategies is likely restricted, limiting their ability to respond adaptively to student aggression.

Lischke et al. (2018) similarly used vagally mediated heartrate vmHRV as a biomarker of behaviour in social contexts and identified teachers with a lower vmHRV may be less successful in regulating their emotions and less likely to show cooperative behavior. Kühne et al (2018) therefore suggest that the physiological impact of stress on teacher responses to students means there is a risk that challenging classroom situations will persist or exacerbate. Indications of low vagal activity could contribute to neuroception of threat for some students as they observe the affective experiences, emotional expression, vocal communication, facial gestures, and social behavior of teachers experiencing stress. Put into the context early experiences and miscalibration or dysregulation of ANS sensitivity (PVI, 2023; Porges & Onderko, 2025), we see the potential for a hypervigilant student's activation to begin to mirror the teacher's anticipatory stress resulting in behaviours indicative of fright/flight.

Educators who are functioning in a primarily ventral vagal state will create vastly different classroom environments and school climates than those primarily operating with their sympathetic nervous system activated, conditions that will influence student neuroception of safety. It is irresponsible to view student interactions in the school setting without exploration of direct and indirect contributing factors. Studies confirm that teacher misbehaviour is related to teacher-student incidents where the teachers' tone of voice, sarcasm, targeting behaviours, etc. instigated or contributed to escalated emotions and behaviours from students (Hepburn, 2000; Lewis & Riley, 2009; Munn et el., 2004; Sava, 2002). It is therefore important to acknowledge

the role that educators' neuroception of safety and threat will have on the way they respond to students and how roles and responsibilities are understood more generally.

For this reason, adults in the education system benefit from being mindful of their own neuroception of safety and steps that can be taken to improve felt sense of safety. Wettstein et al. (2024) describe teachers' reactions to aggressive student behavior as falling into three overarching categories: punitive (threatening, punishing, and belittling), neutral (observing/ignoring, stopping, and admonishing), and social integrative (suggesting a compromise, integrating, encouraging, empathizing, and using humor). Neutral or punitive measures are deemed ineffective in preventing aggressive student behavior while social integrative responses are considered favorable, yet observational studies show that teachers oftentimes ignore or punish aggressive behavior and may thereby even trigger further disruptions (Wettstein et al., 2024). Conversely, positive teacher-student relationship is associated with lower stress levels (La Marca et al., 2023), reductions in disruptions/student aggression, and demonstrations of prosocial behavior (Obsuth et al., 2017 cited in Kühne et al., 2024).

Safety is more than the absence of danger or threat; it involves a feeling of ease facilitating sociality, adaptability, and co-regulation (Porges & Onderko, 2025). Co-regulation involves attunement with another's ANS and is a supportive, interactive, and dynamic process – at its heart, co-regulation is connecting with a child who's in distress and being able to evaluate what that child needs in the moment to help calm themselves (Salamon, 2024). It is through co-regulation that educators can use the reciprocal nature of the ANS to their advantage and strengthen student autonomic resilience. Repeated experiences of nervous system disruptions and subsequent repairs contribute to rebuilding autonomic balance and a bias towards safety and

connection, enhancing fluidity and resilience (Porges & Onderko, 2025). Moreover, educators and caregivers that are responsive and attuned can use their own regulated states to serve as anchors, helping to establish vagal flexibility in others (Porges, 2025). Educators can achieve this through supporting practices that create a sense of safety and connection while leaving behind practices that cue students to have a neuroception of danger at school. Neuroception is not just an assessment of safety or threat based on what is in the current physical or social environment, previous experiences become encoded in memory in such a way as to produce an expectation that what happened in the past is likely to occur in the future (Olson, 2014).

When students are suspended or otherwise excluded from their school community, the feelings of threat related to school will compound and continue to impact the reciprocal neuroception process, however, when students repeatedly experience co-regulatory interactions, their ability to shift flexibly between physiological states is facilitated creating the biological foundation for later self-regulation, social engagement, and cognitive growth (Porges, 2025). Fundamentally, Polyvagal Theory reveals insights into relationships between individuals in the classroom as well as dynamics that are involved in shaping children and youth. The early development of autonomic regulation is shaped through relational co-regulation between infants and caregivers making attachment more than just an emotional or cognitive construct but also a neurophysiological process rooted in the calibration of the autonomic nervous system through social interaction (Porges, 2025). This is a useful reminder that attachment is not static and secure attachment can be cultivated.

Attachment and the Education System

Although technological and social changes have transformed the world since the early

twentieth century, the heart of the issue guiding this capstone is the same that Bowlby encountered when working at a school for maladjusted children in the late 1920s: attachment. It was his experience working with two children at this school that set his professional life on its course -- one of these children was a very isolated, remote, affectionless teenager who had been expelled from his previous school for theft and had not had a stable mother figure (Bretherton, 1992). The connections Bowlby saw between the lack of a stable and caring mother figure and the youth's antisocial behaviour and exclusion from the regular school system is also the story of our current crisis in education.

Developmental psychologist Gordon Neufeld both surprised and validated the assembled educators at the BC Provincial Intermediate and Middle Years Teachers' Association's annual conference when he remarked that kids today are unteachable (G. Neufeld, personal communication, October 21, 2022). The session "Turning Teacher Stress Around" dealt with connections between familiar challenges of the classroom and shifts in family patterns before advocating play as a solution for weary and frustrated educators. It was a call for educators to prioritize attachment in their practice, the same message that is at the heart of one of Neufeld's best-known publications, *Hold On to Your Kids: Why Parents Need to Matter More Than Peers* (Neufeld & Maté, 2024). The value of this work for the present investigation into exclusionary discipline is its explanation of the psychological factors that exert influence on behaviour within the classroom as well as why exclusionary discipline is ineffective and harmful to both the individual student and the classroom context.

The premise and purpose of *Hold On to Your Kids* is that there have been seismic social, economic and cultural shifts in the past five or six decades that have disrupted the attachment

process where children attach horizontally to their peers rather than vertically to adults (Neufeld & Maté, 2024). One of the greatest fears we humans know is abandonment (Fraley & Shaver, 1997; Holmes, 1993; Holtzworth-Munroe et al., 1997; Hoshmand & Polkinghorne, 1992; Macnab, 1991; Mann, 1991; Teyber, 2006) and the separation only needs to be threatened in order to cause anxiety in children (Riley, 2010). The reduction in amount and quality of time that caring parents, extended family members and those in the wider community can spend with children has created attachment and orientation voids which children fill with their peers in order to satisfy our innate orienting instinct (Neufeld & Maté, 2024). The sad fact is that today's children and youth find themselves in an analogous situation to Harry Harlow's rhesus monkeys with children's peers cast as the terry cloth 'mothers' – the best available but still insufficient for the task.

Neufeld and Maté (2024) point out that the first business of attachment is to build a compass point out of the person we attach to, our primary attachment figure, and that as long as the child can find themselves in relation to this compass point, they will not feel lost. They argue that parents and educators find themselves in a fraught situation because the fear of being lost is all-encompassing and the voids created by current economic, social, and cultural forces are too painful that children attach to their peers to avoid these negative feelings (Neufeld & Maté, 2024). However, Neufeld and Maté are quick to point out the unfortunate truth that attaching to peers does not keep children from being lost, merely from feeling lost. Moreover, they argue that this disruption in the natural hierarchy whereby immature humans guide the behaviour, thoughts and feelings of other immature humans underlies and exacerbates the mental health crisis in schools and has made children and youth 'unteachable'.

The sense of hierarchy is key to understanding what is happening in classrooms and how current disciplinary practices contribute to the problems they are trying to solve. One of the strengths of Neufeld and Maté's (2024) work is how they make explicit the dynamics of dominance and dependence, caregiving and care-seeking involved, and providing and receiving in orientation and attachment relationships, as such, they argue that a child is receptive to being taken care of or being directed only as long as they are experiencing dependent mode and that attention follows attachment. When peers have become the cue-givers instead of parents, children and youth will seek to please those that occupy the position of primary attachment figure, their peers, and when the values of peers deviate from the adults involved, it will be almost unbearable for children and youth to find favour with us and so we find that children and youth resist reasonable expectations (Neufeld & Maté, 2024). Compounding this is the potential for children and youth to become defended against vulnerability, when our brain's instinctive defensive reactions against being overwhelmed by vulnerability are evoked against a consciousness of vulnerability not actual vulnerability itself (Neufeld & Maté, 2024). In these situations, there is an emotional hardening with a child losing touch with thoughts and emotions that make them feel vulnerable and a diminished awareness of our human susceptibility to be emotionally wounded.

Peer orientation creates an appetite for anything that diminishes feelings of vulnerability including emotional shutdown and cool detachment (Neufeld & Maté, 2024). The impacts of this are readily apparent in the classroom as the teachability of any student requires a connection with the teacher and an inclination to pay attention, thus, shifts in attachment patterns have profoundly negative implications for the education system. The ramifications include impediments to

cognitive and social-emotional development as well as behaviour because crucial learning processes are suppressed alongside disinclination towards learning (Neufeld & Maté, 2024). An intentionally relationship-based approach to education and discipline is important because knowing about human attachment and love can make for more effective teachers and make the days in the classroom go more easily (Olson, 2014, p85).

The crucial role of relationship in education is one of the reasons why Philip Riley (2011) argues that the traditionally conceived foundations of education, the 3Rs (Reading, wRiting and aRithmatic), are not the true foundations of education at all. Instead, Riley asserts the premise that these 3Rs can only be built on an even more fundamental set of 3Rs: Relationship from the student's perspective; Relationship from the teacher's perspective; and the priority given to Relationship formation and maintenance from school leadership. Similarly to Neufeld and Maté (2024), Riley outlines that schools function effectively only when both sets of 3Rs must be in place and that too little attention has been paid to the fundamental 3Rs by educators.

The role of relationship in education is not a new topic but Riley's (2011) position is transformative of this discussion because he shifts the focus towards adult psychological and emotional reactions to students. In his introduction he describes an "ah-ha" moment where he realised that teachers, especially those who appeared to need their students to love or respect them, could display separation protest behaviours. Extending his analysis, he suggested that applying attachment theory allows us to comprehend why teachers and students may become aggressive with each other given that separation protest can take the form of inappropriate wielding of power as a threat designed to keep the attachment figure close through fear, and in adults, this could look like the absence of student love or respect might provoke teachers to

unconsciously punish students in an attempt to gain or regain it (Riley, 2010). Although it may make some educators uncomfortable to consider attachment in the educational setting in terms of their own attachment style, it is a hard truth that some educators take their emotional insecurities and struggles out on students, in the form of teacher misbehaviour which can include targeting certain students in inappropriately punitive ways (Hepburn, 2000; Lewis & Riley, 2009; Munn et el., 2004; Sava, 2002).

Unfortunately, researchers and educators alike have often tended to overlook teachers as a potential source of problems in the classroom (Kearney et al., 1991). Teacher misbehaviour can result in students becoming fearful or resentful of their teachers and disengaged from the subjects taught by them, with the most commonly reported forms of misbehaviour being excessive negative criticism, embarrassment and humiliation, and yelling in anger (Lewis & Riley, 2009). The term *didactogeny* has been used to describe unintentional harm caused by teachers using inappropriate educational strategies and techniques to maintain classroom control and covers both acts of omission and commission, as well as conscious and unconsciously driven behaviours (Lewis & Riley, 2009).

Indeed, teachers are a significant source of student distress in the classroom and students singled out for discipline are not the only ones to suffer from inappropriate discipline strategies and practices as there is a ripple effect created in the public disciplining of students which affects the whole class. For example, research Lewis and Riley (2009) conducted on student interpretations of teacher punishments shows that public discipline of an individual student, as opposed to private discipline, causes the whole class to lose the focus of the lesson. The student learning shifts from the lesson content to the emotions elicited by negative teacher–student inter-

actions and the stress this causes students tends to provoke typical fear responses varying such as increased arousal and anxiety to fight/flight/ freeze (Lewis & Riley, 2009; Rosenzweig et al., 1999). There is also potential for educators to work against themselves. Way (2011) has found that more school rules and higher perceived strictness predict increased incidents of disruptive behavior which suggests that attending schools with more severe punishments may have the unintentionally prompt defiance amongst certain students.

According to Riley (2010), much of the research into classroom aggression is built on the assumption that teachers as rational professionals deal with students, including the aggressive and irrational ones, efficaciously and effectively at nearly all times given the circumstances, training and experience despite the fact that classroom behaviour by all participants is an emotional experience. He elaborates on this assertion describing the reality of classroom life as a place where highly charged emotional bonds are forged between teachers and students that go well beyond the rational, conscious mind and that paying attention to teachers' adult attachment styles offers a significant opportunity to predict and intervene if needed to improve their student management style.

Interestingly, teachers can be seen to engage in discursive practices that reduce the sense of felt culpability as they rationalise their behaviour to themselves and others in ways that position students to be at fault regardless of the true situation (Hepburn, 2000). This is important because it is not just student behaviour that elicits a specific response from an educator but also the perceptions and emotions of all involved. Research demonstrates that high suspension rates and low academic outcomes are associated with teacher perceptions of student competence, low parental school involvement and students' perceptions that teachers were uninterested in them

(Christle, et al., 2004; Morrison & D'Incau, 1997; Skiba et al., 2016) as well as implicit bias and stereotype (Keller, 2024; Okonofua & Eberhardt, 2015; Trovato & Zimmerman, 2024). This last factor is crucial and highlights the necessity for educators to accept our own role in constructing the classroom environment and accountability for any disruptive elements we bring to it, including how we approach student misbehaviour.

Punishment and Power Dynamics

According to Foucault (1995), surveillance, categorization and classification, the timetable, non-idleness, and regimentation of the body are the mark of modern discipline (cited in Alford, 2000). There exists a wealth of scholarship analysing classrooms and schools using Foucauldian concepts alongside numerous and varied critiques of doing so. For example, Jefferson and Peterson (2021) related panopticism to the creation of docile bodies in lived teaching practice. They note that Foucault claimed that power comes from everywhere because human interactions form a network of relations that represent the essential sites of power production (Jefferson & Smith-Peterson, 2021). This is a particularly important concept for analysis of and reflection on educational practice, as our encounters with students, parents, teachers, and administrators all represent power relations (Jefferson & Smith-Peterson, 2021). This evolution of power relations occurs because power "...is exercised through networks, and individuals do not simply circulate in those networks; they are in a position to both submit to and exercise this power. They are never the inert or consenting targets of power; they are always its relays. In other words, power passes through individuals" (Foucault, 2003, p. 29).

Jefferson and Smith-Peterson (2021) also note that scholarship on the panopticon in schools has often focused on the practices teachers use to surveil students with some scholars

focusing on traditional forms of classroom surveillance, school architecture and the arrangement of classroom furniture to facilitate the supervision of student behaviour, while others have highlighted the increasing influence of new technologies, including CCTV cameras and the use of student databases and apps (Cho et al, 2024; Jefferson & Smith-Peterson, 2021). In the research comprising his doctoral dissertation, Michael Gallagher (2010) observed students in their natural classroom environment as a means of assessing Foucauldian ideas in practice and notes that in the panopticon, self-surveillance is encouraged simply by preventing the inhabitants from knowing whether they are being watched or not. He contends that Bentham's principle was that power should be visible, so that the inmate is always aware of a watching presence, but unverifiable and that in the perfect case, self-surveillance should become so effective that the supervising presence is made redundant. Gallagher scrutinized impacts and limits of the gaze of the teacher and focused on the docility of the children and found that these techniques of surveillance are much more messy, complicated and compromised than the idealised scheme of the panopticon might suggest. His field work suggested that surveillance in the school was discontinuous -- in contrast to the panoptic ideal of total and constant visibility -- and often carried out by hearing as well as vision.

Gallagher (2010, 2013) suggests that Foucault's account of the panopticon is most useful if it is understood as an ideal model of power, rather than as a description of how specific institutions truly function given that it is best understood as only one part of a much wider body of work, and an idealised theorisation of a programme of power. While simple parallels risk misrepresentation of Foucault's complexities, some scholars have attended to the tools used to surveil teachers, such as digital management technologies and the mandated use of scripted

curriculum materials that facilitate administration and parental scrutiny of classroom activity (Jefferson & Smith-Peterson, 2021). Just as was the case for students, the result of this surveillance is self-monitoring and a degree of docility (Jefferson & Smith-Peterson, 2021).

The current classroom context for many students is one of digital technology and ideals of twenty-first century learning (Claro & Castro-Gau, 2023). This is a vastly different context than the one in which Foucault's ideas gestated and found their initial publication. Fascinatingly, the ideals and technologies of digital era have not shifted discipline and punishment into a new epoch. Indeed, many digital apps for education have gained popularity, particularly the behaviour management app ClassDojo which is used in up to 95% of public classrooms, and one of the defining features of such apps is the automation and tracking of punishments and rewards, (Cho et al., 2024). This matters because, as Cho et al. (2024) reveal, these apps have the potential to provoke feelings of fear, shame, and surveillance given that classroom actions are constantly tracked and monitored, and in some contexts, use was tied to surveillance and social control more than any other potential uses. One of the concerns is that it is not just behaviour that can be affected but also the inner sensibilities of children and youth (Cho et al, 2024).This, combined with the knowledge that caregivers potentially having frequent and almost immediate access to information about their behaviour in the classroom, creates a situation where twenty-first century learning has the potential to become a new format of panopticism.

Yang (2009) also explores the idea of self-monitoring but includes consideration of teacher self-surveillance sharing a poignant anecdote from his early teaching days to demonstrate how teachers are disciplined *to discipline* students. At the outset of the school year, he had no classroom, no textbooks, and no supplies other than a box of copy paper and pink office referral

slips. A few months in, he used these ubiquitous pink slips to write his first referral for a student involved in a classroom incident. Yang describes ambivalence in this moment as he had a sense that administration may have had something useful to say to the student but did not inherently consider it necessary for the student to be sent to the office. He admits that it was the voices of the other students in class who were telling him to "Send her to the office" that decided his course of action. Between these students telling Yang how to deal with incidents in the classroom and the prominence of the pink referral forms, Yang received direct and indirect cues about how teachers are supposed to discipline students. The disciplinary action he took resulted in a return to school meeting where he was confronted with the observation that the issue could have been resolved at the classroom level and that what had been a positive teacher-student relationship was now disrupted. Sharing such a moment serves to illustrate the complex performativity in responding to classroom behaviours given that there is an immediate audience to incidents and educators' punishments. Indeed, Lustick (2015) suggests we can view strict suspension and expulsion policies to be part of the spectacle of discipline that Foucault described, demonstrating the power of the school to punish and remove students and, in so doing, deter other students from misbehaviour.

The thrust of Yang's (2009) analysis and argument is the idea that discipline should be seen as distinct from punishment and should take the form of training or self-guidance that can lead to strength: discipline as praxis with its transformative possibilities. Using suspensions as a window into inclusion and exclusion, the difference between discipline and punishment, Yang argues that Foucault's discipline is not the source of repression but is instead its mechanism, a tool that can be reclaimed to take apart the system (Yang, 2009). Foucault's focus was on power

relations but did expand on the possibilities of resistance in his later work; he considered that power is always already present, that one is never outside it and so resistances are all the more real and effective because they are formed right at the point where relations of power are exercised (Foucault, 1996). In the context of a school, this could take the form of purposeful and intentional use of discipline to support student growth, in effect, providing students with a strong foundation for growth before punishment becomes necessary.

Yang (2009) further makes the case that holistic approaches, such as exercising judgment and personalizing disciplinary action, providing an engaging/challenging academic environment, pursuing counseling, involving the family respectfully, intervening early, and providing opportunities for the student to invest in the school community are beneficial for engaging youth and families but do not provide rigorous approach to discipline. In addition to lacking social context and presuming gender-less and race-less "universal students" and "universal teachers," this approach lends itself to a permissive environment (high engagement with low structure) classroom that gives the illusion of safety and pays for it with acceptance of mediocrity and low standards (Yang, 2009). Instead, Yang explores the concept of Classroom X, an environment that encourages self-discipline in students through intentional skill building as well as having expectations of competence and for growth, as a means of resistance to the "discipline" teachers are disciplined to perform. Yang does not oppose punishment itself but argues for evaluating classrooms based on the extent to which there is structure and engagement. In certain school communities it will take resistance to established power relations to create a school culture of high engagement and high structure.

Although Yang's (2009) study is dated, recent studies (Berkowitz et al., 2017; Konold et al., 2018; Patall, et al., 2024) support the call for educators to work towards creating structured and engaged classrooms as a means of supporting individual students and the school climate overall. Through their exploration of socioeconomic background, inequality, school climate, and academic achievement, Berkowitz, et al. (2017) identified an association between school climate and individual student characteristics. They found that a positive school climate contributed to increased academic achievement while decreasing negative impacts of low socioeconomic status, noting that high adult expectations for students and supportive adult-student relationships create authoritative school climates that are linked to higher student engagement.

Similar observations were made by Konold et al. (2018), who investigated the authoritative school climate model that has been derived from Baumrind's (1968) work on parenting styles. Characterized by high demand (expectations) and high levels of responsiveness (support), authoritative parenting and teaching are expected to provide guidance and affirmation. Significantly, when controlling for the influence of demographic variables such as income level, race, and population density, engagement was higher in schools that had high levels of structure and support (Konold et al., 2018). These findings suggest that the impacts of expectations and support are not limited by these demographic factors and that they may even serve as a buffer for the negative impacts of poverty on achievement. What is more, authoritative school climates are also correlated with lower rates of school suspension that are independent of other student and school demographic characteristics and extend across racial/ethnic groups (Huang & Cornell, 2018).

The relationship between boundaries, expectations, and student success is further seen in Patall et al. (2024) who demonstrated that there were positive correlations between structured classrooms and student achievement, engagement, and competence beliefs. Their findings suggest that educators should communicate and maintain clear expectations, provide clear and organized activities, monitor progress, as well as give encouragement and feedback intentionally as a means of creating environments that bolster growth and success. It is fundamentally important to delineate between classrooms that are structured for engagement and classrooms that are described as structured but are better understood as controlling. Patall et al. (2024) point out that when teacher practice goes beyond informing students about how they can interact effectively within the environment to using a set of demands and sanctions intended to pressure students to act only in teacher-determined ways, the benefits of structured classrooms will fail to materialize and efforts to support students' psychological needs, motivation, and achievement will be thwarted.

This differentiation between discipline and punishment and the subsequent call for educators to critically self-reflect on their disciplinary practices remains relevant. Irby (2014) similarly does not decry punishment as inherently negative and makes the argument that improving school discipline involves balancing and managing systems of trouble so that overly punitive discipline can be avoided. Irby (2014) also argues that the nature of the school discipline system is a social and material manifestation of contemporary times that operates on multiple levels and nets of social control. This is in keeping with Foucault's (1995) view that the meaning of punishment and discipline is found and created by the historical context within which it is occurring. Irby (2014) finds that the climate of increasing adoption of positive schoolwide

interventions and supports does not preclude schools and school districts from compelling teachers to take on responsibility of enforcing norms or from continuing to subject students to discipline practices that do not align to students' best interests.

Chapter Summary

Much like the way that history, psychology, and theatre each offer a different perspective or method to explore what it means to be human, physiology, psychology, and philosophy are distinct disciplines that provide insights into why suspensions are harmful for individual students excluded from the classroom as well as their peers as a whole. Lessons from foundational and recent research into attachment help us see the ways that these responses to student behaviour interrupt our relationships with students and increase the likelihood of such behaviour in the future. As Neufeld and Maté (2024) point out, students have a need to attach and in our current socio-cultural context, they are attaching to each other and are increasingly defended against vulnerability. Many students push away from school and from the adults responsible for them in part because the dance of attachment has become distorted and we have not yet recaptured the dependence of children and youth. Attachment theory helps us understand some of the reasons why this is happening as well as a road map towards a solution: connection.

Porges's (2025) Polyvagal Theory similarly helps explain why adults in the education system are compounding the processes Neufeld and Maté (2024) describe. Neufeld (2023) reminds us that most problem behaviour is rooted in instinct and emotion and that it is not these symptoms (incidents) that we should focus on, instead we should focus on the relationship. Connecting emotionally with students involves critical evaluation of our own behaviour and presence in the school setting. Polyvagal Theory makes the emotional processes comprehensible

in concrete rather than ephemeral terms, in fact, it makes emotions truly embodied. Viewing interactions through the lens of ANS involvement helps us understand the students we have in front of us better and the responsibility educators have to purposely inculcate a climate of safety in the classroom. Presenting to students as a threat through sarcastic or shaming tones of voice, putting up physical barriers through locking doors after the bell, and exhibiting domineering behaviour in the classroom have the potential to elicit perceptions of threat or danger in our students (Porges, 2022; Walker & Flaherty, 2024).

We can expect that facing teachers who rapidly lose their temper or frequently get angry, are apathetic or inflexible (or rigid and cynical) impedes student psychological, pedagogical and somatic health (Șleahtițchi, 2022a). Responding to student behaviour with further threats of rupture to a relationship sends a message that the adults who are supposed to care about and provide care for students are not safe harbours and do not provide the space for dependence (Ainsworth et al., 1978; Main & Solomon, 1986; Main & Hesse, 1990; Hesse & Main, 2006). Foucauldian discourses on power relations have been included as a means of understanding the longevity of exclusionary practices in the education system despite public calls for change by the B.C. Ministry of Education itself. Although there is not an absolute parallel to the dynamics of panopticon surveillance in the education system, the theory is valuable for helping us to recognise implicit factors that help perpetuate systems of responding to students.

Chapter 3: Summary, Discussion, Recommendations and Conclusions

Summary of Findings

Attachment Theory, Polyvagal Theory, and preliminary discussion of power relations are placed alongside each other in this capstone because they offer different lenses on how we exist and function in relationships with each other. Although there are vastly different areas of focus, each of the theories previously explored make clear the illusion we have when we see only ourselves as independent actors engaging in singular moments with other independent actors. Integrating these concepts demonstrates how we are connected physiologically in the ANS responses we prompt in others and those they prompt in us, psychologically in our dependence hierarchies, and socially in discipline of others and ourselves through normalization, examination, and surveillance.

Discussion/Implications

Eighteenth century criminologist, politician, and economist Cesare Beccaria (1986) wrote in his influential treatise on criminal justice reform that "...it is clear that the purpose of punishment is not to torment and afflict a sentient being or to undo a crime which has already been committed...The purpose of punishment, then, is nothing other than to dissuade the criminal from doing fresh harm to his compatriots and to keep other people from doing the same" (Beccaria, 1986, p. 23). In this way, the 'father of modern criminal justice' seems to predict B.F. Skinner and Albert Bandura's work in operant conditioning and observational learning, where punishment directly teaches not to do something again and watching others get punished will keep us from transgressing in the first place. It sometimes seems that over two hundred years later we are focused on Beccaria's argument about this ability to influence behaviour while

neglecting to attend to his exhortations that punishment should not be an act of violence perpetrated on a private citizen but should instead be the minimum possible in the given circumstances and proportionate to the crime (Beccaria, 1986). After exploring research into bullying, exclusionary discipline as a contributing factor to students being pushed out of the system, Attachment Theory, Polyvagal Theory, and power relations, it becomes clear that we would benefit from asking ourselves if this is the system we want to co-create. Perhaps now is the time for school counsellors to take on the task of shifting thinking from discipline as a means of correcting deviant behaviour to a rigorous mental and physical training, a practice of will that involves intensive work and creativity towards a common goal that can lead to personal transformation (Yang, 2009).

Research suggests that an educator's previous experiences through repeated interactions with their own teachers may form the scaffold for their responses to students. This is to say that much like observations that people parent the way they were parented, teachers tend to teach the way they were taught (Cassidy & Shaver, 1999; Roisman et al., 2004; Sroufe, 2005). Further studies indicate that this kind of patterning is strongly persistent, where cycles of teacher behaviour, including aggression, may be passed on from one generation of teachers to the next in the same way that healthy security or abuse and neglect are usually passed on within families through intergenerational transfer (Riley, 2010). Interestingly, there are similar effects observed in organizations as Cameron's (2022) work on the Traumatic Events Systems Model demonstrates. Cameron details the impact of trauma on organizations and notes that traumatically closed systems can have maladaptive behaviour and attitudes leading to an organizational culture that reverberates with, or perpetuates, negative impacts decades after the

initial event and even after none of the original staff remain (Cameron, 2022). Such research supports the rationale of applying Foucault's discourses on power relations to questions surrounding the continued widespread of exclusionary practices. This is not to mean that there is no consideration of the disagreement amongst some scholars regarding whether schools truly fit the panoptic prototype (Gallagher, 2010, 2013; Hope, 2013 as cited in Jefferson & Smith-Peterson, 2021). Indeed, my purpose is not to demonstrate an exact correspondence between schools and Bentham's ideal prison but to use the concepts to help make sense of why individual educators and the system as a whole perpetuate practices that are demonstrated to be ineffective and counter to pedagogical practices.

It is unfortunately the case that there is some of the psychological architecture inherent in Bentham's panopticon in the education system. In addition to the previous discussion of teacher surveillance and docility, it is important to recognise that teachers do not have to have administrators or colleagues in the room for their mannerisms, social status/approval rating, fashion sense, sense of humour, pedagogical practices, mood, etc. to be observed and assessed. Administrators and counsellors are frequent recipients of gossip and evaluations of the teaching staff by students. It is also readily apparent to teaching staff that they are frequently discussed by students and colleagues, particularly as students get older and more critical of the adults in their lives. This awareness does lead to varying levels of self-monitoring and self-consciousness by teachers. Schools have the language of teacher autonomy and the physical separation into separate classrooms and yet so much is seen, and so much is judged. Whether it is the volume of student voices in the classroom or the approach to classroom management, teachers not only want to be effective, but they also want to be seen to be effective. It is easy for teachers to feel

compelled to follow along with hardliners and to remove students from class, push for suspension, refer to detention, or exclude students in other ways, not because they believe it to be effective or pedagogically sound but because they are aware of being observed and adjust their own behaviour.

It is not enough for adults in the education system to see student behaviors that challenge as the result of poor choices that can be fixed by punishment. Seeing themselves as separate from the context of student behaviour allows adults in the education system to treat challenging behaviours as an individual problem rather than shared situation, yet students are better served when we have a collective sense of safety. Perceptions matter a great deal and when students view school staff as being there to help and support, rather than control and discipline, they experience increased calm and confidence (Emerson, 2022). Approaching academic or behavioural issues as learning opportunities necessitates a change of mindset in some staff who may fear relinquishing long-established means of control but doing so can relieve students from being pushed into ‘fight or flight’ (Emerson, 2022).

As Porges (2025) suggests, the ability for students to feel safe and to connect with others is biologically embedded in the structure and function of the autonomic nervous system and when educators understand behavior through the lens of neurophysiological state, we become able to shift from judgment to curiosity, from pathology to adaptation. Feelings of defensiveness impede social engagement and contribute to isolation and loneliness while genuine, compassionate, emotional connections are vital components to physiological and mental health (Porges & Onderko, 2024). This same dynamic holds true when seen through an attachment lens where peer-oriented children and youth can become defended against vulnerability, thereby

interfering with their own cognitive, social, and emotional development and are unable to find rest in their relationships or a caregiver's presence. A school culture that is fully supportive of learning and contributes to a school climate of feeling safe, is one where the interpersonal environment is marked by efforts to intentionally and continually develop trust, tolerance, and acceptance of differences (Olson, 2014). We feel unsafe when we sense criticism or judgement, anxiety, anger, or disinterest and we should want to learn, teach, and lead in environments where educators can become safe havens for students (Olson, 2014). Creating healthy and safe environments that invite students to be vulnerable and are held accountable to themselves is the form of disciplining students to which we should aspire (Yang, 2009).

This capstone developed out of an investigation into bullying, and in a way, that is what it remains. Research into bullying demonstrates that disconnection is a common and key component in bullying and that empathy needs to be extended to the perpetrators as well as the victims if we want to achieve significant shifts in bullying behaviour (Wilkinson, 2017). Not all behaviour that is addressed via exclusionary discipline is bullying behaviour but if empathy is a necessary part of our approach to preventing further bullying behaviour, then it follows that empathy should be part of all disciplinary interactions. Neufeld and Maté (2024) explain that the only way to unmake a bully is to reverse the dynamics that made them one in the first place and that our current methods for exhorting children to behave toward one another in civil ways miss the root of the problem: the lack of vulnerable dependence on caregiving adults. Exclusionary discipline leads to stigmatization and isolates young people from the school context, which increases fragility and puts children and youth at higher risk for poor outcomes (Lodi et. al., 2021). In essence, we need to see the attachment issues underlying the behaviours that challenge

and we need to hit our own wall of futility so that we can let go of expectations that we can continue to teach and lead in ways that are familiar, comfortable, or convenient and embrace the reality that our job is to work within Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs before ever touching on Bloom's Taxonomy – we need to cultivate connections before we can communicate curriculum.

Regardless of whether the focus is curricular content or social norms, teaching and learning occurs in a reciprocal relationship that exists in a perpetual state of co-construction. High suspension rates impede our holding students close or retaking our positions as guiding compasses in part because they impact how our students view their relationship to us, how willing they are to be in a dependent relationship to us. It is necessary for us to approach our relationships with students with the knowledge that children do not automatically grant us the authority to teach them because we care or because we think we know what is good for them, rather, they must be actively attaching or seeking contact and closeness to us (Neufeld & Maté, 2024). Learning is an inherently vulnerable and uncomfortable process because it requires us to change – when we acquire new knowledge or ways of being, we are essentially leaving behind what is 'known' and therefore feels safe. Riley's (2011) consideration of educator attachment style, or emotionally based behaviour in the classroom intersects with what Neufeld and Maté (2024) have shared about the socio-cultural context of peer-orientation in the home and classroom and underscores why it is imperative that educators have the courage to examine the roles they play in instigating disciplinary situations. It is not just within the psychological sphere that we impede student well-being.

Without an understanding of the raw emotions involved in teaching, and adequate training in navigating one's own emotions and that of students during moments of intensity,

teachers are placed into intensely emotional environments ill-equipped to deal with the complex feelings and contexts children and youth bring with them (Riley, 2010). Understanding our own emotional responses and responsibility is imperative given the rise of bossy and dominance-seeking behaviours in children and youth. Neufeld (2023) suggests that we are experiencing an escalating epidemic of alpha children in North America because the dance of attachment has become distorted. This dance involves two modalities -- one is dependent mode where we look up to, seek comfort in, follow, and look for direction from our attachment partner, and the other is alpha mode, where we present as the answer to dependency needs by giving direction and taking charge. Children attach in alpha mode when they perceive it to be unsafe to depend on their caregivers, and this is part of the rampant challenges we see in current school environments (Neufeld & Maté, 2024). Instead of asserting dominance through harsh and exclusive punishments, the solution is making it safe for children and youth to engage in dependent mode. Educators are not children and youth's first attachment figures and have no control over attachment dynamics in the home but we do have responsibility for nurturing dependence and safety in our attachment relationships with students.

It is for these reasons that I believe that the skills taught to all the other relational professions should be taught to teachers too, especially because teachers need to function as a secure base for students. We need to be the guiding compass and take the caregiving role to allow students to take the dependent, care-seeker role. "Irritating and rude behaviours are always only surface manifestations of deeper issues. Trying to punish or control behaviours without addressing the underlying dynamics is like a doctor prescribing something for symptoms while ignoring their causes. A deeper understanding of children will empower parents to deal with 'bad

behaviour' in truly effective ways" (Neufeld & Maté, 2024, p. 26). Given that a lack of a secure base predicts aggression in children (Sroufe, 2005), if we fail to create an attachment with our students, can it be said we are doing all we can to prevent situations where they are more likely to be aggressive? If we are interacting with our students in ways that prompt the ANS to perceive a threat through our sarcastic tone of voice, practices of locking a door at the bell, referring students to the office for lack of pencil, or any other such similar infractions, are we not contributing to the behaviours that we seek to punish? We all benefit from mindful and intentional practice given that felt safety influences attachment.

Recommendations or Proposal

The fundamental problem that this capstone seeks to explore is how can we begin to meet our students' needs for safety, care, and effective learning spaces without giving into the systemic pressures towards reinforcing self-defeating narratives through disciplinary practices? If relationships are at the heart of processes of education, how do we build stronger connections and safer school climates that instill purpose and growth in students? It has been a challenging process to craft recommendations or proposals in response to this question because, on one hand, the solution is too enormous and involves systemic changes, while on the other hand, those practices or changes that an individual could conceivably implement feel so small that they will have no impact. Yet I ultimately believe in the power of small steps to create new paths forwards. Reframing perceptions of behaviour should not be interpreted as encouraging permissive practices or an absence of consequences (Goold 2024; Irby, 2014; Yang, 2009) but as a step towards authentically and meaningfully teaching the skills students need to develop. Contained within Polyvagal Theory (Porges, 2015, 2022; Porges & Onderko; 2025) and

Attachment Theory, particularly disorganized attachment (Forslund, et al., 2016; Reisz et al., 2017), is a connection between executive functioning and behaviours that challenge which suggests that best practices could include meeting students where they are at and bolstering self-regulation skills. Such an approach has demonstrated effectiveness in lived experiences in Canadian schools. Recent investigations into the efficacy of an Alternative Suspension (AS) program (Laliberté, 2018) found positive outcomes such as increased academic success, higher graduation rates, improved behaviour at school in selected sites in Chilliwack (British Columbia), North/West Edmonton (Alberta), and Moncton (New Brunswick). Each of the program sites used a structured neutral/out-of-school setting with a pro-social focus where participants' needs and development were addressed through supported homework time, tailored workshops, one-on-one discussions, and referrals to community supports.

One of the key strengths of the program was that the youth had the opportunity to learn from their behaviours. One-on-one counselling was available and there was an intentional focus on the development of a warm relationship and rapport between the youth and project staff which facilitated activities that helped students resolve existing conflicts and change the negative attitudes and behaviours that led to their suspension (Laliberté, 2018). Students seemed to have greater insight into their behaviour, greater willingness and capacity to reflect on their actions and motivations and reported that AS helped them to learn more constructive and appropriate behaviours. Opportunities for parental involvement and sessions in life skills, anger management, and conflict resolution skills also contributed to students' reported increases in self-esteem (Laliberté, 2018). Ultimately, students, parents, and school administrators believed that the youth had gained more control over their emotions and were better able to express their

feelings; students made better decisions and showed better self-regulation, which helped them to avoid the issues that previously put them at risk.

A similar pilot project, the Connections Program, was also put in place during the 2024-2025 school year in a partnership between the Mission Public School District, the City of Mission, and community agencies. This program was intended to provide students and schools an alternative to suspension. As with the AS program, each student had the opportunity to reflect, restore and reconnect with their school and community in an effort to prevent worrisome behaviour, develop relationship skills and healthy decision making ability and building a sense of belonging and connection with supportive adults (Mission Public Schools, 2025). Students also worked with program staff to develop a plan and goals they will share with staff students identify as supportive when they return to their home school. Crucially, students enjoyed the program and often bought into the process. Students, staff and families embraced the program with students often asking if they could return for additional three-day stints. Limitations of the program included the fact that although it was meant as an alternative to suspension, in actual practice, participation was often restricted to those who were suspended given the popularity of the program and limitations of service. This may be more of an issue of prioritisation than interest since this was a resource-intensive program and demand outstripped opportunities. Unfortunately, the rich resources required by the program were prohibitive and dependent upon the availability of funds.

It could be that alternative to suspension programs or Restorative Practices are viable options for some school settings, but this will not be the case everywhere since successful implementation often hinges on staff buy-in and administrator support of the programs (Kuh,

2021; Wang & Lee, 2019). We know that suspension rates are positively correlated with administrator attitudes and change substantially with principal exits and entrances (Bacher-Hicks, et al., 2019). It is also shown that strong administrator support increases staff buy-in of positive discipline programs (Kuh, 2021). If we were to shift away from large-scale school-wide programs and focus on guiding principles, then we find ourselves in a much stronger position to support students by providing them with the relationship they need with flexibility to respond in diverse ways (Yang, 2009; Neufeld & Maté, 2024). In fact, this is one of the reasons why it is important for educators to have a working understanding of physiological and developmental underpinnings to the behaviour we see in schools. When we see behaviour as communication or as a culmination of how students have learned to cope in the world they have experienced, we can help can shift school culture to create a new climate, one where we are working towards the development of children and youth who are resilient, creative, flexible, self-motivated and who have a positive and secure connection with those who have chosen to guide them.

When it comes to school culture and student behaviour practices, it is important to remember that while schools have a code of conduct that gets reviewed each year and there are school district policies must be adhered to, those are guidelines and really it is the principal that sets the standards for the school, as long as it is within the policy guidelines (B-A. Cullen, personal communication, December 14, 2025). This reality gives an incredible level of influence to principals on the culture and climate of schools. If administration and other school leaders embrace the knowledge that attachment and ANS dysregulation are not fixed traits, then we can look for ways to create environments that provide opportunities to retrain our ANS and create secure attachments (Neufeld & Maté, 2024; Porges & Onderko, 2025). It is a quirk of the system

that although individuals who go into administrative roles are required to have a minimum amount of teaching experience and a master's degree, there is no set expectation about what field of study the degree must be from. Moreover, while individual school districts provide some form of pre-leadership sessions for interested teachers, districts do not provide formal training to future administrative personnel (S. Montgomery, personal communication, December 14, 2025; L. Vetter, personal communication, December 14, 2025; B-A. Cullen, personal communication, December 14, 2025; K. Zimmer, personal communication, August 21, 2025). Some may enter the role with a deep background in student-centred practices but this is not guaranteed (J. Conway, personal communication, December 15, 2025). This situation has particular significance in shaping the climate and culture of the school beyond disciplinary practices.

Schools are filled with individuals who are tasked with a common purpose but who can also have disparate understandings of how to accomplish this task. Research into organizational change shows that psychological safety is necessary if individuals are to feel secure and capable of changing (Edmondson, 1999). Psychological safety is a shared belief within a team that it is okay to speak up, ask questions, take risks, and make mistakes without fear of repercussions and it is a leader's job to create this environment (Edmondson & Nickisch, 2024). Such interpersonal risks as asking for help, admitting errors, and seeking feedback are necessary but also near impossible when feeling unsafe.

For these reasons, I propose that school counsellors embrace their unique positions to spearhead efforts within their schools to encourage honest reflection and guidance towards relationship-based school cultures that build and maintain safe and nurturing school climates in ways that fit their unique school communities. Shifting away from current discipline practices is

difficult, involves established power relations and requires willingness to explore unfamiliar potentially unfamiliar and uncomfortable concepts on the part of staff. Breaking with how things are traditionally done requires empathy and safety. Counsellors have not chosen to be formal leaders in the school but they have chosen to be in positions that support all members of the school community.

Limitations to the Capstone

Gaps in the literature

Riley (2010) observed that there is uneven scholarship into teacher misbehaviour with fewer studies being undertaken in North American or English language-based locations than in other global locales. He attributes this to discomfort with the topic or because there is fear that doing so will be taken as an attack on teachers. This is understandable given the cultural context surrounding teachers and the profession itself, where public antipathy can reach vitriolic heights, and yet, any discussion of problems in the education system and potential solutions is incomplete if we do not have accurate information. Research into teacher misbehaviour continues to be produced (Gözler, 2018; Page, 2014; Page, 2016; Șleahtițchi, 2022b; Sleahtițchi, 2023) but it has not yet reached the robustness equivalent to investigations into student misbehaviour or disciplinary practices.

Much like the lack of data around suspension rates in B.C. schools, there are few sources of data regarding teacher misbehaviour in the B.C. educational context. There are the reports that accompany discipline outcomes published by the Teacher Regulation Branch but these represent the most serious offenses and do not capture the totality of the issue. As Yang (2009) points out, there is need for sustained, serious self-critique and reflection because most schools will leave

unspoken what everyone knows: that some teachers expel children from their classrooms in huge numbers and others demand little to no effort from their students. Investigations into office disciplinary referral behaviour of teachers further demonstrates that not only do some teachers refer students more frequently but their own racial identity and that of the students are contributing factors in referral behavior (Holt et al., 2022; Liu et al., 2023). Lack of discussion into teacher misbehaviour creates a silence that allows teachers to insulate themselves from improving their craft and creating healthier school cultures and climates.

I have previously acknowledged that my capstone is merely an initial exploration of power relations given the scope of the project. If one was to delve further into the issue of exclusionary discipline and Foucauldian notions of power, it would be necessary to include more features of Foucault's theories. For example, in their investigation into resonances between Foucauldian and Vygotskian theories, Elizabeth Done and Vicky Bamsey examine how events that may not be perceived to be exclusionary by educators may contribute to school exclusion or self-exclusion of students. They raise the point that school behaviour codes and policies function as forms of governmentality or subjection and that student responses to how they are treated by those in power can be demonstrations of resistance (Done & Bamsey, 2025). This concept of resistance to power within the education system, specifically seeing student behaviour through the lens of resistance, could be a fruitful area to explore.

Areas for future research

Recent research into teacher burnout and perceived school climate and stress (Brannon & Clark, 2024; Eddy et al., 2020; Pas et al., 2010; Sleahtițchi, 2022b) offers an opportunity to explore factors contributing to teacher misbehaviour as well as the impacts on teacher efficacy

and reliance on exclusionary discipline. Indeed, doing so may help by providing an alternative lens to understanding disciplinary practices, one that can help provide a systems view alongside consideration of individual actions. Related topics of study that could prove fruitful on many fronts include investigations into the efficacy of relational approaches to behaviour management; staff resistance, be it resistance of student-centred pedagogy/social-emotional learning or resistance of non-punitive models; and effective methods of staff navigation of colleague misbehaviour in a context of teacher autonomy.

There is also the possibility that the practice of using exclusionary discipline will never fully end, thus, another research question that could reasonably be pursued is how do we maintain relationship and prevent the negative impacts or harms from exclusionary discipline without setting up administrators to be perceived as the enemy? Furthermore, if we leave behind the reinforcement and punishment perspective in behaviourism and embrace a developmental perspective, a safety perspective, then how can this be feasibly accomplished given the constraints of the system? Finally, it is necessary to also include consideration of resources and investigate how best to determine appropriate levels of counselling support for schools. We have a provincial student to school counsellor ratio of 693:1 (Nicholls-Allison, 2022), which is a ludicrous situation. It is true that districts and administrators can lower this ratio if the budget allows, but it is also true that when the budget is in crisis, school districts will fall back to this staffing ratio. Understaffing of school counsellors is a significant barrier and impedes potential opportunities for changing school culture and climate.

Intervention gaps

One of the most significant barriers for systemic change in the school system is the

inertia of the system which is partially helped by the diversity of personalities in teaching and teacher autonomy. Getting all staff on board for any initiative is difficult and doing so for emotional literacy can feel nigh-on-impossible. Shifting school culture takes commitment, time, energy, and support. The purpose of this capstone was never to solve all the issues plaguing the education system or outlining a new program of positive discipline but school counsellors can be that external force that takes us out of a state of rest and creates momentum.

Conclusions

My opposition to exclusionary discipline should not be misconstrued as a laissez-faire attitude towards limits and boundaries for students, in fact, as a parent and as a teacher, I fully embrace an authoritative approach of loving boundaries. I believe that boundaries provide a sense of safety for all and an expectation of competence, but I oppose creating a sense of isolation and a sense that acceptance and care is conditional. I believe that the primary responsibility of every educator is to ensure each student is seen, known, and given the chance to grow. This is not the same thing as allowing chaos to flourish in an 'anything goes' environment. As Yang (2009) points out, classrooms with high engagement and low structure have an appeal for students and teachers, but it is an easier route that fails to provide guidance and care for students.

Approaching students through a relationship-based student-centred practice does not immediately or fully ameliorate real issues that students and staff face; the goal is to shift our responses so that we honour the individual and support them as they learn new ways of being in the world and interacting with others. Personal growth as children, youth, and adults is an iterative process. We should aim to walk alongside students to help them grow rather than reject

them for not already having the competencies we expect. The present work is centred on exclusionary discipline but insights that relationship building is a key strategy in reducing exclusionary discipline outcomes and racial disparities in out-of-school suspension (Anyon et al., 2018) remind us that disciplinary practices and responses to behaviour are one part of a larger mission: nurturing children and youth.

Neufeld and Maté (2024) argue that our children and students want to belong to us regardless of their external signs to the contrary and that attachment is the pursuit and preservation of proximity, closeness and connection be it physical, behavioural, emotional or psychological. In the context of attachment, exclusionary discipline is shown to be counterproductive because of the ruptures it creates in relationships and the further reinforcement of peer orientation. One of the lasting ideas from behaviourism is importance of immediacy in reinforcement or punishment in behavioural change and this impacts our responses to misbehaviour (Myers, 2014) but this does not take into account the primacy of attachment. Neufeld (Neufeld Institute, 2023) reminds us that when children and youth misbehave or transgress boundaries, the most important thing to do is send the message that the relationship is more important than the problem before seeking to address any incidents.

As adults, parents and educators alike, we can be disappointed when we erroneously believe that we are automatic models for our students, when in reality, children and youth only accept those that they are strongly attached to as models -- it is attachment that makes a child want to be like another person and take on another's characteristics (Neufeld & Maté, 2024). When we impede students' attachment to us whether as individual educators or as a school culture or system, we get in our own way to lead, guide, and instruct. As Bowlby points out,

"...for a person to know that an attachment figure is available and responsive gives him a strong and pervasive feeling of security, and so encourages him to value and continue the relationship" (Bowlby, 1988, p. 27 as cited in Riley 2010).

My curiosity is if school counsellors do not take on the challenge of guiding the social emotional culture of the school, who else will do so intentionally and with the same level of access? School counsellors are uniquely positioned with the school system because they have their fingers on the pulse of the school – they know which classrooms feel safe and which ones feel unsafe, they provide support to colleagues, and work closely with administration. Counsellors have the opportunity and responsibility to actively build a culture of safety within the school. It is the case that some teachers and administrators enter the field without completing courses in developmental psychology, and therefore, possibly without the language and habit of cultivating attachment.

I fully recognize that what I am suggesting amounts to massive cultural shifts in potentially resistant environments, and I have in fact worked in contexts where there is resistance to collaborative, school-wide activities or assemblies, and yet, how can we expect children and youth to value and accept the guidance we seek to provide through discipline if they do not have a strong and pervasive feeling of security with us? There is part of me that feels fear that this capstone will appear terribly naive and be dismissed out of hand. However, I choose to lean into the discomfort of the vulnerability of sharing my thoughts and feelings on the topic because I choose to resist those forces that have too often, and for too long, encouraged me to stay silent as I watched (participated) in systems and discussions that treated students as objects to be subjugated rather than children and youth needing unconditional positive regard. In this way, I

hope to model and take steps towards meeting our students' needs for safety, care, and effective learning spaces without giving into the systemic pressures towards reinforcing self-defeating narratives through disciplinary practices.

Unexpected joys come when we begin to look at education through a relationship-based lens. Exclusionary discipline undermines relationships between students and schools, and in doing so, disrupts the context necessary for students to learn and grow. If we want to create school cultures that meet our goals of creating environments where all students feel safe, nurtured, and valued and where order and civility are expected standards of behavior (AAP, 2013; Ministry of Education, 2008), we must be intentional about attachment and aware of how we influence felt safety in our classrooms and schools. Olson reminds us that "...classroom and school culture change begins with the adults and is then followed by the students...Begin with yourself, followed by your colleagues and administrators, and end with your students." (Olson, 2014, p. 184). At the heart of this is the belief that school counsellors can and should be like Dukdukdiya, the hummingbird in the Quechan fable about a fierce forest fire. While all the other animals were stunned into inaction, it was Dukdukdiya alone who fought against the raging fire, carrying drop after drop of water. Not only did she fight the fire she fought the norms of inaction and resisted pressure to stop from the other creatures because she decided she was going to do everything in her power to stop the fire.

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