Empathy, Patience, and Consistency: A Critical Approach to Teaching Opportunity Youth

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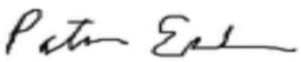

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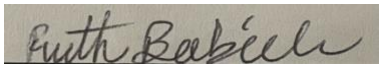

Abstract

This praxis explores how positive relationships between educators and opportunity youth influence students' attitudes and behaviors in school. *Opportunity youth* are children who face significant challenges in their transition to adulthood, often experiencing educational and social difficulties. To gain deeper insight into their experiences, I conducted interviews with five students participating in Clark University's Liberal Arts for Returning Citizens (LARC) program. Research shows that out-of-school suspensions often lead to ongoing disruptive behavior and feelings of alienation from school communities. In response to the school-to-prison pipeline, scholars advocate for a prison abolitionist pedagogy that centers students' lives, fosters strong student-adult relationships, and presents curriculum through a socially conscious lens. In connection, I put forth the three most important aspects a teacher needs to effectively implement the pedagogy, which are empathy, patience, and consistency. My findings highlight the influence of family, community, and school interactions on how students perceive and form positive relationships. Educators have a crucial role in supporting opportunity youth by cultivating a sense of belonging, encouraging peer connection, and helping bridge gaps between students and their families.

Acknowledgements

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Introduction

On Wednesday January 15th, 2025, I was sent home from the middle school I worked at as a substitute teacher, and I was not asked to come back. I didn't throw a punch, I didn't swear or raise my voice, I simply approached the end of my patience with a member of the administration. After two years of working as a substitute, I observed unethical treatment of high-need students when their teachers were absent, and I could not be complicit any longer.

I left the school feeling proud and empty at the same time. I contemplated for at least a year before saying anything. A conversation I had a couple weeks prior with a teacher prepared me for the next time I saw something if I wanted to say anything, there was a very good chance I would be 'asked to not come back'.

Three students saw me on my way out and asked where I was going. I rubbed my eyes, acting like there was something in them, but really, I was wiping away tears. I responded with a different lie each time. "My stomach hurts, so I'm going home." "I didn't get much sleep last night, so they let me go home to sleep!" "They didn't need me today." With each response, I tried to paint the school in the best light possible even though it was the hardest thing I had to do. Even though I may have cost myself a future employer reference, the wellbeing of children with no voices will always be my first priority no matter what position or environment I'm in.

As a substitute teacher, I have little power. I go where is assigned to me and am reminded of my youth and lack of qualifications constantly. My most positive takeaway is that I am truly beginning to fully understand that some of the upsetting things I experienced growing up in school were not my fault, they were unintended (and intended) consequences of public institutions working the way they are supposed to.

Experiencing public school from a student perspective and now as a staff member, I believe there is a dire need for less police presence and more emotional support in secondary schools. Being blinded by the submissive state my early education has pushed me into, I've learned something crucial to my development as an educator during my undergraduate education; no matter what, a student's behavior does not warrant a harmful response from a teacher. I also gained understanding that those choices are often made with pressure from other overarching structures; those structures being administration, public schooling, etc. I had to sit with the fact that I need to unlearn much of what I thought I knew about being a teacher.

Reflecting on My Schooling

Growing up, my teachers yelled a lot. I can only remember one teacher who didn't. In ninth grade, my English teacher smacked me on the back of the head with her wedding band hand, for confusing the different usages of the words 'lay' and 'laid.' But then at the end of the year when she retired, she gave me an old dictionary and told me I was one of her many favorites and she enjoyed teaching me.

This is the type of emotional inconsistency that was present in many of my classrooms growing up, which made it difficult for me to trust my teachers and feel safe in school. One minute I was praised by my teacher, the next I was belittled for not understanding something. I still recognize in my internal monologue how those experiences affect me today. For example, when I receive compliments on my praxis, I get awkward; I do not believe them. And when I receive constructive criticism *correctly* (such as feedback I have gotten on my praxis), I'm still caught off guard by the kindness. On the bright side, my mother and my grandparents provided most of the emotional support for academics that was not present in my classrooms. My mom attended college for art and photography, so she always had a healthy outlook on what it meant

to succeed in school, never making me feel bad for making mistakes. There are many aspects of my identity that automatically push me forward in the world but having my family even though I would classify my home as *explosive* (I'm leaving that up to your interpretation), made me remember that I'm loved and supported.

By the time my high school graduation (2021) rolled around, I swear a fourth of my graduating class disappeared. I knew where most of them went; private school; boarding school; trade school; agricultural school; or their family moved for work. But there were a couple of my peers whose whereabouts were unknown to us. After elementary school, our teachers stopped announcing when a peer was not at our school anymore. Throughout my years after graduation, I slowly learned where some of them ended up. They dropped out due to several unfortunate and stressful circumstances.

Throughout my entire public schooling experience, those I love were not cared for correctly in school. Instead, they were pushed out, criminalized for aspects of their lives that are uncontrollable. They had few teachers who wanted to help but lacked further resources and energy, making them complicit in pushing them out of school. As a future public-school teacher, I will be working for the state. And working for the state means that there may be times where I'm complicit with punishment, and I am unaware. Working as a substitute teacher at a public school, there have been times where being complicit in pushing a child out of school has become increasingly clear to me. As someone who was schooled through a public institution, I still find myself second guessing my own beliefs related to what a classroom should look, sound, and feel like.

I constantly feel like my classroom management style is too soft, because I rarely raise my voice, I allow talking and collaboration, and I welcome eating. However, as I continue to

grow and meet experienced educators, I've come to learn that I'm not *too soft*, I'm just deeply empathetic. I've learned that my empathy—once something that felt almost debilitating—is actually going to be an asset in my field. My empathy allows me to look beyond a child's harmful behavior and focus on understanding the reasons behind it and how we can move forward, with education as a goal. I never want to punish a child; I don't even like the word *punishment*. Being labeled as punished can be deeply damaging to the child's sense of self, especially since there's so much more potential in responding with care and humility. What I learned through my lived experiences is that positive relationships are at the heart of creating belonging for all students, not just students who are at risk of being pushed out of school. With that, my praxis centers how positive relationships between "opportunity youth" and educators impact a child's attitude and behaviors in school.

Developing My Method of Inquiry

In Spring of 2023, I produced my original research question: "Is there a relationship between the way a student is disciplined and whether or not they may end up incarcerated?" I cringe looking at this; wordiness was my enemy. And it was also a yes or no question, that carried an implication that my findings will be answering the question. I created this question with my prior knowledge, but not yet having done a literature review. My thinking was concerned with how teachers discipline their students. After reading existing literature and finishing the first interview, I knew there was something off with my original research question. I originally wanted to isolate the way a teacher disciplines as a personal issue when it is not entirely correct or aligned with my theoretical framework. School discipline is overtly shaped by the structure of the public school system. At first, I wanted to avoid the structure entirely, but that's impossible. I used to only associate the structural with policy, and my theory of change is

based in the classroom. So, naïve as I may have been at the time, I thought that just because I was not referencing policy, that I would not need to include the impact of structures and systems on the way classrooms and teachers operate. Thankfully, I was given the opportunity in my research methods class to reconstruct parts of my project.

In fall semester 2024, I took "Methods of Inquiry" with Professor Anita Fabos, I was given the opportunity to flesh out my praxis, as a semester-long research design project. Professor Fabos took her time with me, examining my research question. She gave me the insight that my current question is searching for a distinct answer. My original question would require case studies, over a long period of time, with many participants. After discussing my question while preparing for Clark Fest, Professor Fabos helped me realize that my literature findings and my point of view is interested in the factors that influence the behaviors of children, what I have control over, and what I have no control over as a teacher. I have control over the *culture* of a classroom; meaning the shared values, norms, and behaviors that I enforce in my classroom. What I do not have control over are the structural inequalities that are often reflected and reinforced through everyday interactions between teachers and students. When I refer to *structural inequality*, that word refers to the way that humans organize society through institutions (e.g., public schooling) that present consistent disadvantages for minority groups (University of Pennsylvania, 2023).

One of the most prominent examples of structural inequality in education is the *school-to-prison pipeline,* which is a system that is sustained through sending students out of the classroom (Cuellar, 2015). Throughout my paper, I define and describe with greater detail what I have come to learn as *positive relationships*. The role of the teacher has the potential to be the greatest impact in a child's adolescent life, but I know there is more to it than just being "nice"

or “kind” (Pascoe, 2023). One teacher cannot change structures of oppression that contribute to chronic absenteeism or community stressors, but there are specific undertakings that teachers can do for students who are being pushed out of school. It requires your personal time, energy, and a social justice commitment that I have been sad to hear from a handful of my students that most of their teachers did not have for them. Positive relationships in school are a major contributing factor to the success of opportunity youth. Teachers who expect bad behaviors from opportunity youth, will quickly lose trust from the child, jeopardizing the chance for any relationship at all. In the next section, I share with you the social issue my research addresses.

Problem Statement

” Our Black and Brown students are not failing; it is the systems instruction and standards created to monitor, control, and measure a very narrow definition of achievement that are off the mark” (Grammer, 2018).

Worcester is made up of a dense inner city, small suburbs, and 45 public schools. For those from central Massachusetts, Worcester is known as a creative hub, housing young and established artists, scholars, rappers, poets, musicians, and business owners. From block to block, you can see country flags painted onto electrical boxes, fire hydrants and trash cans, signaling to everyone the cultural section of the city they’re in. The block my family and I visit often is the Armenian block because you can’t find middle eastern staples at American grocery stores. My favorite part about Worcester is that it’s where everyone comes together in one city. Living in the town twenty minutes next to Worcester, I rarely saw or met anyone with my hair texture and olive skin, unless I was in Worcester. I wanted to start this section off by painting you a picture of a vibrant city, but a city, nonetheless. Positive and negative aspects of a

geographical location can and do co-exist within another. As a collective human race, we tend to categorize everything as *good* or *bad*, without reflecting on what we mean by it. Two of my participants voiced exactly what they meant by categorizing Worcester as a *bad* city. They have had time to reflect, so we have to take into account those narratives who were born, raised, and suffered in Worcester. I always visited my friends, family, or went shopping in Worcester and then went home to the suburbs. Two participants from Worcester illustrate an evil city with evil people living in it who want to hurt you; and that's where they grew up. Throughout this paper, you are going to hear many narratives that paint people and places in simultaneously negative and positive light and the dual emotion is most present when I hear opinions of Worcester Public Schools (WPS) and its high school student body.

WPS is the third most diverse school districts in Massachusetts along with Malden and Lowell (Niche, 2025). In total, there were 26,001 students enrolled in the WPS District. Out of those students, 73.9% of students are students of color (Department of Elementary and Secondary Education, 2023-2024). Since I am interested in discipline, I looked at the student discipline data for the WPS 2023-2024 academic school year to see if there are any trends. The racial demographic groups with the highest percentage of students disciplined are Hispanic/Latino and white students. Worcester has a higher percentage of Hispanic/Latino and white students overall, which may explain why a greater number of white students were disciplined compared to Black students. Even with this finding, Black and Hispanic/Latino students were suspended outside of school at a higher *rate.* Additionally, students categorized as "High Needs" were overwhelmingly disciplined at the highest rate. To show the contrast, only 62 students disciplined were general education students, highlighting a significant disparity.

(WPS Student Discipline (23-24 Fiscal Year)

Student Group	Students	Students Disciplined	% In-School Suspension	% Out-of-School Suspension	% Expulsion	% Alternate Setting	% Emergency Removal	% Students with a School-Based Arrest	% Students with a Non-Arrest Law Enforcement Referral
All Students	26,001	1,110	1.4	3.0	0.0	0.0	0.7	0.0	0.0
English Learner	8,384	361	1.4	3.1	0.0	0.0	0.7	0.0	0.0
Low Income	19,742	993	1.6	3.6	0.0	0.0	0.8	0.0	0.0
Students w/disabilities	5,633	399	2.4	5.2	0.0	0.0	1.3	0.0	0.0
High needs	22,049	1,048	1.5	3.4	0.0	0.0	0.7	0.0	0.0
Female	12,615	473	1.0	2.9	0.0	0.0	0.5	0.0	0.0
Male	13,376	637	1.7	3.1	0.0	0.0	0.9	0.0	0.0
Amer. Ind. or Alaska Nat.	53	3							
Asian	1,586	14	0.1	0.7	0.0	0.0	0.3	0.0	0.0
Afr. Amer./Black	4,436	176	1.4	2.7	0.0	0.0	0.5	0.0	0.0
Hispanic/Latino	12,010	629	1.6	3.7	0.0	0.0	0.8	0.0	0.0
Multi-race, Non-Hisp./Lat.	1,046	69	1.9	5.1	0.0	0.0	1.1	0.0	0.0
Nat. Haw. or Pacif. Isl.	5								
White	6,865	219	1.1	2.1	0.0	0.0	0.5	0.0	0.0

(U.S. Department of Education, 2023-2024)

Holifield (2023) in her podcast *411 Teen* with special guest Vincent Atchity explains that Black students, Hispanic/Latino students, students with disabilities, and students belonging to two or more of those identities, are disproportionately disciplined and absent compared to their mainstream and white classmates (Holifield, 2023). I looked at DESE's data for days missed due to discipline, and I found that the data for WPS reflected Holifield's claim. The city has students who are missing up to 40 days of school per fiscal school year, related to suspension, and not (U.S. Department of Education, 2023-2024, *Student Discipline, Student Discipline Days Missed*). Even though the numbers may vary from community to community, more often than not, Black and Brown kids, especially those with learning disabilities, are more likely to be suspended from school compared to white students. But, *why*? DESE does not investigate any deeper from the data gathered. So, I will present to you what I think.

The decision to suspend a student is usually made by the principal— and there are many factors influencing a person's decision making, even factors that we do not know are influencing us. With media outlets pumping stories and posts out onto our phones by the minute, we are fed

false narratives all the time. Harry Grammer (2018), a criminal justice reform advocate did a Ted Talk back in 2018 titled, "Incarcerated children are still children" where he discussed his experiences working in youth detention centers, witnessing first hand the negative false narratives perpetuated onto Black youth. His voice shook as he asked the audience "Why do [incarcerated children] look so different, than they're portrayed on the news?" I thought about the boys I tutor at a Department of Youth Services door secure[1] facility, and how one of the questions I often get asked is *what do you think of me?* Youth offenders are often portrayed as violent and much older in the media, influencing the public's perception on incarcerated children (Webb, 2017). We hear terms such as "super-predator" to describe adolescent Black boys who have not even hit puberty yet (Grammer, 2018). In effect, people absorb all these stereotypes, which unconsciously effect the way we think, feel, and act. *Implicit bias* is the term used to describe this phenomenon.

Implicit bias refers to stereotypes such as attitudes or behaviors, that influence how we treat that certain group of people without purposely doing so. This bias appears in the classroom when teachers have to discipline students. A Stanford study indicates that "teachers were more likely to escalate the disciplinary response to the second infraction when the student was perceived to be black as opposed to white" (Staats, 2015). The "school to prison pipeline" is sustained through instances such as this. The *school-to-prison pipeline* explains the concept of punitive school discipline policies that removes marginalized students from the classroom and school community, increase the child's likelihood of incarceration in adolescence or later in life. The primary punishments the "school to prison pipeline" refers to are isolated in-school suspension and out-of-school suspension. More importantly, these punishments are given for

[1] Incarceration facility that uses strong locks, control systems, along with staff to deter youth from leaving facility

minor infractions such as defiance, swearing at a teacher or too many tardies. This phenomenon is also known as highly subjective zero tolerance policies.

Zero tolerance policies are the result of the Gun-Free Schools Act of 1994, to ensure gun safety within schools (National Association of Secondary School Principles, 2016). These policies "automatically impose punishments on students and mandate suspension or expulsion from school for certain offenses, often without consideration of the circumstances" (Cuellar, 2015, p.2). Suspending students with little to no consideration may cause unintended effects such as, students will have more time to spend unsupervised in the community or at home, and thus more opportunities to get in trouble. If a student is already having behavioral struggles and isn't in school, they are more likely to succumb to the unstructured freedom of suspension and boredom (Interview, 2024). If a student comes back from suspension and has not improved any behaviors, teachers may think that the child is incapable of change. I have had and worked with many teachers who have deficit views of disruptive children. Teachers may not want to spend their time working with the student for several reasons, some having nothing to do with the teachers' personal character (e.g., empathy fatigue, other students to attend to). In effect, the punishments get more and more severe until the student is pushed out of school or the student hates school so much, they don't want to go. Exclusionary practices, whether well intended or not, result in loss of academic opportunities and educational/emotional growth. An informational page on Citizens for Juvenile Justice (2015) titled "The School-to-Prison Pipeline" explains that,

> Children who have been expelled or suspended from school once are much more likely to be disciplined similarly again, and two times more likely than their peers to drop out of school. Students who are arrested at school are three times more likely to drop out than

their peers and students who dropout of school are more than eight times more likely to end up in the criminal justice system (Citizens for Juvenile Justice, 2015).

There is this thought that punishing a child until they stop the behavior is effective, when in reality it's not. The more a student is suspended, the less likely they're going to want to go back to school (Cuellar, 2015; Darling-Hammond &, Ho, 2024). This thought even continues into adulthood, assuming that people do not change, and that we have to punish them into changing. Students I've tutored labeled their suspensions as trauma. Some of them were arrested in school, so there was no way their peers didn't know what happened. Why children behave how they do, and this feeling of separation from school is what I'm interested in. What exactly is happening before, during, and after a child is removed from school? A study written by Alison Evans Cuellar (2015) titled *School Suspension and the School-to-Prison Pipeline*, argues that "Out-of-school suspension may increase criminal offending behavior by problem youth, more than doubling the probability of arrest" (Cuellar, 2015, p.1). The way students are treated in and outside of school has the ability to impact the manner in which students act and respond to stressors. The more time a student spends outside of school due to suspension, the more time they may have with no adult supervision and heightens their chances of developing mental health struggles.

Throughout my data analysis later in my paper, I highlight the childhood experiences of former opportunity-youth and explore how they believe those experiences have shaped their lives. I want to introduce you briefly to the Liberal Arts for Returning Citizens Program, and the students that kindly allowed me to interview them, because they are who my research is about. I want their narratives to be at the forefront of my praxis.

LARC: Liberal Arts for Returning Citizens and Their Students

I am a PLA (Peer Learning Assistant) for Clark University's Liberal Arts for Returning Citizens (LARC) which is a grant funded program where formerly incarcerated individuals can take college classes for free. The students are individuals who enjoy education but had struggles continuing during formative years of schooling and/or after. Five student voices affected by punishment, are at the center of my praxis.

John is over the age of forty and has a formal completed college education. He had “one father, three mothers, one biological, two stepmothers” and described fond memories of childhood growing up in Ghana. He remembers a big community of neighbors and familial support within that community. He situated himself as middle to lower middle-class, even though his parents were considered tremendously wealthy. In school, John excelled particularly in English comprehension, describing overall he did fine in school academically, but experienced harsh discipline often throughout secondary school. John believes in “the power of women”, in educating positions. He circled back to how Americans must nurture themselves and each other, like he experienced growing up in Ghana. His his outlook on how education should be about nurturing the positive development of a child made me feel happy that there are people out there who believe that as deeply as I do.

Rachel grew up in Worcester, she is over the age of thirty and identifies herself as a Vietnamese woman. She describes herself as someone who was “raised to be a criminal” but that she is “the one percent” in her family that did not turn to drugs, or violent crime. She simply described that for her entire childhood, she was barely living and when she was, it was in survival mode. Her parents were refugees during the Vietnam war when they immigrated to America and proudly defines herself as a “Vietnamese first generation female”. She illustrates

her childhood community and home as “racist and ghetto” growing up with all her basic needs not being met. Rachel’s childhood was like most people she knew but at the same time, very different. At home, she “took most of the abuse” from primarily her father, and any other man that entered her house. In school, she "got away with a lot of things," attributing it to her race and gender. The downside she recounts was people helping her at school, but not in the way she needed help.

Robert is over the age of thirty. He’s from an area near Roxbury and describes the environment of his upbringing as seeing things “most children who are 8,9,10 should not be seeing”. In his interview, he often referred to the “origins of [his] anger” and how “trauma can make you react in certain ways” (Interview, 2024). For Robert, he moved through school not caring all that much about anything. He is a Black man who grew up going to a school with classmates he identified with. He loved school, but struggled with a learning disadvantage in math, holding him back a year in middle school. Robert has a chill demeanor. Very calm and charismatic guy. I really enjoyed our conversation and when he thanked me at the end of his interview, I could feel tears starting to well up in my eyes.

Thomas grew up as a kid riding his bike around Worcester. He’s Puerto Rican, but identifies more with Black culture, since he grew up in a predominantly Black neighborhood. He named himself “guilty by association” because while he never joined a gang, he was friends with kids who did. Thomas described himself as wanting to be a part of a group and make money to be able to keep up with material trends. However, at the heart of his desire to sell, was seeing his parents struggle to keep with with the costs of living. Eventually, Thomas noted being pulled in by the easy money he was getting from the streets, and began to identify with that version of himself, along with those around him. He was often bored in school, not because he didn’t like

learning, but because he was breezing through class assignments like they were nothing. Thomas experienced public, private, and alternative schooling, and he shared his insights with me on the differences among them.

Lisa is over the age of thirty and grew up in the Dominican Republic. She attended schools there until she was 10 years old, then she moved to America with her mother and little brother. She did not have a good relationship with her mother growing up. As a kid, Lisa described that it was hard for her to understand why her mom moved them to the US, and why her mother made certain decisions. In high school, Lisa illustrates a very common high school routine. She went to the class as she liked and needed support in, then would smoke and skip with her friends. Eventually, she graduated from Job Corps within a year and received her GED, passing on the first try. She knew what was going to make her money and not inhibit her dedication to succeeding. She spoke very to the point. As women, we had a mutual understanding that sometimes we just got to do something, when we must. She's not ashamed of her family, who she was or is.

There is data to support that zero tolerance policies such as out-of-school suspensions correlate with continued disruptive behavior and feelings of disconnection from one's school community (Forman, 2025). To address the school-to-prison pipeline, research suggests that teachers should implement prison abolitionist-based pedagogy and culturally responsive teaching into the classroom. This includes fostering positive relationships between students and adults in the school, and teaching relevant curriculum that students learn from and find meaning in. In the next section, I share with you two frameworks that I believe will support the positive development of opportunity-youth in my classroom.

Theoretical Framework

Culturally Responsive Teaching

A Curriculum and Pedagogy of Prison Abolition: Transforming the Civics Classroom Through an Abolitionist Framework by Tadashi Dozono (2021) explains the importance of teaching through a prison abolitionist pedagogy and culturally responsive curriculum. He states that "Schools serve the same state that the police and prisons serve" (Dozono 2021, p. 411). Dozono puts public schools on the same level as prisons, bringing awareness that even though they are institutions that are servicing children, all state funded institutions function similarly, in ways that reproduce social inequalities. Because public schools are state institutions, they run systematically similar to prisons. The state controls what is taught in school, graduation requirements, how much funding a district receives, and compulsory attendance (Wong, 2018). There are substantial requirements that teachers need to make sure students meet, sanctioned by the state. Dozono explains that this reason is not enough to stop an educator committed to teaching in a prison abolitionist lens. Teachers make a classroom. Change can happen on a micro scale, within the curriculum taught, and pedagogy enforced.

Curriculum is obviously a primary component to school. Dozono explains the importance of democratizing the curriculum. What he means by this is lessons should be constructed in a way so class may be student led, or with ample opportunities for students to share knowledge with peers and teachers. There should be knowledge production from the collaborative work of students with teachers, not knowledge re-production. Teachers should create a classroom space where they release some authority over knowledge. There should also be relevant material that students can relate to and enjoy. After a lesson, students should be able to make better sense of the world around them related to who they are, especially as one is moving through public schooling. Curriculum should be taught in order from "problem" to "solution," rather than

focusing too much time on the "insurmountable weight of systemic oppression" (Dozono, 2021, p.418). Dozono is referencing the importance of being intentional when teaching potentially triggering content. For example, if I want to create a unit plan to teach about the Civil Rights Movement in the context of the novel, *The Hate U Give*, I will teach necessary historical context/information with intentionally chosen images, supported by lived experiences; as opposed to overwhelming my students with heavy and potentially upsetting content. Dozono makes a key point, acknowledging the importance of learning about historical oppression, but emphasizing that teachers must be intentional in the way they present or facilitate discussions surrounding heavy topics.

In pedagogy, the most important aspect Dozono mentioned was implementing restorative justice into the classroom and not just saving it for administrative discipline. Finding alternatives to out-of-school suspension and sending students out of the classroom is imperative. The way that discipline has been carried out in public schooling must change. He states "positing decarceration as our overarching strategy, we would try to envision a continuum of alternatives to imprisonment" (Dozono, 2021, p.414). Since out-of-school suspension more often than not leads to opposition to schooling, eliminating out-of-school suspension can directly disrupt the school-to-prison pipeline (Dozono, 2021). Students should feel empowered in the classroom. Teachers and students should have mutual respect but knowing that the teacher is the authority in the room when lessons are taught. Showing humility and empathy as someone in an authoritative position, will change the entire culture of a classroom.

Public schooling is in desperate need of change, starting in the classroom. Some people think that comparing public school discipline to incarceration is taking it too far; however, recent

trends show that this comparison is becoming quite accurate. Using harmful disciplinary measures in school introduces incarceration very early on in a child's life. Dozono explains that,

> Putting people in prisons, functionally exiling them from society and humanity, and kicking students out of the classrooms and schools, does not meet the needs of the entire public. An abolitionist framework in K-12 schooling means a constant commitment to a shared humanity. It means listening and attending to the needs of the most marginalized. Nobody's thinking is to be dismissed, to be given up on (Dozono, 2021, p. 415).

Dozono implores the need for dedicated educators who are ready to de-center themselves in their career. If pedagogy and curriculum do not change, the public schooling system will further entrap and create more resistance in children, that will keep opportunity youth in a cycle of academic struggle. There must be a "constant commitment to a shared humanity" as teachers must constantly address harmful behaviors, with the goal of sustainable change within the child. Dozono's theory touches on emotional support in the classroom, but to me, it seems as if Dozono is assuming that the teachers reading his piece already know how to emotionally support their students within and separated from curriculum. He touches upon the importance of "shared humility" but barely scratches below the surface. I believe emotional support in teaching is just as important as curriculum, so I paired Dozono's theory with an interpersonal theory called the Triune Ethics Theory.

Ethics in Interactions with Children

The *Triune Ethics Theory* created by Darcia Narvaez (2014) combines findings from neurobiology and moral psychology to examine the ways in which identities, attitudes, and relationships are formed. The interpersonal theory is made up of three main "ethical mindsets".

From my understanding, the "ethical mindset" is what we, as adults focus on when engaging with students.

Self-Protectionist Ethic

The first ethical mindset is called the Security, Safety or Self-Protectionist Ethic. The *Security, Safety or Self-Protectionist Ethic* refers all the way back to when our ancestors fought or hid from predators, also known as the fight-or-flight response. Children who have experienced trauma or neglect are more likely to exhibit either the wallflower or bunker morality. The *wallflower* morality refers to a child who appears withdrawn or is prone to freezing when spoken to. Often, children who are severely neglected or physically abused will revert to the *flight* response, with little to no confrontation. The *bunker* morality refers to a child who may have no control over their reactions and shows aggressive traits. Often times, boys who spend a lot of time in their community may witness violent, upsetting events that affect the way they're able to cope with stressors. For example, a student I tutor explained to me the physical pain he feels when someone is irritating him. He described this itching feeling for sometimes days after, whether he got into a physical fight as a result or not. For those falling under a bunker morality, in a moment of irritation it can be difficult to move on because of past traumas. Narvaez states that "When people are fearful for their own safety or their self-beliefs, they are less responsive to helping others and more focused on self-preservation" (Narvaez, 2014, p. 2.).

Engagement Ethic

The second ethic is called the *Engagement Ethic* involves "face-to-face relational attainment with egalitarian, flexible responsiveness within an encounter where, when both are in engagement mode, a unique, playful co-constructed interaction takes place"

(Narvaez, 2014, p. 2). Dismantling the notion that teachers are the only knowledge holders, establishing an egalitarian mindset as a teacher will make it possible for students to engage with you and your class with more understanding and trust. Students will want to take part, not fearing their inquiry is wrong. I view this ethic as matching your student's energy, if I had to put it in my own words. Students want you to joke with them. They want you to laugh and talk with them about their interests. One way I incorporate the Engagement Ethic when I'm in a teaching position is through humor. When the kids are funny, I laugh. Why wouldn't I laugh? This is a way that I create relationships with students. Then, when I need to get them to do work, I have noticed that they feel bad when they misbehave. If a student doesn't like you, they aren't going to respect you. I have gotten the most difficult student to do their work and do it well, just by proving mutual respect. In the end, I showed a relationship with this student that taught me many things about being a caring educator.

The Engagement Ethic also homes in on "love/care/attachment, enhancement, and elevation" (Narvaez, 2014, p .2). At once, I thought about students who may not have the exact type of support they need at home. It's a teacher's responsibility to foster love and encouragement into their students' lives during school, especially for those who may not have it at home. I had a semi-peaceful household growing up. So, when it was not so peaceful, my favorite teachers were there to put me in a good mood. More importantly, they taught me one specific valuable skill that I was not learning at home: communication.

Communication! When thinking about love/care/attachment, enhancement, and elevation, I think about communication. I always want to foster communication in my classroom. I don't care if my students talk without raising their hands! Instead of learning how to raise their hand, my students will learn how to not talk over their peers, engage with their peers, and have

meaningful, and especially kind conversations with each other and myself. I do not believe that'll happen if I'm teaching my students to be nervous to speak unless they raise their hand.

Imagination Ethic

The *Imagination Ethic* focuses on the functions of the frontal lobes and prefrontal cortex. These parts of the brain are involved in "executive function, such as planning, foreseeing consequences, stopping, and starting actions, and taking the perspective of others. These capacities allow for a broader review of action possibilities" (Narvaez, 2014, p. 3). One alarming aspect to the imagination ethic that made me think about my experiences working with at-risk youth, is that some students may have what is called a *detached imagination.* According to the theory, detached imagination is "Intellectualized morality that sees life in discrete pieces, solves abstracted, moral problems without attending to the rich context, using rational logic to make social and moral decisions. Morality can become narrowly focused and degrades into a set of procedures" (Narvaez, 2014, p. 3). While reading, *morality can become narrowly focused and degrades into a set of procedures*, I laughed because it made me think about a saying that some of my friends would say: *Talk shit, get hit.*

Talk shit, get hit, is a procedure. If you talk badly about someone and they find out, you are getting beat up, no thinking required, no questions asked. Students who may be around violence at home or at school or in their community may have trouble responding to stressors in a manner that is not showing anger or violence. More importantly, adults should not be punishing a child for their behavior, they should get to the root of the hurt.

According to the theory, "if neglect is sufficiently profound, the visceral-emotion nervous system is unable to "resonate" with others" (Narvaez, 2014, p.3). This is extremely important to know, because in instances where students are found to be experiencing extreme neglect or

abuse, the child may have difficulty putting themselves in other people's shoes. This is obstructively apparent when students get into violent altercations in school. When two individuals are physically fighting, they aren't thinking about the other human they're beating on. All they care about is the anger and frustration they feel, it doesn't matter to them if the person they're hurting is being hurt. This mindset can be present in opportunity youth through an array of different behaviors done unto others and even done unto themselves. Early intervention in an opportunity youth's life is going to be their best hope of succeeding.

Theory of Change

A Curriculum and Pedagogy of Prison Abolition: Transforming the Civics Classroom Through an Abolitionist Framework by Tadashi Dozono (2021) and *Triune Ethics Theory* by Darcia Narvaez when referenced together, align with my theory of change. I believe that culturally responsive curriculum and emotional support must be interconnected in classroom culture in order for co-created meaningful learning to take place. For opportunity-youth in particular, the classroom can be a stressful and unwelcoming space at times. I believe that teaching culturally relevant and intentional material will increase engagement and positive behaviors in class, but not by itself. When culturally relevant material is not enough, the Triune Ethics theory acknowledges the complex nature of children's psyches and the importance of constant emotional support, and I mean constant. Together, Dozono and Narvaez demonstrate my belief that a functioning classroom must have a teacher who is knowledgeable about their students and committed to their success, no matter how hard it is.

Being committed to your students will look different depending on their level of need, and any structural constraints you may have at your school. In the next section, I explain a

couple terms to help you understand the rest of my paper, along with the unintended effects of negatively labeling youth.

Conceptual Framework

When I hear the word *juvenile*, I immediately think of *juvenile detention centers.* The term is used differently across different disciplines, but when it comes to education, it is used negatively, referring to that kid who's always getting in fights or other behavioral issues. I don't see young offenders as dangerous; I see them as hurt. The terms in which society as a whole labels youth may have a lasting impact on the child's self-worth, and personal views of a child. There are a number of negative connotation words that have been used in the past to refer to struggling youth. Those terms include juvenile, delinquent, dropout, and super-predator. The term *at-risk youth* has been used previously more popularly, insinuating a less negative association. According to the U.S. Department of Education, at-risk youth have about seven variables associated with them. These include, "basic demographic characteristics; family and personal background characteristics; the amount of parental involvement in the student's education; the student's academic history; student behavioral factors; teachers' perceptions of the student; and the characteristics of the student's school" (Miller, 2024, p.1). Some children are born in environments that predetermine them to be susceptible to the struggles of decision making in adolescence. Similarly, not all students who are *at-risk* look the same. As explained in the Triune Ethics Theory, students who are struggling may act out, or be withdrawn. All in all, the six variables listed are accurate indicators of which students may be struggling. The *at-risk* definition has evolved from the definition derived from "A Nation at Risk" from only including

environmental influences, to including societal, home, community, and schooling factors. A term that has been recently gaining traction is the more positively connotative label, *opportunity youth.*

At-Risk vs. Opportunity Youth

National Public Radio (NPR) journalist Anya Kamenetz (2015) wrote a compelling piece on the usage of language when working with youth, titled, *Delinquent. Dropout. At-Risk. When Words Become Labels.* The way in which educators understand and use terms when referring to their students is reflective of what type of support is being given to the child and how the child may feel about themself. *Opportunity youth* is a term that has recently been gaining traction but is not searchable in scholarly works as of yet. John Bridgeland, who is the CEO of Civic Enterprises coined this term in his report centered around high school dropouts, titled "The Silent Epidemic" (Kamenetz, 2015, p.8) saying that there is extraordinary untapped potential hidden in students who are in unfortunate circumstances (Kamenetz, 2015). Opportunity youth capture that all children should be given the opportunity to succeed. There is immense opportunity for some students, they just may not have the support to succeed.

At-risk does not reflect the child's intelligence or nature, but the uncontrollable factors that are difficult to control. I give the definition to both of the terms that are used in modern scholarly works. Personally, I use the term opportunity youth in academic writing. In discussion about the kids I work with, I use the word *students.* I do not categorize them at all. According to NPR, it is essential to avoid any negative labels when working with children. Not to impose toxic positivity, but to create an environment where students are treated and feel that they are not a burden.

School-to-Prison Pipeline

The *school-to-prison pipeline* is a term used to describe punitive disciplinary measures that push opportunity youth out of the classroom, thus increasing their chances of incarceration. Punitive discipline refers to any action that sends the child out of the classroom and zero tolerance policies. This includes but is not limited to out-of-school suspension. A study written by Alison Evans Cuellar (2015) titled *School Suspension and the School-to-Prison Pipeline,* explains the problematic practices used to discipline at-risk students, the most punitive being out-of-school suspension and expulsion. These policies "automatically impose punishments on students and mandate suspension or expulsion from school for certain offenses, often without consideration of the circumstances" (Cuellar, 2015, p.2). Suspending students as a first resort will most likely cause unintended effects. If a student who is already having behavioral struggles isn't in school, they are more likely to succumb to the unstructured freedom of suspension and boredom.

Another unintended effect of exclusionary practices will begin or continue the loss of academic opportunities and educational/emotional growth. An informational page on Citizens for Juvenile Justice (2017) titled "The School-to-Prison Pipeline" explains that the overall impact is devastating for children. Students who have been expelled or suspended are more likely to be disciplined in the same manner and twice as likely to drop out of school. Students who are arrested during school, are "more likely to drop out than their peers and students who drop out of school are more than eight times more likely to end up in the criminal justice system" (Citizens for Juvenile Justice, 2017). Proposed solutions run on the basis that opportunity youth need to be disciplined *in school*. This may look like in-school suspension, or removal from the classroom for one-on-one support until it's safe for the students to return to the classroom. Getting rid of

discipline as a whole is not feasible at the moment. But changing how discipline is carried out in school may very well alter the entire course of a student's life.

Often, once a student acts out a handful of times, educators may think the student is incapable of change. This is where the school-to-prison pipeline usually begins, when educators stop trying with opportunity-youth, for whatever reason it may be. Understanding the unintended effects anything an adult does may have on youth is a good start when trying to reframe one's thinking, especially through a prison abolitionist lens. Next, I share with you my identity and integral experiences that created who I am as an individual and as a teacher.

Positionality

I didn't learn to like my curly hair until I went to college. I straightened my hair every single day contemplating chemical treatments. No one looked like me at school, I stuck out like a sore thumb.

I never know how to explain my race. In my experience, not many people know about Armenia, let alone the Middle East. I would not call myself white and I would not call myself a person of color. I don't like spending time explaining to someone why I choose the label I choose when it comes to my race. It's a waste of my time, and I either leave feeling racist, or a fresh wave of imposter syndrome hits me like a truck. I have trouble believing that my experience is valid, especially since I attend a liberal arts school. Clark's 'welcoming' culture feels exclusive, only categorizing your life as *valid* if you physically look exactly like your race/ethnicity. I am Armenian. The way some Armenians identify is dependent on how the government identifies us. When filling out paperwork, I always check *white*, because that's how I'm perceived. No matter if your preferred search engine nods its head when you type in "Are Armenians white?" after having a lengthy conversation with me. My race and ethnicity influence

the way I experience the world, especially at a college that unintentionally excludes the racially/culturally ambiguous.

I have trouble understanding why my race is everyone else's business. Growing up, I had much more coarse, black body hair that covered my arms, legs, and face. I ate food that *stunk* to my classmates who categorized me as Indian and Mexican. My great grandmother risked her life coming over to the U.S from Armenia, saw her mother and infant sister die of dehydration after being left in a desert, and I still had kids asking me how many goats I was worth.

On the complete opposite side of the racial spectrum, if I say I'm not white— then I'm a racist.

Let me explain.

If I had a penny, for every time a white girl called me racist for identifying as not-white, I would have too many pennies. And the thing is, I never start these conversations. My race has made me see how insecure the world is. White people feel like they have to be the number one ally, and in effect, they don't acknowledge people like me. I have imposter syndrome about my culture, my race, and ethnicity because I am perceived different racially, depending on the environment I'm in. I do have the privilege of being perceived as white most of the time, having that "invisible knapsack" of white privilege, as described by Peggy McIntosh (1989).

I worry about money more than I worry about anything else. I grew up with a financially stable family, and had a healthy childhood; however, we lived paycheck to paycheck with my single mother and help from my grandparents. There was no question that I would need to get a job as soon as my age allowed me and keep one until the day I die. I wish that I could spend money and not worry about it, but I can't afford to. As a low-income kid, I dealt with a lot of stress at home that affected my mood at school.

I don't think of my identity as something that I am continuously working to reconstruct. Some of my identities I was born with— they're not changing. Others have become so permanent in my life; I might as well have been born with them. Every part of my identity influences how I interacted with my praxis site.

Positionality Impacting Praxis

When interviewing, I carried myself the same way I did when I was a Peer Learning Assistant. I established common ground, not just for my participant, but for myself as well. Even though I am technically in a some-what authoritative position, I am also a younger female. My identity as this has become excruciatingly apparent since the majority of the participants in my research and students in LARC are men who are older than me. This is by no means a bad thing; it's just possible that my identity may have hindered some of the topics covered in the interviews.

My status as an insider is beneficial for semi-structured interviews. Most of the participants I already knew beforehand, and that increased comfortability when signing up for the interviews, and while they were participating. My identity as an outsider, as someone who has never been incarcerated, enables a great conversation of learning, but there are some experiences and feelings that I cannot fully relate to. My schooling experience was not positive. There were times I'm sure like any other student where I did enjoy parts of it, but it was overwhelmingly negative for myself and those I loved.

Literature Review

"This is the time when kids are the most impressionable, vulnerable, and malleable. Every social interaction that they have, every relationship they form, every event that happens, has the ability to leave a lasting impression on them and impact who they become in the future. Whether it's

parent-child relationships, friendships, teacher-student relationships, etc., each one has its role." (Clarissa Karantzis, 2018).

I believe that sustainable change takes place in the classroom, through positive relationships with educators, which coincides with a prison abolitionist pedagogy. There are two concepts that became salient while reviewing existing literature. As explained in the theoretical framework, pedagogy is at the center of change in the classroom. A study written by the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (2012) called *Equity and Quality in Education: Supporting Disadvantaged Students and Schools* explains that the highest quality school systems are those that couple together quality and equity with curriculum and pedagogy (OECD, 2012, p.3). Even if a teacher has a well-designed culturally responsive curriculum, it doesn't necessarily mean they hold corresponding beliefs about how teachers should engage with students while teaching the material. If classroom curriculum along with prison abolitionist pedagogy contribute to creating an equitable and quality educational environment, what does that look like?

Throughout my literature review, the underlying theme in each piece was the need for positive relationships between teachers and students when learning in the classroom whether it be social or academic. Since the formation of identities is a central part of adolescence, students are more likely to be influenced by the adults or older figures in their environment, looking towards them for guidance on what behaviors are respectable and what behaviors may inhibit them moving forward through school (Hurd, Zimmerman, & Hue, 2009, p.3). There are several attributes of educators that support these relationships; however, I believe the most impactful

qualities are empathy, consistency, and patience, similar to what was demonstrated by high school teacher, Jessica Siegel.

Small Victories reads like a friend telling you a story. Samuel G. Freedman (1990), an established journalist and professor at Columbia, captured the beautiful and heartbreaking intricacies of the New York teacher crisis from 1987-1988. He follows the journalist-turned-high-school-English-teacher, Jessica Siegel, explaining how one of the most underperforming public high schools in New York has most of its student body graduating and attending college (Freedman, 1990). Siegel designed her curriculum to directly relate to the demographic and interests of the students she taught. Teaching a curriculum that is tailored to the student body, shows that the educator took the time to learn about students intersectionalities and recognizes that students care about learning (Freidus, 2020). This shows an understanding that students who do not perform well in the classroom are intelligent, but being taught material that they feel does not apply to their lives. More importantly, Siegel made space for students to share their out-of-school experiences, to better understand the material, and create community among classroom peers. I believe that Donzono would categorize Siegel's teaching style as equivalent to prison-abolitionist, because she dedicated her teaching style to constant humility. There are chapters in *Small Victories* that solely focus on a student's life at home and how Jessica's involvement with the students progresses outside of the classroom.

Motivation and attention from students are where there is the most difficulty with teaching curriculum. Research suggests that there are aspects to the curriculum that will reduce stress and upset when learning. First, accessible learning materials are essential. Learning from students how they function best in the classroom will overall associate learning with enjoyment, rather than stress. There are three different learning styles, that teachers can identify once

speaking with students. Throughout the entire curriculum, all learning styles should be used, but when working one-on-one, the students particular learning style can be accommodated. Having auditory, visual, and tactile mediums available to learn and understand material will increase overall understanding and efficiency. Students who are auditory learners need to hear lessons, not just see, to learn the best. On the other hand, visual learners need to see what they are learning, not just hear it. Tactile learners learn the best by being hands on. These learners need to do what is being learned, not just hear and see (EducationPlanner.org, 2011-2024). It is important to teach material in the way that your students learn best. A sign that a student understands material is if they share an experience in relation to the curriculum being taught, that should be seen as an asset, not a deficit (Freidus, 2020). The classroom should be a place for students to collaborate with each other, and associate learning with joy.

Empathy

In this paper, *empathy* refers to the overall ability to deeply care for another's life and situations (Meyers, 2019). Being an empathetic teacher means considering the effect that everything may have on your students and showing interest in students' personal lives and achievements. An article titled *Teaching with empathy: Why it's important* written by Amanda Morin (2024) identifies four main parts of teaching with empathy. The first is *perspective taking*. This means putting aside one's own feelings and trying to think about a situation through the student's eyes. The second is *putting aside judgment*. It is important to consider parts of a situation that you may not have seen. Making assumptions about a child before knowing more about a situation will be recognized by the child. The third is trying to *understand student's feelings*. Trying to remember when you were the students' age or if you have had a similar experience to theirs will help you communicate with the child and put aside judgment. An

educator should always consider what they do not know about a child or a situation, before evaluating reactions. Lastly, *communicate that you understand*. Communication will look and sound different depending on the situation, however, it is all around important to avoid phrases that suggest a situation needs to be 'fixed' and you know the only way how to (Morin, 2024). Showing empathy to a child does not require solving a problem, sometimes showing empathy means active listening.

How to Reach and Teach ADD/ADHD Children written by Sandra F. Rief (2012) laid out "practical techniques, strategies, and interventions for helping children with attention, problems, and hyperactivity" in an overtly clear and concise way. Attentional difficulties are often a symptom of something much bigger going on in the child's life (Miller, 2024). I was drawn to how Rief (2012) noted on the inside cover of her book that she wrote it *for* children with ADD/ADHD and attention problems/hyperactivity.

Rief acknowledges that attentional problems are essential to address in any student, not just those with ADD/ADHD. She also stresses the importance of continued care in school because the inability to pay attention is often seen as something that is easily controllable. Hyperactivity and attention problems are not something that are going to go away. For some students' behaviors it can get increasingly better, but it is likely the student will always have some degree of struggle in school. This intervention guide started off strong in the "About This Book" section by stating that "Attention deficit/hyperactivity disorder is not something that we can 'cure'… we, the significant adults in their lives, play a *significant role i*n how well these children achieve, succeed, and feel about themselves. We are the ones who can help these children best manage their lives, cope with frustrations… we are also the ones who can help them see their strengths— often their giftedness—and value their uniqueness" (Rief, 2012, p.5).

As someone who grew up with a learning disability, I understand the impact that a teacher who encourages students to recognize their strengths can have. For some, it may be key motivation to overcome significant challenges. Morin and Rief demonstrate the core beliefs of the *Triune Ethics Theory*. Both authors acknowledge that the nature of childcare is unpredictable, but as adults working with kids, we have a responsibility to build them up. To see things from their perspective and never give up on them even if everyone else has.

Empathy is especially important when teaching material that may be frustrating and difficult for some students. For example, when discussing feedback on an assignment with a student, a teacher should prioritize the recognition of strengths, before explaining areas for improvement. This will start a pattern for the child, showing there is clear support when working on difficult material; that the teacher is there to motivate and help, as opposed to just picking out mistakes. There are that students may not be able to separate themselves from in the classroom and because of that, it is important for educators to lead with empathy. According to a 2022 study, "prior research shows that teachers play a more prominent role in the development of students at risk of adverse educational trajectories. Hence, teacher empathy might be particularly relevant for students with a low socioeconomic status or with cognitive or social-emotional difficulties" (Aldrup; Carstensen; Klusmann, 2022). As explained in the *Triune Ethic's Theory*, children who have experienced neglect or trauma, put forth either the *bunker morality* or the *wallflower morality*, two states of being that often get opportunity youth in trouble. If students feel safe expressing their emotions, they will. But first, a teacher must effectively build trust through empathy, and to do that, you must make sure there is consistency…

Consistency

In general, consistency refers to "the quality or state of being constant, reliable, and uniform in behavior, performance, or approach over time" (Hassan, & Kumail, 2023). In teaching, this means being someone that your students can continuously rely on for emotional and academic support in the classroom. Students should be able to predict what each day will look like in their classroom, because of repeated preparation and consistency from the teacher. Opportunity youth often struggle with their mental health and academic confidence. When students feel that they are in an environment where their teachers are consistent, they will feel safe to share their thoughts and show their feelings in a communicative manner. It is imperative that there is consistency within the teacher's demeanor in the classroom every day. Teaching methods, routines, expectations, and support in the classroom should be consistent throughout the year and not abruptly shift depending on the day. You will read in my findings about how John and Thomas were both suspended in high school but then allowed to come back. Even though both of those situations resulted in reintegrating a student back into school, that is an example of inconsistency in administrative implementation of policy.

A true sense of trust and stability will not be present in the classroom without consistent supportive demeanor and emotional support from the teacher. Especially with students who may be susceptible to negative influences within their community and have shown signs of struggle in school, adults influence the lives of children in a variety of inevitable ways. Gholdy Muhammad (2020), author of *Cultivating Genius* explains that "many times, youth may struggle with skills like decoding or reading fluency, but they can read social contexts and environments exceptionally well" (Muhammad, 2020, p.41). It is often underestimated how well in tune children are with the adults in a classroom. They're able to tell when a teacher doesn't want to spend time helping them, even if the teacher's words are saying they do. Everything has the

ability to impact a child for the rest of their lives. As humans grow, we tend to show traits and behaviors that are either learned intentionally or unintentionally, through observation or influence (Hurd, Zimmerman, Xue, 2009). There are studies that suggest creating an emotionally consistent learning environment will positively change the students social and academic development inside the classroom (Curby, Brock, & Hamre, 2013, p.292).

Patience

There are ample opportunities in the classroom for a teacher to grow overstimulated or irritated in a classroom full of children who may be defiant or struggle in academics. Patience is a key trait needed when interacting with students and especially opportunity youth (Teachers of Tomorrow, 2023). Teachers often answer the same questions repeatedly from students, so being patient is necessary to achieve a solution. Opportunity youth are more likely to take longer to learn concepts and may struggle with new material. It is essential to take your time with students and know that learning comes with repetition and time.

A psychologist Ashley Garber (2019), wrote a piece about how she made sense of how people struggle or thrive in life, based on her own experiences of growing up with trauma. Garber explains that “constantly being rushed is a state of stress” that directly impacts the way our nervous system functions (Garber, 2019). Garber’s research is focused on adults and rushing in everyday life and for students, school is like their primary occupation until they’re 18 years old. Teachers must not appear irritated at students if they are taking longer than expected to complete an assignment. At that point, an educator should be able to adapt their assignments for those students and move on with the rest of the class (Everyday Speech, 2024). Being patient with students will increase classroom learning, and make students feel supported in their learning, potentially increasing participation and feelings of belonging.

Patient teachers are more likely to build strong relationships with opportunity youth, especially when meeting students for the first time. It may take longer for students with traumatic experiences to trust adults. A student I had (let's call him Gary) who was incarcerated gave me some advice one day about teaching in urban school settings. Gary explained that if students seem like they don't like me at first, I just need to be patient with them; that especially boys with trauma may need a long time to warm up to me. He said the most important thing is to let my students know that I will be there the next day when they are ready to trust me.

The Triune Ethics Theory focuses on how opportunity youth react to stressors and why. Then, suggests creating egalitarian interactions with students. Doing so has been proven to increase student interactions and outcomes.

Leading with Empathy, Patience, and Consistency in Classroom Discipline

The most vital time to lead with empathy, consistency, and patience is when disciplining in the classroom. It is imperative to implement restorative justice into classroom culture and eliminate the punitive approach to punishment. Hani Morgan (2021) explains in her article, *Restorative Justice and the School-to-Prison Pipeline: A Review of Existing Literature,* "Implementing well-designed restorative discipline programs in schools with high percentages of minority students is a promising approach that may reduce the disproportionate imprisonment of Black people" (Morgan, 2012, p.2). This means prioritizing talking through harmful situations, to reconcile harm caused and encouraging students to do the same, when the teacher is not present Removing students from the classroom should be used as an absolute, desperate, last resort. Having a student go for a walk and come back or sit in the back of the classroom doing an alternate activity is better than associating the classroom with embarrassment. Students who I've spoken to after suspension from school expressed feeling embarrassed to return to class and often

felt nervous to ask for help after getting in trouble. On the other end of the extreme, children who are incarcerated may have uncertain difficulty with transitioning back to school; especially those who were arrested while school was in session. When a child's normal routine is uprooted, especially without care in their transition back to school, it can cause lack of motivation and low self-esteem related to school.

There are programs implemented in schools around Massachusetts that work to directly address the school-to-prison pipeline through a restorative justice-based program implemented directly within schools. A program called Becoming A Man (BAM) based in Boston, Massachusetts explains positively what will happen when a child, especially boys, are taught how to talk through their emotions, especially in a public-school environment. Here's what the program is all about,

> Youth Guidance's Becoming A Man® program (BAM®) is a school-based group counseling program that guides young men in 7-12th grades to learn, internalize and practice social cognitive skills, make responsible decisions for their future and become positive members of their school and community. BAM integrates clinical theory and practice, men's rites of passage work, and a dynamic approach to youth engagement. Each session is built around a lesson plan designed to develop a specific skill through stories, role-playing and group exercises. BAM students learn and practice impulse control, emotional self-regulation, recognition of social cues and interpreting intentions of others, raising aspirations for the future and developing a sense of personal responsibility and integrity. Students who participate in BAM are more likely to stay in school, develop healthy relationships, and stay out of the juvenile justice system (Becoming A Man, 2024).

The program works with schools to identify which youth are most at-risk and would benefit from the program. Most importantly, BAM focuses on caring for youth, showing empathy, consistency, and patience. Like BAM, there are already well established programs out there that need people to draw more attention to what already exists. In the next section, you will gain more insight on the content of my study.

Context

As a white presenting college student, I did not want to walk up in a school, do my research and leave. I would have loved to work with youth for my praxis, but the time restraint and my lack of academic research experience made me nervous I would make a harmful mistake. This is an anxiety that did not disappear, I'm always nervous about causing unintended harm. I just learned how to work with it.

I chose Liberal Arts for Returning Citizens (LARC) at Clark University as my site. In this program, formerly incarcerated individuals can take free classes at Clark for half a college credit. Even though the classes do not accrue to a degree, the program introduces/re-introduces returning citizens to what it's like taking in-person college courses. Returning to *normalcy* after incarseration is isolating and easier said than done. For some, normalcy is not what they want; they want/need something that is going to alter their outlook on life. LARC challenges the pre-conceived notions of what it means to return to education. As a program, they juggle the meaning of *re-entry vs. re-integration* and the bigger picture of returning home after incarseration. *Re-entry* refers to the process of returning home after a period of incarceration. While *re-integration* refers to the sustainable transition back into the community through a multitude of support networks, after a period of incarceration. LARC is a *re-integration* program because it would not function without the help of many separate groups of individuals in the

Worcester area (e.g., judges, parole officers, grant writers, donors). With those supports, LARC is a physical space where students can start to make sense of education/knowledge as separate from what society views as *school*. Based on students lived experiences, the structure of schooling did not foster joy, but the knowledge they gained did.

I believe learning from those who have been through the systems we study, is where the most expertise is hiding. Adults who have experienced being pushed out of school and have since then processed those experiences, have invaluable insights for teachers to learn from about how to better teach and care for opportunity youth.

I am an insider to the program as a Peer Learning Assistant (PLA) for LARC, which is an undergraduate student that is in a minimal teaching position. I have been involved with the program for two years. My job consists of picking up dinner that is provided, working one-on-one with the students in class, tracking and following up with attendance, and editing students' work. My positionality oddly enough, works well as an interviewer. I have never been incarcerated, but I did have a misdemeanor charge until I was eighteen, and the police in my town knew visited my home frequently. So, I carry absolutely no judgement when I hear someone has been to prison, I do not believe that someone's charges *should* define who they are. LARC students also identified that my lack of experience *being in* the criminal legal system creates a sense of belonging in an academic environment. I can easily empathize with how they are feeling because I have room in my brain for it.

There is dual-learning that happens in LARC classrooms. Not only are the students learning from the professor (and myself-ish), we learn from the students. The most invaluable ethic I learned from the students is that everyone is capable of completely changing who they are, they just need support and the will to do it. One day, a student told me he was happy I never

met him before his twenty-year incarceration; he labeled himself as *unsafe*. I could feel my eyes getting hot with tears, because I couldn't even imagine who that *unsafe* previous person was. From another student, I learned strategies on how to compartmentalize when I eventually become a teacher. This student was worried I would emotionally burnout too quickly. Not only do I learn things from the students, I also learn something from the LARC faculty and staff with every interaction.

My main point of contact and collaboration was with Shelly Tenenbaum, a sociology professor at Clark and one of the co-directors of LARC. She is the person I approached for permission to work with a program that has essentially become her child. Throughout my research process, Shelly has sent me articles and helpful resources that would assist in my literature review. Asking someone to do research within their passion project felt extractive to me. I was nervous to ask, especially since at the time, I had only been volunteering with LARC for a short time. Shelly was excited to hear about my idea and was willing to help me make it happen anyway she could. She made known right away that if she feels like my project may cause harm, it will not happen. It made me feel better knowing that right away. The support from Shelly assured me that my project holds important meaning, and will not be started, until it is fully ready. The other faculty collaborators who assisted me with my praxis are Jie Park, Anita Fabos, and Heather Macpherson. Jie Park is a professor in Clark's Community Youth and Education Studies department and was my praxis advisor. She oversaw all my progress and helped me work through the difficulties that came with doing research for the first time. Anita Fabos was my professor for a class in the International Development department called "Methods of Inquiry". She allowed me to use the same material from my praxis, for a semester-long research proposal, so I could refine and alter what was not working. Heather Macpherson is

an English professor at Clark, who I worked with in LARC as a PLA for three of her writing classes. Heather has kindly agreed to editing parts of my paper and in her comments added insight as a public high school teacher.

Methodology and Data Collection

I always take one positive thing out of something difficult. When listening to the interviews, I realized where my strengths were. The whole time I was stressing about reading literature and finding a theoretical framework, I didn't realize how good I was at interviewing until I listened to the audio. Not only was I able to get quality data, but it also validated that participants felt safe enough to share vulnerable experiences with me and that I was able to give my participants a constructive space to reflect and heal.

Even though I had identified my participants, I had to then recruit. Shelly identified two professors who kindly agreed to let me present my research at the beginning of their classes. The first was a Finance class. There were about eight students present, and all were passionate to learn more about my project. Many of the students I recognized from previous classes, and a couple I did not recognize at all. The second was an entrepreneurship class, with about twelve students. Even though I received interest from well over fifteen students, I only heard back from five. The recruitment process went well, despite my nerves. To accommodate everyone's visual and auditory needs, I handed out copies of the consent forms for students to read along with me while I explained the logistics. I answered questions as I read, and then at the end. The students were then directed to read over the consent form again in their own time and send me an email to set up an interview date if interested. Two students immediately emailed me so they would not forget, and others did so later in the month. I received five emails/texts and conducted five

interviews. Out of the two classes, there were three students who participated in my study that were present for both recruitment presentations. Two out of five of my participants were students new to the program, who I have not previously interacted with. I did not get as many participants as I was expecting, but I do not see that as a problem. I feel that my interviews were thorough and concrete, even though there are some questions I wish I asked. I'm also nervous that my findings do not present accurate general findings if I do not have a larger sample. Regardless of what others think, my interviews that are which focal part of my research made a lasting impact on me, and from what I understood from my participants, it made a positive impact on them as well.

I conducted interviews independently with the participant in the Goddard Library study rooms, because I wanted to create a comfortable, non-medicalized setting for the students to share vulnerable experiences. This is the part of my methodology that I got some push back on by a few of my classmates. More importantly, I am a trusted person that most of the students are familiar with. I believe that having a psychologist or medical professional in the room, would be disrespecting the students' progress made towards rehabilitation and essentially make the interview a medicalized setting, which was not my intention. Nigel Mathers, Nick Fox, and Amanda Hunn delve into what it means to use research as methodology explaining that those who are clinically trained, are not necessarily the best people to be present conducting interviews or in the interview room (Mathers et al., 2002, p. 1). My study is not supposed to be a therapy session, where feelings are spoken about in great detail and advice is given. Traumatic memories were mentioned, but because it was in a peer conversation, with minimal detail given. In feedback from the participants, there was expressed enjoyment of the interview process.

To investigate what is really going on as a result of a problem, we should be looking at the people who have been affected by that problem. *Qualitative data* is the explanation of a concept that cannot be explained by numbers alone. I decided to take qualitative data in the form of in person *semi-structured conversational interviews*. I had a set of 9 open-ended questions (reference appendix) prepared to ask my participants, because the questions provide opportunities for my participant and I to have a conversation about some topics in more detail (Mathers, 2002). Following each question were some *probing questions*, to continue the participants thinking when there is a lull in the conversation.

Each interview was scheduled to be about an hour long. The average interview was about a little over an hour. The longest interview was an hour and a half and the shortest was about 55 minutes. We worked through each question, and sometimes the participant transitioned into the next one without even knowing. I audio recorded the interviews and took some handwritten notes. I used voice memos on my iPad, and labeled each interview with a letter, to match the transcripts. The handwritten notes are kept in a folder, hidden in my desk, and have no name or letter associated with them. They were used for my understanding while doing the interviews.

As we progressed further into the interviews, I found that each of the students opened up and looked increasingly more comfortable. I noticed that toward the end of the interview, two participants started switching up how they spoke and gestured, which was different from how they were at the start. Other than verbal feedback from the participants, there were small things such as this, that indicated to me that I created a comfortable space to share vulnerable experiences. In the next section, you will gain some insight into my very messy data analysis process.

Data Analysis

Process of Data Analysis

I had five interviews that took about an hour each, coming out to about 70 pages of data. Transcribing and coding took me forever and it was frustrating most of the time. I used a mixture of listening to the interviews, transcribing them through audio voice to text, and typing. I preferred this method because the audio transcribers I found were not exact. Also, typing them gave me the chance to get familiar with my interviews. I can tell what quotes were from which person and when in the interview without any labels.

I have zero academic confidence so every theme that I developed from the data, I was not confident that it made sense. I really had to push myself to code. Luckily, in class on January 31st and February 14th, I had the opportunity in my praxis class to bring a couple pages of data as a class assignment for everyone to code as a group. This was my favorite thing to do because I listened to many different views on my data and different ways to code. I needed lots of examples on how to code in order to do it myself. My classmates had such specific categories; ones that I agreed with entirely, and ones that I did not. My professor, Jie Park, has been so helpful with the coding process, giving me clear examples from my data of how to do it, especially during these two classes. I realized I was being too vague, and it was important to make categories based on my literature review and stick strictly to the words of the participants.

After those two classes, I printed my transcripts and highlighted important words and phrases. Then, I made a list on google docs of the codes and tried my best to organize them into categories, then to themes. Throughout my praxis, I found myself using inductive and deductive approaches to analyze my data. An *inductive approach* to making sense of data means 'bottom-up.' Collecting data without referencing any particular theories and thinking about data at face value. A *deductive approach* to data analysis means 'top-down.' For some themes in the

interviews, I referenced my literature review and researched what scholars had to say based on what I found. There were also times where I came upon phrases that I believe are important, but I did not know where to categorize them or write about them. I had to go back and read some literature to refresh myself on the concepts I could be looking for when I was stuck.

Analyzing other people's stories and experiences was difficult. I wanted to include everything in my findings because I think everything about someone is important. I struggled to find an even balance between discussing the individuals and students as a generalized group. Because of whom I am and want to be as an educator, I'm very aware that not all students will benefit from a universal approach in the classroom. In effect, it took me a long time to code, with the goal of surfacing generalizable findings. I feel that education needs to be personalized, that I found myself wanting to write about each participant and their experiences separately, pulling from separate experiences, separate identities, and then exploring what each interview had in common. This is another time in my praxis where I was butting heads with overarching structures.

Keeping in mind the way knowledge is created and sustained, I analyzed my data through an ethical, cultural, and sociological lens. I am interested in the way that values, norms, and language shape the self and experiences within one's community. There is a constant interaction between the self and one's environment, which enables and inhibits us from accomplishing what we want to do. The last theme I discuss in this I section is how the self is impacted by the world around us. [I am leaning towards changing the name of this theme] As you can probably tell from the title of this section, you will see how humans are formed by family, community, and school interactions. You will read about my interpretations of the data and how it all ties into my

research question: “How do positive relationships between teachers and students impact their attitudes and behaviors in/towards school?”

I needed to be in a private space to read the transcripts and occasionally listen along because I would cry. I am deeply empathetic, which is an asset in the education field but also an inhibitor. My praxis is personal to me, so during it, I cried a lot. But, not to the point where I was so upset about my work that I could not function in a healthy manner. My participants' experiences in public schooling sound like my sisters', so it got difficult sometimes to separate myself from my trauma that motivated me to study school exclusion. It was difficult listening to the audio recordings because I really heard every word. Hearing some of the things the students have been through, seen, or done as children left me speechless; because in the end, they were punished instead of cared for. This is the side of my research that I try not to feel emotional about for an absurd amount of time. But at some point, I had to allow myself to cry. I was not crying because of the specific participants; I know that they would not want that. I was crying because of the ages that were attached to the experiences. Even worse, my enemy: the structures that reinforce inequality. I sometimes felt hopeless in my research, realizing the most challenging task I will have to tackle as a teacher is *chronic absenteeism*, which is not as simple as a student hating school and not wanting to go (which I will talk about more in my conclusion).

I understand the importance of coding, that is why I stopped complaining and did it. However, I found discourse analysis to provide more nuance, and that is exactly what I felt like I was missing with coding. *Discourse analysis* examines how language reveals variables such as social identity, emotions, values, and cultural models shape the self. Language includes, excludes, and can reveal so much about who someone is. There are three lenses of discourse analysis that I referenced when reading the interviews. The first lens is *social*

identity/positionality, which focuses on how the language one uses reflects how the participants identity was created. The second lens investigates *what the speaker is trying to do*. This lens attempts to understand what the individual is trying to convey through their word choice. The third lens investigates how language reveals *cultural models*; frameworks within a culture that help an individual make sense of their experiences. I reference each of these lenses, which gave me a rounded understanding of each participant's upbringing. Below, I included an excerpt from one of my interview transcripts and how I analyzed the language using the three lenses of discourse analysis.

> Thomas: Yes, so (location) south is black. And then the east side is more Hispanics. So being Hispanic, the (location) south guys would think that I'm from the east and then I would have to take somebody be like no no no I know him. He's from over here and we're all cool and vice versa. The other kids would be like no he's from (location) south. And on top of that when I was in prison, like I said, I grew up (location), so I lean more towards the black guys in jail because those are the guys I'm hanging out with them that I can relate to. We listen to the same music, honestly, I'm not too in tune with the Hispanic side of me. You know like I grew up (location), I'm a (location) guy, whereas my parents, and my family are Puerto Rican, like my older brother he was born in Puerto Rico he's more listening to salsa and I'm listening to you know 2Pac and Biggie. You know what I'm saying like you know I play basketball too. They do more like baseball. You know so like, that's the type of stuff that would like you know when I was in jail with caused problems. I had a problem with this one dude and then, I got the Spanish guys on the other side saying that's why you hang out with your race and I'm like I don't care.

Referencing the *social identity/positionality* lens, Thomas identifies himself through his race and his geographical location, and how they differ. He is Puerto Rican but grew up in the Black dominated side of his city, explaining the other side housed majority Latinos. Because of where he was born and grew up, Thomas identifies more with Black culture, as opposed to Puerto Rican culture like his brother. He noted how they listen to different music and play different sports, because that is what the brothers were drawn to when given the choice.

Continuing to *what the speaker is trying to do* through the language used, and how that language reveals underlying *cultural models*. I believe that Thomas was trying to convey the feeling of 'limbo' associated with his identity explained in the previous paragraph. As a child Thomas knew who he was in relation to his race, but his ambiguous person caused stress when he was out in his community. He articulates how it would have to take someone who knew him, to clarify that he's from the south side of the city, even though he's not Black. Later in his interview, Thomas details that the opposite sides of his city are organized into two gangs. So, the way that one was perceived has the potential to be consequential. Because of this division, growing up, Thomas carried with him the belief from others that races should not be intermingling.

For each participant's transcript, I did the same process, going through each lens. Coding revealed to me the overarching themes of family, community, and school interactions are present within each interview. But it was not until I did discourse analysis, did I find that those themes all influence a child's perception of positive relationships. In the next section, I share with you excerpts from my interview transcripts, going into detail about each theme.

Family Interactions

Ambivalence

You cannot have a meaningful relationship with a student if you do not know about the child's family and home life. We are shaped by our families and our home communities more than anything. When we enter the world as infants, our family is the first group we interact with. Lots of learning takes place during childhood through a variety of different modes. The most common way children learn is through observing life around them (Rymanowicz, 2015). Have you ever heard of the saying *monkey see, monkey do?* For example, if a child observes

aggressive behaviors at home, they are more likely to develop aggressive traits or vice versa (Rymanowicz 2015, para.5). I remember when I was a kid, my mom would talk on the phone near me, and I would learn swears from her in English and Armenian. But, if I repeated any of them around her, that was the end of it. Through observing my mother repeatedly swearing, and being disciplined for repeating the behavior, I learned that swearing was inappropriate. Because of the environment I grew up in, swearing became a natural part of my daily vocabulary. However, since I was reprimanded whenever I swore, I learned to try and filter myself, especially at school.

School takes up roughly thirty hours per week for children not including extra curricula. It's like their job; It's the base of their life until they're eighteen. Rachel described herself as a "product of her environment," (Interview, 2024) which greatly influenced how she experienced school. Robert pointed out that the most important thing for me to do as a teacher is to stay in contact with parents and know what's going on at home. You never know what's going on in a child's life; for Robert, he was in high school when he suddenly lost two of his siblings from devastating circumstances. It helped him that there were adults at school who knew what was going on. I used to work with a teacher who would not try very hard to get to know students' caregivers or life at home. With all of that being said, I'm going to dive deeper into each participant's family interactions. Then, detail how those values impacted the way each participant experienced school punishment. Hopefully after this section, you will understand why school life and home life can never be separated.

The word 'family' carries a different meaning for everyone who uses it. Those who surround us, give us a sense of community and belonging or at least, they should. Family dynamics are tricky, especially since we do not choose where we grow up or who our caregivers

are. I didn't expect to include Freud (1939) in my thesis; however, I think it is important to talk about this dual feeling of love and hate Freud called *ambivalence.* Dr. Marie Kolkenbrock (2024) from the King's College in London noted that Freud "provided us with a language for (and therefore an acceptance of) elements of resentment and hate in the way we relate to others, even those we love" (Kolkenbrock, 2024, para.2). I agree with Kolkenbrock's contemporary interpretation of Freud, which suggests that psychoanalysis has the potential to serve as a means of fostering a growth-mindset when relating to both our family and our community (Kolkenbrock, 2024). Ambivalent is the perfect word to describe family dynamics. I'm sure you have a family member in mind right now that you don't get along with too much, whether it be simple arguments, or a more emotional history. The people we spend the most time with are the people who we tend to have the most complicated relationships with. Each participant described their family as "non-traditional", using those exact words, or a longer explanation. I have no way of knowing *why* participants chose to give these long explanations for their family dynamics, because I didn't ask for them. However, I'm familiar with the long explanations, as I provide them myself when talking about my family. My mother has always been a constant in my life, my father, not so much. I never know what to share with people, because I have a fear of being judged or misunderstood. Awkward enough, I find myself over explaining the small bits I do decide to share.

Parent and Child Interactions

What someone has been through will affect the way they perceive and react to their surroundings. Children who have experienced trauma or upsetting events in their childhood may have challenges regulating their emotions, especially in a setting such as school. Richard Gold (2014) explains that "Ultimately, what we see in distressed young people, as in many sufferers, is

that they adapt to their pain by protecting themselves in the best ways they can. These adaptations are sometimes both constructive and can actually be very harmful" (Gold, 2014 p.3). There are many complicated aspects to trauma. The effects of trauma are completely different for each child and the way they express their pain is even more complicated. If a child is abused or neglected, that child will begin to feel deep shame, and blame themselves for what happened. If a child is carrying that type of burden with them day-to-day, and at the same time in a school environment that is not emotionally supportive, there is bound to be struggle.

Four out of five participants had one family member primarily present, and it was a female caregiver. From my prior knowledge and experience, I was almost certain that the lack of a father figure was going to be present. But I also wanted to make sure to investigate the stereotype of the absent father, being conscious of how participants' fathers were once struggling adolescents too. Do you know that joke/old saying that goes something like 'my dad went to get milk at the store and never came back'? My friends and I used to say this all the time, making dark humorous jokes about our absent or juvenile fathers, leaning into the stereotype and belief that our fathers didn't care about us, and that was far from the case. Fatherlessness in disadvantaged communities has always been a crisis; boys especially are growing up lacking stable male role models within their households (Jones, 2025). If there are not strong enough bonds within the household between the child and caregiver, youth will start looking for those role models or belonging elsewhere in the community. In the next section, I narrate the complex parent-child relationships each participant shared with me.

Robert's father was incarcerated for the majority of his adolescence, 8-15 years old to be exact. The positive male presence he needed during the time where children are most impressionable, he didn't have. So, he started looking at other men within his household and

community for guidance on who he was supposed to be. Because Robert's mother was unexpectedly appointed a single mother of five children, his family went through money struggles. There had been times where his mom could not pay the hot water bill, or the heat, so he and his siblings would sleep wrapped up in jackets and coats. Seeing his mom struggle like that, he knew there was something he could do to help. Robert saw male representations in his community living a "certain lifestyle" (Interview, 2024) and making money fast, so he began to follow.

Similar to Robert, Thomas also relied primarily on his mother. Thomas's dad was an addict, struggling for most of his childhood, often disappearing, coming in and out of his life when he relapsed. Eventually, Thomas was led to believe that neither of his parents cared about school, so why should he? After this realization, Thomas started spending more time outside with other older boys in his neighborhood, looking for a sense of direction and a way to make money.

Lisa described her relationship with her mother as difficult, not getting along with her the majority of the time. She wanted to go out and have fun when her schoolwork was finished, but her mother understandably prohibited her from going out into her community because there was a good chance she would get into trouble while she was having fun. Lisa explained that her mother "worked overnight shifts… she had to sleep all day while we were in school, or we have to do whatever… whatever the case may be" (Interview, 2024). Lisa mentioned living with her uncle at one point, noting how he would always mess with her because of her age. She never spoke about her father, and the only positive male in her life seemed to be her little brother. When Lisa was in high school, her relationship with her mother declined drastically enough, that

her mother got an apartment close by their current apartment, so Lisa could live in her own space.

Robert, Thomas, and Lisa all described how what was going on between them and their parents played a role in pushing them out into their unstructured communities. Unintentional neglect, while not ill-intended, will create a divide in the child's feeling of belonging at home. Robert described having a relatively great relationship with both of his parents, but the unpredictability of life took one of the caregivers in his life that supported and provided discipline and structure. Thomas's father was an addict most of his childhood, making it strenuous not only for Thomas, but his mother's ability to care for him and his brother. Thomas saw how this father's addiction and money affected his family, so he went out into the streets looking for a solution. Lisa's mother was often found sleeping when not at work, because she had to work endlessly to financially provide for her children. As a result, Lisa began looking after herself and her brother much earlier than other kids, so the idea of listening to an adult, when she was essentially already functioning like one, didn't make sense to her.

Rachel described wanting to be anywhere but her home. Rachel was brought up by parents who hated her and raised their children to hate each other (Interview, 2024). Her parents were abusive to an extreme extent; Rachel noted being surprised how she didn't end up dying after some of the things her parents put her through. She recounts fleeing with her mother countless times throughout her childhood, to escape the abuse of her father. Rachel's mother and father combined and separately, caused immeasurable amounts of trauma that Rachel has healed from, but will never fully separate herself from.

John had three caregivers at home, his father and his mother and stepmother. There was never a time in his childhood where he went uncared for. He was close with his immediate and

extended family, and there were positive male role models throughout his childhood. John grew up in Ghana, so corporal punishment within the household was considered cultural discipline (which I will go into further detail in the "Old School Punishment" section).

Ambivalent family dynamics are difficult to grasp, if you did not grow up in that type of household. If you are one of those people, now that you read about the nature of my participants parent-child relationships, I want to explain something I want the teachers reading my thesis to take away from this section. I hope that you reflect on the assumptions you make when meeting parents. To truly be there for your students, you have to genuinely be open to parents, especially the ones that come off as *defensive* when you show concern for their child's classroom behaviors or grades. Keep in mind that there's a possibility parents may feel like you're targeting their child, and they'll likely step in to defend them. To keep the conversation productive and meaningful you should keep a calm demeanor and start with the student's achievements and strengths. This puts forth that you care and want to work towards supporting their child.

Old School Punishment

When I asked participants to expand on their family growing up, I heard the term 'old school' used a lot and I knew exactly what that term meant. My parents and grandparents were brought up in old school discipline, but it was specific to my culture. The definition I had in my head ended up matching the definitions that I put together from the participants. I understood 'old school' as corporal punishment, right and wrong way, adults are always right.

Robert described a multitude of dynamics within his family that may sound equivalent to physical abuse, but he made me understand that love was at the center of his household at the end of the day, no matter what. His mother was 'old school'. Usually, his father would be the one to set a good example and talk to the kids when they got into trouble. It was an unexpected

transition to being a single mother with seven children. His mom “didn’t really know how to discipline” (Interview, 2024) on her own, when his father was eventually incarcerated. Robert had three sisters and three brothers, so when they would argue, his mother would say “Okay, on the weekends, you’re going to resolve your problems” (Interview, 2024). And Robert’s mother would allow him and his siblings to physically handle their grievances. Being physical was taught in a way so as to stand up for oneself, defend oneself, or someone else out in the community. But it was also enforced within his household; in so, this violence demonstrated as prideful and thus rewarded when repeated.

John also grew up receiving physical discipline regularly at home by anyone in his family who was older; it was a sign of care and love. John’s father, who he called “the king” practiced what is called “Spare the rod, spoil the child” (Interview, 2024), meaning that caregivers must whoop their children to become good human beings, free from entitlement and greed. I was surprised to hear John say he was “lucky to be whooped” (interview, 2024). I have previous understanding about physical discipline and how it looks in different cultures because of my own, but I never thought about how someone could be grateful that they were hit as a young person.

John and Robert don’t agree with the old-school style of parenting they were raised on, but they do not blame their families for it. John calls the whoopings “an experience”, something westernized people view as abuse, he views as “an experience…not trauma” (Interview, 2024). As a child, he obviously felt pain from the whooping, but that was a norm for him, something that he knew would happen, if he was caught being disrespectful. He contests the views of abuse in Westernized countries because “[Whoopings] is what I grew up with, that’s what has made me” (Interview, 2024). Not only does John avoid categorizing his experiences with his family as

either negative or positive, but he also sees every experience as an integral part of his identity. This is ambivalence within his culture, John knows that beatings hurt but are not ill-intended by his family members.

Robert described a deep respect for his parents, understanding why they chose to parent in a certain way. He said "I don't fault her for it because like I said, she was raised differently. She was a really great mom, she just didn't want, I guess should say, I don't want to say it… conditioned to be soft children. And where we grew up, you at least had to fight. Because there was a point where she was like, if someone hits you and you don't hit them back, then you're not in the house until you get into a fight" (Interview, 2024). In this statement, the word *fault* struck me. Robert categorized forced physical violence imposed by a parent, as a *fault*. I don't know if it's just me, but what Robert described sounds more punitive than a personal fault; and this is the exact point I'm trying to make. Not only does Robert avoid blaming his mother at all for the way she was brought up, but he also used caring language in his response to discuss tense family dynamics.

On a separate note, through this answer, Robert revealed the cultural model *fighting to survive.* I believe this was learned in the home through observation and explicit direction. Robert was seeing and experiencing physical fighting at home, enforced by his mother. This taught Robert that fighting was commendable, thus continuing this behavior at school and within his community Rymanowicz, 2015). In relation to that, I cannot help but think about the unconscious negative effects physical discipline had on their functioning in school and mental development, even though they do not consider it trauma. The *Self-Protectionist Ethic* explains that "if the emotion systems underlying other ethics with are damaged by trauma or suboptimal from care, the Security ethic will dominate the personality" (Narvaez, 2014, para.4). This

emotional state that Robert, along with other participants described being in for most of their childhoods.

I guess I would say I respect physical discipline when it is cultural to a certain degree. I do not condone or agree with it due to the emotional and chemical effect violence has on the body, especially for children. Physical punishment has been proven to cause mental health conditions ranging from diagnosable conditions such as depression, anxiety, or post-traumatic stress disorder. Further, the youth's chances of becoming dependent on drugs or alcohol significantly increases (Durrant & Ensom, 2012). Overall, if a child has experienced any degree of physical harm by a family member, their demeanor will change. A study conducted by Harriet L. MacMillan proved that spanking and slapping during childhood will increase the likelihood of mental health disorders and psychological maladjustment in adulthood (MacMillan, 1999). In addition, visual and auditory exposure to violence, (i.e., watching it) can leave a lasting impact on a child's mental health even if they were not directly involved.

Lisa was one of the participants that described her family as "non-traditional". Once Lisa, her mother and brother moved to America from the Dominican Republic, they moved in with their uncle and his wife. Lisa did not like living with them. "Things were not so good. I didn't get along with my uncle and like I, for example, me and my little brother was really close… I felt like it was no need for my uncle to like mess with me because for my age. My uncle was like a very like, what the word I'm looking for, old school brutality. Whatever he said, we had to do" (3). Lisa wished her uncle would have been open to having conversations about what she was being forced to do and why. At home, she had a lot of responsibilities to maintain the house and take care of her little brother because their "mom worked overnight and then she had to sleep all day while [they] were in school" (Interview 2024). Lisa recounted a few positive interactions

with her family members, and if they happened, they were not long lasting. In effect, Lisa did not want to be at home.

All participants shared seeing and experiencing family violence, but not viewing it as violence, but a cultural norm present in their homes and their communities. Participants had a shared understanding of what happened to them, why it happened, and how it affected their navigation of everyday stressors and experiences. Students who act out in class may be looking for attention, and that's how they were taught to get it. I can list a handful of students I work with that try to get my attention through countless stressful behaviors (e.g., Throwing things, yelling, leaving the classroom) when all they could have done was come up and talk to me. Especially working with students who have had negative interactions with their environments, the first barrier I noticed students having to overcome is how to trust and talk to people; they must learn that there are adults in the world that are safe, and who will not give up on them.

Referencing back to the *Self Protectionist* and *Imagination Ethic* (Narvaez, 2014), opportunity youth who often show the bunker morality, will learn to see "life in discrete pieces, [solving] abstracted moral problems without attending to the rich context, using rational logic to make social and moral decisions (Narvaez, 2014, para. 8). The choices we make, and moral decisions do not just refer to huge life-threatening choices; moral decisions have to do with interactions that affect the existence of another human. For example, when I am teaching, I make the moral decision to never yell. The way I saw moral decisions coming up in participants interviews was how they responded to human stimuli in school (e.g., Peers, teachers, self). Teachers must be prepared to respond to negative behaviors in a manner that does not further harm the child but deescalates.

When participants narrated positive interactions in school, it always had to do with emotional support that deescalated anger associated with self-doubt, related to learning or discipline. Robert mentioned that a math teacher "was the first person to notice that something was wrong" (Interview, 2024). Saying that "you're really smart, and I wanna know why are you putting these numbers and why are you mixing these numbers up? She wasn't going *incorrect"* (Interview 2024). Then he made pen clicking noises tracing an 'X' in the air, signaling the way other educators and adults tried to help him in the past.

Thomas noted multiple times that he was an emotional child, lashing out in class not caring about the impact until after an adult helped him understand how his almost explosive behaviors have the potential to impact people. Thomas's educators saw past his pervious behaviors in school and remained patient with his progress.

Teachers must be familiar with students' cultural models, even if they do not agree with them. In those situations, I recommended listening to the child's lived experiences at home, meeting family members and consulting other school professionals before taking further action. As a teacher there is only so much interference one will have the power to do, and in a way to be mindful of overstepping into family dynamics that you may not fully know or understand.

Community Gender Representations

To say that gender isn't real, would carry different meaning depending on your definition of *real*. To some, for something to be *real*, it has to be scientifically present with biological components, misrepresenting the social and cultural impacts of gender on socialization. To others, real refers to what one sees, feels, and experiences. As a college educated student at a liberal arts university, I've adopted the understanding based on what I've been taught, that gender is a social construction. I have prior understanding of how gender manifests into my own

life; as a young Generation-Z woman, I acknowledge my gender every day. I teach/work in male-dominated spaces (which is very silly to me, since I grew up in a family and culture dominated by female care, rarely being around men) so my womanly-ness is often the topic of conversation.

I was first struck by the stark differences in gender representations that were shown through each interview. This is especially when discussing caregivers, teachers, and role models during childhood. In my sample, my participants described their role models growing up as primarily women in caregiving roles, and these were the adults that had the most significant positive impact on their lives. The overwhelming majority of participants shared that they have been harmed physically or emotionally by men in their community when they were under the age of ten. When thinking about masculinity, I was immediately brought back to my Introduction to Gender and Woman Studies class where we watched a documentary about men who struggled with thoughts of suicide. After the documentary, we had an emotional class discussion about men's mental health, hearing vulnerable personal experiences of struggle from the only guy in our class. It's not that I had never thought about men's mental health, it's just that I never had men in my life that communicated their feelings, so I was struck hearing my peer open up. It was strange seeing a man acknowledge his emotions.

When I did a first search for existing literature, I kept coming across that term "toxic masculinity." Through a sociological and cultural lens, I view gender as a social construction, and in relation, masculinity as traits and behaviors that are typically associated with men. I'm interested in the way that masculinity is learned through environmental influences. From this finding, I want to redefine the way that gender norms are reinforced in classroom culture. As a

white presenting female educator, how can I enforce positive masculinity in my curriculum and pedagogy?

As of 2022, males are four times more likely to die of suicide compared to females (CDC, 2022). This is gender disparity that is somewhat commonly known, but do we know *why*? *Toxic masculinity* is a buzz word in criminal justice research. There is an over emphasis on this term as being the reality for incarcerated men and opportunity youth. Dan Griffin (2021) from The Men's Resource Center defines toxic masculinity as unhealthy and injurious forms of masculinity that are formulated to oppose anything that resembles femininity (Griffin, 2021). This provocatively negative term used to describe male behaviors and beliefs, had unintended dangerous effects on men's mental, relational, and emotional health.

We must separate individuals from their behaviors and understand that larger oppressive systems are at play. Especially in the liberal echo chamber of Clark, men are viewed in an unsettlingly negative light. Men are not the enemy, hegemonic masculinity is. I agree, some humans commit heinous crimes that may be unforgivable, or some children may carry a negative reputation, but it is important to separate a person from the harmful things they've done. Gender manifests itself into reality in many ways and one of the most prominent representations is through the buzz word 'toxic masculinity'.

The way in which society teaches boys at an early age what it means to be a man, and the way adults respond to perceived "toxic masculinity" behaviors and traits needs to change (Festa, 2023). It is imperative that as a society, we move past the implications that all masculinity is destructive. Rather than only categorizing masculine traits as toxic, we should also be acknowledging what "positive" masculinity is. Ruth Fuller provides insight on the depictions of masculinity in her research article titled *Aren't You Scared of Us? Expression of Healthy*

Masculinity in Men's Prison (2019) that there are structures of inequality that produce hypermasculine and "emotionally stunted individuals" (Fuller, 2019, p.21). In her article, she narrates her experience tutoring in MCI Shirley, a secure prison in Massachusetts, shedding light on what masculinity looks like in prison. She found that the media portrays incarcerated men all wrong. Fuller describes the men she works with as "emotional and complex humans, many of whom did bad things and have had very bad things happen to them" (Fuller, 2019, p.21). That saying, "Hurt people, hurt people" could not be truer. Thomas brought that phrase up in his interview, and I remember a LARC student wore a hoodie that said it to class. Certain stereotypical masculine traits have created a cycle of hurt within some communities, but that does not mean that masculinity is *bad*.

There are also cultural beliefs of gender that influence the ways in which the binary genders are perceived based on race. The way that Black boys and Black girls perceived by majority white adults are far different from each other, but they both still carrying a negative connotation. Black girls are stereotyped as "inattentive, disengaged, disrespectful, disruptive, and uninterested, criticizing their deportment (Calais, 2023, p.44). Black boys are often stereotyped as "animals" or "criminals" (Calais, 2023, p.47). Throughout my literature review, data collection/analysis, and personal experience there is a desperate need for educators who are committed to the success of young men, especially young Black men. Currently, there are minimal places for boys to be emotional or make mistakes while growing up. Enforcing any type of gendered discourse, such as toxic masculinity categorizes youth and gives masculinity a negative connotation.

Thomas shares, "My dad was a drug addict. He stopped using for a few years. But it was like an on and off thing and then around twelve or thirteen, is when he relapsed again, and then

from there, it was downhill. So, during these tough moments, I never had a strong father figure" (Interview, 2025). He talked a lot about his dad and the way that he was present and not present in his life growing up. Often times, Thomas would look for guidance from other men in his community on how he should carry himself; Robert did the same. While his father was incarcerated for the majority of his adolescence, Robert saw male representations in his community living a "certain lifestyle" and making money, so he began to follow. He knew his father would not approve of what he was doing, but Robert didn't care about anything. Robert shared, "My male presence in my life that I needed at least that I felt I needed it at the time, he wasn't around. So, you know, I started seeing other guys like my brothers. They were individuals who were doing certain things and it was like hold on, I don't care anymore. I'm just gonna do what I wanna do and that's when I started getting a lot of whoopings and stuff" (Interview, 2024).

Dozono notes that "an abolitionist framework in k-12 schooling means a constant commitment to a shared humanity. It means listening and attending to the needs of the most marginalized. Nobody's thinking is to be dismissed, to be given up on' (Dozono, 2021, p.415). This framework acknowledges the changing needs of young people and that no one is disposable. Dozono describes choosing alternatives to kicking students out of his classroom that address their behaviors with care and humility. What I found in my interviews, is that teachers challenged notions of hegemonic masculinity in their classroom by letting their male student's cry. This directly combats the stereotype that 'boys don't cry', creating a place where they can feel their emotions in a healthy and safe manner.

School Interactions

From my interpretation, participants organized themselves differently in a school setting, versus with their family and within their home community. There is a major disconnect between public schooling and the culture of the student body the system serves, and it is shown through multiple means (e.g., discipline, curriculum). Some participants attended school at one point in their childhood that was at least a thirty-minute commute outside their home. Participants describe the atmospheres of school versus home being different from one another, even if their school was located within the close vicinity of their community.

Experiencing Punishment in School

Data shows that continuous suspensions will make a student feel disconnected from their learning environment, and in effect, more connected with the community they find when not in school (McCombs, Scott, Losen, 2022). Disciplining a child in school can either go very well, or very badly. A 'good' form of discipline described by participants includes one-on-one talks with a trusted adult, where the focus of the conversation is not blame. A 'bad' outcome from discipline described by participants leaves the child feeling dismissed by adults. I have seen all types of discipline strategies implemented in schools I have worked at and attended. Some I agree with and have taken note of for my future use, and some that have honestly left me a bit traumatized. The way participants felt after being disciplined in school is what I was drawn to focus on because I believe the way a child is redirected carries a significant impact on the child's sense of self. For teachers, disciplining students is a daily occurrence so when it happens, moving on from it may be a lot easier. For opportunity youth, punitive discipline in school may trigger a fight or flight response and a cycle of self-blame and guilt. Social interactions, especially in school have the ability to impact the way a child grows up and their sense of self (Kaantzis, 2018). My teachers yelled a lot about any little thing. I remember getting yelled at for

pressing down too hard on my pencil; I saw kids all the time get screamed at when they were misbehaving. These disciplinary strategies have impacted me as an adult by making me fearful that I'll be yelled at for anything I do that may be considered a mistake. Thinking about the bulk of my teachers growing up now, they struggled with classroom management. I mean they did it, but with fear and humiliation. Classroom management is challenging to master especially with large class sizes, in effect, teachers often resort to sending students out of the classroom or raise their voices (Swank 2017, p.81). I'm not assuming that teachers who do these things are terrible people, they may not know what else to do. There have been times where I didn't know what to do when I had a student who was being disruptive. However, I do not send children out of my room *unless they* are going to an adult's room who I know is a safe person to address their behaviors. For my participants, I found that in school, discipline with care and humility was not entirely present. In this section, I will explain what I mean by that, and it's complicated. First, I'm going to tell you about how John and Thomas were both expelled, but then their expulsions were reversed.

Overall, John was a dedicated, passionate student who did not want to conform. He narrates that there was often only one way to do things, and that was difficult for him since he had a creative mind. In school, John was physically disciplined similar to how he was at home. He illustrated himself as being the English word "instigator." I was giggling when I explained to him what that word meant, and he laughed and entirely agreed with it. His friends would convince him to do something, and one thing led to another, John experienced multiple whoopings at school. Sometimes in front of all his peers. He narrated, "In junior high school, we had this ROTC for the Navy. And matter of fact, I was appointed to be the leader to command. But before that, I was seized and they whooped me in the ass, our instructor whooped me. In

front of, it was in front of everyone. It was only six, but it was so painful. Three days prior, I was given lashes in front of the whole school in the dining hall" (Interview, 2024). There were times when John was lashed for something that in retrospect, should have just been addressed with a verbal warning. The first time John was whooped in front of his classmates, it was for supposedly making fun of another student calling him "yellow man" after a reggae artist they all listened to.

John shared that he was also expelled once but ended up being called back to school by the headmaster. John narrated "They expelled me, that's because they thought I was rude to the peace corps tutor. Who I told him in the face, 'listen, this is Black Africa, you are American. 'You cannot come in', I told him that goes against our contract. It's almost taboo the way you talk to our elders. But I thought that he was being disrespectful in a way" (Interview, 2024). John didn't describe a disconnection from school even when he was expelled. He spoke very matter-of-factly, understanding the process of punishment in Ghana. Even though John was expelled, he was allowed back in school and eventually graduated, moving onto Journalism school. While he was removed from school, that did not stop John from moving forward with his education. I'm wondering if this is because John had a strong support system at home and within his community. Since his father was a headmaster of another high school, John was still in contact with some relation to the education even while he was expelled.

Thomas also graduated high school after expulsion, but he did not end up pursuing higher education until later in his life. When Thomas was in high school, he was expelled and sent to an alternative school. That whole mess of a misunderstanding started over the previous summer; Thomas and a bunch of kids were playing basketball when a fight broke out. It ended with one boy hurt pretty bad. He narrated "I get called into the principal's office. It was my mom was

there, my dad. I was like what did I do? And the safety liaison of all Worcester Public Schools is there. So, I'm like what's going on? So apparently in the summertime, I had gotten into a fight. I didn't do anything, but the group I was with, they had gotten into a fight. The kid got hurt, and he only knew me. And so my teacher was like I think that you're a danger to my school, yadda yadda yadda, and kicked me out!" (Interview, 2025). He was expelled almost instantly, there was no further investigation on the school's part. Thomas never got to explain his side of the story, and he saw the whole fight.

Alternative school was boring, but Thomas did well. He was able to spend the rest of the school year there, then return to his old school for good behavior. Though his schooling ended with a high school diploma, he feels that his removal from school broke his concentration on education. I found the timing of Thomas's expulsion to be the work of malevolent timing. Two weeks before he was removed from school, Thomas was placed into AP (Advanced Placement) classes, after advocating for his need for more engaging classes. He described this feeling of dread whenever it seemed like things were going well, something happened to knock him down. He was getting into the groove of AP classes, and then he was expelled and placed in an alternative school. In his interview, we had a conversation about how this feeling is present in his life today. He said that sometimes, it's hard to believe that something bad isn't going to immediately happen.

He and I both were on the same wavelength, that kicking him out of school with little to no investigation was extreme. So, as part of question 9 in my interview set, I asked him what he would have done for a student if he had been principal in that situation…

Me: So, If you for example, if you were the principal, would you have expelled you?

Thomas: No. I would first off ask my side of the story. They didn't even ask my side of the story. I never got to tell my side of the story. I would have went and spoke with some of the teachers. You know what I'm saying? Like how he's doing in classes that's major too period like if i'm being a nuisance in class comma maybe, you know period but I was doing great stuff, you know I was an AP, trying to be better (Interview, 2024).

I could feel the impact his expulsion had on Thomas just by the way he spoke about losing this feeling of reliance within teachers he trusted. He wondered why none of his teachers stuck up for him when they found out, and why the principal did not give anyone the chance to discuss his expulsion.

Robert had a way he spoke fondly about early school memories, giggling as he told stories and animating with gestures. He was never expelled, but he described to me what he calls his "career of suspensions, a long career of suspensions" (Interview, 2024) in elementary, middle, and high school for minor infractions and fighting. Even though he did get suspended a lot, there were only a couple of situations that he actually started. Robert generally liked school; he liked learning and seeing his friends/cousins from other towns. School itself was not the issue at hand, it was his peers. Either a classmate started something with him, or one of his friends was dealing with something. He explains "for me it's always been someone either provokes me or it's someone else's issue and me just being a good friend or loyal friend, was made into like my issue" (Interview, 2024).

When Robert was suspended, he was often bored, left to his own devices describing he was "at home, getting into more trouble" instead of at school where there was structure. There was not much to do at home when he was suspended. His mother worked, his father was incarcerated, so there was not a whole lot of learning from mistakes taking place. Robert was

often home with his older cousin, that he liked to call his ‘brousin’ (pronounced bruh-zin) getting into all sorts of ‘harmless’ trouble such as filling water balloons with pee and throwing them at delivery drivers! When Robert was suspended, whoever was home was his role model for that day.

As Robert entered high school, he was less interested in conquering boredom than he was making money. Not only did his antic change, but his tone of life shifted too.

Me: As you got older, when you were suspended, did those antics change?

Robert: Well, I think he whole dynamic of everything I was doing changed. You know, I started to realize hat my parents were struggling, so they can’t buy me this, they can’t buy me that, so why don’t I sell some weed? You know, so I started selling weed, and I’m able to buy this, I’m able to buy that. You know? And when I was suspended, I was like, well I’ll just be out all day selling weed you know. I won’t even be in school…where there is structure (Interview, 2024).

The habitual suspensions started to indicate to Robert that maybe he would be better off putting his efforts into something else, especially when he was forced to take time off of school. There was this realization at one point in his youth that he was succeeding from selling weed, more than he was in school at the time. Both Robert and Thomas found identity with selling drugs. As children, they saw their parents were struggling, unable to pay for necessities or buy them trending clothes.

Rachel rarely got disciplined in school, she was often excused from misbehaving or ignored. Most of her teachers thought that she was acting out occasionally because her brothers were in gangs, so they let her get away with a lot of things. Teachers and school support staff would give her support at school such as space to talk when she needed it or paying for school trips. Those things were great and all in place of discipline, but Rachel needed to be saved from

her home, not given extra treatment in school. Rachel said to me “All these people helped me, but they did not help me in the way I needed help. They were enabling me” (Interview, 2024). Teachers may have thought that they were doing her a favor by continuing to push Rachel onto the next grade, but by not acknowledging concerns within her life, she learned to believe that bad things are bound to happen to her.

Because Rachel was never disciplined, she narrated being scared to confide in any adults in her life, saying, “they’re not gonna believe me, so I said nothing” (Interview, 2024). Rachel thought that the only way to save herself from her home was to get in big trouble, so that she would be removed from her house. For her entire childhood, Rachel felt like her young age made it so adults would not trust what she had to say.

Lisa was “never the perfect student” (Interview, 2024) but she liked learning. She was not a fan of going to the classes she had no interest in. So, she would often skip with her friends. Most of the time when they would sneak off campus, they were successful making it somewhere as a group no problem. But there were a couple times where the police patrolling for students skipping, caught them and took them back to school. She did not mention any further discipline from skipping school. In response, “after getting caught, [Lisa and her group] were like okay, instead of going to the same places as the park or walking around, why don’t we just go somewhere that they can’t find us?” (Interview, 2024) And after that, they made it a habit to go to this pool hall and hide there until the police were done with their patrol.

This was the only instance where Lisa mentioned being disciplined. Even so, she was just brought back to school. This did not solve Lisa’s slight defiance to going to certain classes, but she had a math teacher who was really understanding and allowed her to complete work and sit

in her classroom during classes she didn't like. Lisa was able to concentrate and pass her GED with flying colors.

Positive Relationships with Educators

" a researcher commented that because the student had strong grades and could easily get accepted into prestigious Universities, educators did not have to worry about students like her instead of focus on students who 'actually struggle' (Muhammad, 2020 p. 68).

Small Victories discusses the impact that *everything* especially the relationships they have with their parents/guardians, can have on a child's mental wellbeing. Jessica emphasizes that when a child is in school you need to make that the most productive and nurturing environment possible. There are many students who are dealing with an enormous amount of stress at home and still coming to school. Jessica saw the potential in each of her students, even the ones who were showing no interest in their education, and it made a difference in their motivation (Freedman, 1991). Community adult role models play an integral part of child development, since often, opportunity youth live in or come from broken homes, with at least one parent that is totally or periodically absent (Bosick; Fomby 2019). Thomas noted "that's all it really takes, having someone in your corner" (Interview, 2024).

My praxis is centered around the role of the teacher. I know that being 'nice' to my students who are experiencing challenges such as poverty and racism, is not going to physically change anything about a child's life, that would be naive of me to think. But I know that there are instances where teachers have the resources to do something that will have an impact, and they just don't for whatever reason it may be. In this section, I'll be sharing with you the teachers that participants believed had the most impact on their development and learning. The memories shared by participants is exactly what I have in mind when I ask myself "What can I do for

students when I can't control everything?" If anything, I can be a positive role model even if my influence is minimal compared to that of their home communities.

John recounts fond memories of growing up. His mother was a nurse, and his father was the headmaster of a high school. He also had two other stepmothers and the support of his community, so there was always someone there to care for him. My interpretation of John's childhood was a little different from the other participants. Unlike Thomas, Rachel, Robert, and Lisa, John's school and home community intersected because of how close knit the communities in Ghana are. One of the moments John described that stuck out to me is how he answered my question about memories from school, with an anecdote that happened at home:

Me: Alright let's get into schooling a little bit. So, number three, can you describe the schools you attended, elementary, middle, high. You don't have to talk about all of them. You can talk about just one or all of them. Any key memories, also stories, anything that you think has to do with your education.

John: I can remember one memory, in kindergarten. That memory was because I was ill and did not go… and so the teachers brought the classmates to come and sing for me. I remember that very well. When someone wasn't well, we would go to their house and we would go and sing. Yeah, I remember that very well, it's stuck there (Interview, 2024).

The intersection between school and home, made John feel cared for and seen by his school and family. Even though he mentions taking painful beatings from his family members, he does not consider that part of his trauma. In effect, John has these positive and valuable memories of his school and family intersecting.

In their interviews, Thomas and Robert shared that because their fathers were not entirely present during their childhoods, they were consciously and unconsciously looking for another

male role model to identify themselves with. Four out of five participants recounted having at least one teacher that made a long lasting and emotional impact on their life, moving them forward in school. This shows me that teachers could be that role model for some students who may be missing that support at home. There is this quote said by Nicholas A. Ferroni that I have found myself thinking about: "Students who are loved at home, come to school to learn, and students who aren't, come to school to be loved". Not saying that there is no love when a child is neglected, it just makes me think about how children are looking to get different things out of school.

Thomas recounts a couple of relationships with teachers even though at first, he said he did not. I was ready to wait for him to think of at least one adult from school, because I knew he had to have had at least one. The way he described himself as a kid and his present demeanor make it hard not to like him. He ended up telling me about one principal and two teachers. His principal used to be a cop and always knew when Thomas smoked before school just by looking him in the eyes. He would sit Thomas down and talk to him when he would get in trouble, and had communication with his teachers, inquiring how he was performing in the classroom. The first teacher Thomas mentioned was one who he could go to for anything. She had seen him in emotional states and showed him care. Thomas shared, "I had a teacher, I forget her name. I see her sometimes. Whenever I was upset, I could always go to her room. And she would like, talk to me and calm me down. I was a very emotional kid, you know what I'm saying. It didn't take a lot to get me going" (Interview 2024). The way Thomas said *whenever I was upset, I could always go to her room* really stuck out to me. That is an act of care that teachers do not have to offer to their students, but a lot do. With the many barriers that school presents when caring for opportunity youth, keeping your door open does not require school resources/permission.

However, it does require a consistent commitment to giving students your time, patience, and empathy, which are valuable and scarce skills that are undervalued in public schooling.

This act of kindness was remembered by Thomas years and years later. Sometimes, all a child needs are someone to listen and comfort them. He shared another anecdote about a time where his principal and teacher worked together to discipline Thomas in an effective and caring manner.

> Thomas: "So we got to a point where we had a pretty good relationship. And one time, I felt like she was picking on me, and I had a really bad day and I blew up. And I swore at her. So them I go down to the office or whatever, and I'm talking to the principal. Because he was pretty cool, he was actually mad chill. He used to be a cop. That was probably the best principal I ever had because he would like sit there and like talk to you. So, he's talking to me like… she says some good things about you. And I start crying! Then after that, I went up to my teacher and I was like I'm so sorry, she was hurt by that. We had a dope relationship, you know" (Interview 2024).

I learned early on in my education degree to never underestimate the power of active listening. Not only does active listening signal to a student that you respect their knowledge, but you are slowly building trust, so that the student will continue to want to share parts of their life with you (Usable Knowledge 2017, paras. 1,7). If anything, listening to your students lets them know that you will continuously take what they have to say into account.

Robert had a teacher who taught him math, after being the first adult to notice that he may have a learning disability. Robert said "She was the first person to notice that something was wrong because she was like you know, you're really smart, and I wanna know why are you putting these numbers and why are you mixing these numbers up?" (Interview, 2024). Both

Thomas and Robert expressed desire for their administrators to have taken a more proactive approach when addressing behavioral issues. They felt that if their administrators involved teachers more in administrative discipline, their point of view could lead to a more nuanced understanding of the student and their behavior. Thomas found that the way his principal melded relationships between him and his teachers was impactful for a more cohesive school support system. Lisa did not have the adult support she needed at home, so it seemed like school is where she tried to obtain that structure. Lisa mentioned an aunt that she had growing up who would take her and her brother out to the park, or Chuck E. Cheese, positive activities that her mom did not have the time or energy to do with them often. From what I understood from her interview, Lisa was looking for a type of stability that will move her forward in life, not hold her back.

Once Lisa dropped out of public high school in 9th grade, she made the decision to enter a residential Job Corps program. She had a teacher that allowed her to sit in her class throughout the day, as long as she did her work and kept on track. Lisa shared "They were really understanding, and I had like a math teacher, and I used to love her class there, and like I just made my schedule where most of the day I was there, or at ESL class. And those were the only two places I would go during the day, for two of the periods that I was in that class" (Interview, 2024). Lisa's program worked with her to figure out how they can tackle her low motivation in some of her classes. Lisa shared she felt she did not need certain classes to further her career goals, and she should be focusing on what she is good at, furthering her English. Because her teachers and administrators listened to her needs, Lisa showed up to the class with her favorite teacher everyday, completed her work, and passed the GED with "flying colors" (Interview, 2024). Lisa was able to succeed because her teachers made that accommodation for her. Based on how Lisa described feeling about the majority of her classes, I can't help but wonder, what if

Lisa's program did not allow her to make that shift in her schedule, would that have impacted her success?

I've had a professor in the past tell me not to ask questions like that because *what if* questions focus on something that didn't happen. I completely disagree with that opinion. [circle back to how everything affects children] I believe it is important to at least think about questions that may impact different outcomes; that way, as a teacher you are making the best-informed decision, considering all possible outcomes and what will benefit the student the most. One of the assumptions I make about teachers (based on those who I've worked with and had as a student) is that they may not have considered how the student will be affected if they do not deeply consider the potential impact their decisions may have on students.

The reason I bring up a what if question, is because there was one participant that had no recollection of any positive relationships with teachers. Rachel talked about school staff and faculty in a neutral tone, putting forth that they did the bare minimum when trying to help her. She gave the examples, paying for her to go on field trips and excusing/ignoring bad behavior. This approach from Rachel's teachers sat with me long after her interview took place. As I explained in an earlier section, Rachel had absolutely no support at home. The chronic stress her parents and older male family members caused was the main factor that contributed to her difficulty progressing in school. Chronic stress is any degree of trauma that significantly affects the way a child moves forward in their life physically and emotionally (NCTSN 2003 para. 5). In terms of physical and visual symptoms of abuse, I am genuinely confused as to how Rachel's teachers did not recognize that she was being mistreated at home. The only reasons I can possibly think of are lack of knowledge on signs of abuse, or intentional/unintentional neglect from teachers because Rachel was an ELL student.

Because Rachel is Vietnamese and still learning English, she recounted that she often felt forgotten about or made to feel that she had a debilitating disability. Rachel described herself as a "late learner," explaining that she didn't have ELL teachers in early elementary school. As a result, she felt she "didn't have the help that other kids had", which led to her being held back in first grade. I think it is important to think about the *impact of neglecting to discipline a student?* Or the *impact of not taking a student seriously when they confide in you about abuse at home.* Even though Rachel received some support at school, the support given was not helpful at all. In her own words, "they were not helping me, they were enabling me". Rachel uncovered a crucial outcome of looking the other way when a student is disruptive— it will enable harmful behaviors. Failing to address when a child does something they shouldn't be doing makes it seem acceptable, especially if they know you are aware of it; that makes it even worse! Not only does that make it seem like what the student's doing is okay, the lack of acknowledgment on the teacher's part gives the impression that the adult does not care enough. Looking the other way not only signals to the child to continue harmful behaviors, but it also allows the negative influences in their life to keep harming them.

Teachers are in the position to enact change within their classroom, and that starts with the dedication to prison abolitionist teaching. Bettina Love's prison abolitionist teaching model acknowledges the American schooling system as broken and urges that teachers take a consistent stance within the broken system to nurture the growth of opportunity youth (Dozono, 2022 p.415). This requires acknowledging that you're caring for children whose lives may be impacted in ways you don't fully understand. As Rachel noted, she was asking for help from her teachers, even opening about what was happening at home. It seems like Rachel's teachers helped in the

best way they knew how, but that help actually signaled to Rachel that none of her teachers actually cared about her enough to remove her from her parents' custody.

I was shocked when I heard none of Rachel's teachers stepped up to advocate for her. Even though this next aspect may come off as viewing teachers in a deficit, it is important to note that some teachers tend to assume first that children are being 'over-dramatic' with a problem they're sharing. From Rachel's interview, I could think of dozens of instances where I even thought a student was being over dramatic, but I still took each child seriously until they told me the truth. As a substitute teacher, I can understand where this assertion comes from. What I am stuck on, is why did Rachel's teachers ignore her when she confided in them about being abused multiple times? I can only contemplate about why, but what I know for sure is the impact. These attempts to get help left Rachel feeling helpless and confused about who is helping her and who is hurting her because she was receiving 'help' at school. Which leads me to the connection between interactions with the home, community, and school.

Family, Community, and School Interactions Influencing Perceptions of Positive Relationships

The impact that institutions and norms have on a growing person's sense of self has the potential be detrimental to their moral development. The 'self' is constantly interacting with the world, and there is no way to control that. There is what you desire to do, what you believe is right, and what seems easiest. Then, there are other opinions influencing the way you carry yourself. I hear so much talk about 'being a man' and not wanting to be perceived as weak by others and there are systematic influences at play in this belief perpetuated through different means (e.g., media, environments, people). The impact of these categories has a significant impact on child development, decision making, and identity. Intersecting between everything we

experience as humans, is how we view ourselves and form our beliefs after we have those interactions.

Throughout my paper, you read about how John, Robert, Thomas, Rachel, and Lisa were formed by the social structures and environment around them. What most significantly influenced my participants' childhood wellbeing was their perceptions of what a positive relationship with adults in their lives meant. In relation to that, participants articulated needing *more* positive relationships in a school setting not only with teachers, but with their peers. Research 2019 study suggests that the primary relational experience for youth is with their peers in school (Gowing, 2019). Even if the interactions are not always positive, having a community of people at school increases a child's feeling of belonging. Students placed more emphasis on forming relationships with peers. So, that means it is the teacher's job to encourage community among their students, modeling to students what healthy relationships are, especially since students may be receiving/seeing contradictory representations on what it means to have positive relationships from their home and community.

Rachel had no one supporting the identity exploration we all go through as young people. She had her parents putting her down every single day without fail, making her believe she was worth absolutely nothing. She describes herself as a "product of her environment". That she was raised to be a criminal and there was no other choice for her. Rachel had a survival instinct forced upon her by the adults in her life. It eventually became a part of her sense of self, affecting the way she felt about herself and interacted with the world. Rachel's narrative leads me to my ultimate finding; there is a major disconnect in understanding between teachers and parents.

The Missing Link: The Under Appreciated Role of Parent-Teacher Relationships

"We will never make any inroads into delinquency prevention until we take serious steps to develop effective approaches that deliver appropriate skills to kids traumatized by the pains of poverty, ***and include their whole family****" (Teske, 2017).*

Referencing back to my research question, *how do positive relationships between "opportunity youth" and educators impact their attitude and behaviors in school?* Throughout my research, I found that positive teacher-student relationships with opportunity youth does shift their attitudes and behaviors in school. However, a key part of providing lasting support for opportunity youth involves not only fostering a sense of community among students but also building strong relationships between teachers and parents.

A 2023 study titled, *Association Among Parent-Teacher Relationship, Autonomy Support, and Career Development of High School Students Across School Types* found that parent-teacher relationships are related to the career development[2] of high school age students (Fang, 2023). Data supports that opportunity youth need continuous support that extends from school to home. Teachers and parents have many other responsibilities, so creating this line of communication has the potential to give opportunity youth further support in one location, if the other is lacking.

I've never met any parents of the students I've worked with since I am not stationary in one classroom: I've only ever seen pictures or gotten a wave when bringing a student to dismissal. Meeting parents is something that excites me as a future teacher because I know the

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[2] The authors associate positive career development (i.e. identifying career goals, career readiness) with future success.

impact that supportive or unsupportive parents have on child development. A 2018 study explains that "parents described their first-hand knowledge of their children and the challenges they face. They discussed how a holistic view of a students' life is important, and how parents can notice problems at home" (Karen, Klevan, 2018). Parents see their child in the hours they are not in school and can offer valuable insight or information that the child may not otherwise share. Establishing a relationship with student's parents, will give teachers increased understanding about what supports children go home to at the end of the day.

All participants described a home environment that had little supervision due to parents being at work or their own personal struggles. John, Robert, and Lisa noted how more time out of school due to factors such as out-of-school suspension, leaves increased time to get into trouble, and overall did not deter any of them from engaging with a range of influences and behaviors. Research agrees with their statements, saying that children are more likely to get in trouble with the law in the hours and days they are not in a structured environment (Cuellar, 2015). This is something that I've always known would be a challenge that will most likely never get easier. I'm not being pessimistic either, just realistic. There is no way to control what happens to students once they go home, and there is no way to control the decisions they make. I am sure that there are instances where out-of-school suspension may be needed, however, suspension will only be effective if the child is under parental/guardian supervision at home and receiving adequate support. There is a common assumption that children who misbehave in school or have been incarcerated, do not have supportive adults at home. This may be true in certain cases, but it is wrong to immediately assume that parents are intentionally neglecting their child simply because the student is exhibiting concerning behavior. Through my own experience and research, it is not as simple as that. All participants suggest communication home

for all students, and especially as a primary step in student intervention. Robert made a specific point to stress parent communication, *initiated by the teacher* to at least learn what's goin on in the child's life from a caregiver point of view. This discussion will also give you insight on the dynamics of the parent's relationship with their child, which I hope you learned from my paper, is that they are complicated.

Increasing Positive Parent Involvement

It's crucial to examine the *role* that the parent should be playing in their child's education. Teachers must work to prevent negative parent involvement by discussing with the student the nature of their relationship with their parent. Then, further discuss with the parent how they can support their child outside the classroom. There are three levels of parent engagement that may already be at play in the child's education. It's important to understand these roles before moving forward with the child's care plan, so that, as a teacher, you don't assume or rush to solutions.

The first is *involvement*, referring to the parent as spectator/teacher. Meaning the parent actively checks in with their child about school progress at home and help with assignments. The second is participation, referring to the parent as accessory/educational volunteer. Meaning the parent volunteers for non-classroom activities. The third is advocacy, referring to the parent as a decision-maker. Meaning the parent has direct ability to monitor or change basic systems within their child's school (Khan, 1996). One out of five participants described continued support while attending school. Other participants described minimal parent involvement, such as selecting

private schools for their child to attend, and meeting with administration if their child was being disciplined.

I want to foster positive parental engagement in my students lives, but I know that is not always entirely possible for reasons outside of anyone's control. Four out of five participants had one present family member growing up, and it was their mother. Three out of five participants had at least one parent who struggled with addiction. Another participant referred to their mother as their little sister. Involving parents in opportunity youth's education is an asset, but it must also be done with care. Teachers have the opportunity to strengthen parent-student relationships, but first by building a connection with the parent themselves.

Based on the experiences participants shared with me, I found myself searching for a universal guide that teachers could use to determine the right level of parent involvement for their opportunity youth—particularly when such involvement can support the student's academic and emotional growth. I rarely hear positive things from teachers I work with when it comes to parent communication. Some described giving up on some parents because communicating with mutual understanding is difficult. What does that mean as a teacher, giving up when things become too difficult? It makes me think about who that attention is going to, and who is being forgotten. As stated by Lisa, "God knows the real situation that the child is going through" (Interview, 2024). In the end, if a child wants their parent more involved in their education and it's proven to be productive, establishing a positive relationship with parents has been proven to support the positive development of opportunity youth. In my conclusion, I share with you what I plan to do with my findings and my final implications, and how I addressed them.

Conclusion: Redefining "Discipline"

My findings were full of contradictions. Family dynamics in particular practice cultural forms of punishments that affect a child's sense of positive relationships. Out in the world, those punishments even though not viewed as trauma by participants, cultivate or destroy a sense of belonging. Teachers and administration need to get creative with discipline. Suspension, yelling, humiliation do not work, and these tactics must be eliminated from the norm within all schools. Thomas described a time where his principal had him and another student who go into physical fights work on a project together for the full school day. The two ended up good friends after that. Rachel had an idea about having students take part in a non-academic activity while talking about the incident that occurred. Decreasing stress while disciplining a student, will make redirection that much more effective. There needs to be emotional healing and introspective understanding, for change to take place within a child. Understanding what they did, why they did it, and what they can do to rectify their behaviors, is the key to effective educational discipline.

Bits of advice were sprinkled evenly throughout each of the interviews. That was one of my favorite parts. I find it so meaningful when people I work with give me advice about how I should be as a teacher based off their experiences. Now that's advice I can actually trust, because it comes with evidence. For example, a student I tutor told me to *give boys who are 14-18 time to warm up to me. That they may act like they hate me at first, but they don't actually hate me, they're just slow to trust people.*

From what participants suggested, I have to figure out a way to cultivate empathy within students, so it becomes a part of who they are. I have to teach children who don't have a conscious, how their actions can affect other life. My classroom should be about teaching children to be critical of their world, but also aware of who is in it and how what we do has an

impact no matter if we feel it or not. I want students to understand curriculum, not memorize it. I want them to be able to apply concepts and facts about their world to help them further meaningful success in education.

As I continue my undergraduate degree, I find myself making mistakes that set me back, then proving accomplishments that make me feel like I can pursue a degree in education. The impact that I've had on children and the future impact I'll have as a teacher, sometimes keeps me up at night, nervous I'll mess up. I know I will continue to be nervous until I have a classroom of my own; or I will never stop feeling nervous. My praxis disciplined me for a year and a half, setting goals and standards to meet when investigating why children are pushed out of school (and how later, as adults, they make sense of their experiences). Throughout the research process, I spent that whole time thinking about my career, my students, and who I want to be for them. In the next section, I will share with you the gut-wrenching realizations/questions I had while completing my praxis, overall implications and conclusions, and the next steps I plan to take.

Realizations/Implications

These larger than my control issues you're about to read became salient to me (along with some *solutions*) from a sixth interview I was grateful to get on April 22nd, 2025, with a LARC student named Joe. I was left at a hard stop, procrastinating and not adding to my thesis for days at a time not knowing how to respond to this finding. Joe would prod time to time about what I was stuck on in my praxis— and my apparently *ambitious* anticipated concerns, which I share with you below.

1. How can I get students' minds onto education when there are things in their lives that take up much more space?

    a. For students who love to learn but hate the physical place of school, what can I do to support that student's love for learning, while in a building that is associated with stress?
2. Chronic absenteeism is going to be the most challenging to address in my classroom.
    a. How do I provide sustainable care for students, so that to improve their attendance/engagement in school?
    b. How do I figure out what is at the root of a child's absence.

In the end of Joe's interview, I had him speed spitting suggestions to me, agreeing with my stance as a future educator, while also rightfully reminding me or the harsh truth. Before I get into Joe's interview, I feel the need to preface some context about chronic absenteeism in the context of Worcester Public Schools.

Chronic absenteeism is when a child is absent for ten percent or more of school days due to a variety of different factors. The students who are chronically absent are often the ones that eventually disappear from teachers' minds if they don't end up returning to school. I cannot help but think about the children who are forgotten about. It's amazing how the books we read in my major have to do with culturally responsive curriculum and teaching topics that will enrich my students' identities. But there is a social/cultural grouping that are often chronically absent, that I feel is imperative I talk about. I was hesitant at first to name it in my thesis due to the uncomfortable conversations I've had on the topic in my education classes, but after completing interviews and working one-on-one tutoring opportunity youth, I would be ignoring a forgotten about group. And that is the topic of *adolescent gangs.*

Being from Worcester County, I know that gangs are prevalent in my area. This is not an assumption I'm making based on the stereotypes associated with Worcester. Gang violence is a real concern but discussed as if it's taboo. I had a feeling that the topic of gangs was going to come up in my interviews, but I held out on including the topic in my literature review because

my research is not about youth gangs, it's about the impact of teacher student relationships; but, that shows how little I know. Being gang affiliated is an identity; the relationship youth have with their affiliation is so deep, it is what a child lives, breathes, and will die for. I know that as a teacher, I will not be dealing with the justice system directly; however, I want to be a teacher who is kept up to date with anything that may put my students in danger or jeopardize their feeling of safety in school. I mention this because four out of five participants described being affiliated/associated with a gang or had loved ones involved. Being gang *affiliated* refers to being directly involved and active participation (Interviews, 2025). Being gang associated refers to being connected to, but not directly involved or active in a gang (Interviews 2025). In addition, when I tutored at a Department of Youth Services location, I worked with many students who were gang affiliated and associated, and one comes to mind in particular.

This student has the desire to go back to school but will not go back because it was impossible for him to learn without kids attempting to hurt him in class. I was startled one day to hear the opinion he had of his teachers, telling me *they didn't do shit* for him. That they probably didn't even notice he was gone, or that they did and were happy about it. Why aren't we discussing anything like that in my education classes? How some children are too scared to go to school because there's a chance they might get jumped in class? Since the school-to-prison pipeline is majorly present in smaller urban cities such as Worcester, I wonder why my classes do not discuss it more? I appreciate what I've been taught at Clark, but there needs to be more consideration when it comes to students of vulnerable identities who struggle with being present in school. There is not readily available research proving that chronic absenteeism is associated with gang affiliation, but my interviews pointed me into that direction. Competing against a stressor such as gang involvement as a teacher has proven to be a difficult phenomenon. Often,

children's attendance or grades will be remedied so the child can move up to the next grade, to the next teacher. There are contradictions in teaching and contradictions carry confusion. Teachers may believe that regardless of improvement, passing a student to the next grade is doing them a favor. For some students, who knows maybe it does. As long as teachers stay listening to their students, and build up those relationships, there will certainly be a decreased amount of unintended harm.

The Role of Relationships in Returning to Education

A question that surfaced in my thesis defense is why out of the large group of people who are formerly incarcerated in Massachusetts, what made LARC students return to education? What makes them different from those who do not return to education? I thought about this for a while, and I did not connect the dots until LARC's end of the year celebration, where students from the Sociology of Law class spoke on a panel discussing the barriers of reintegration based on their lived experiences. Most students talked about their unwavering self-determination. However, the common denominator that became salient through the conversation is the importance of *community* when released. One student who spoke, made a point to stress the importance of relationships with people who have *not* been incarcerated. They pointed out that LARC is building incredibly fast as a program because of the empathetic people involved. LARC staff and faculty make a point to have students bring in aspects of who they are to their learning, cultivating a co-created learning environment and sense of community.

With this final implication centering community, Joe's interview worked through the issue of chronic absenteeism, and he discussed solutions with me that circled back to the importance of relationships. Next, I give you a brief description of who Joe is.

Joe is Puerto Rican, Dominican/Haitian, and in his late twenties. He grew up on Worcester as an only child of a single mother, moving back and forth across the city moving in with each of his mom's boyfriends. His father was deported when Joe was a child, in effect they're not close. When speaking about his social-economic class, Joe said there was "a lot of stuff I had to do back then just to eat… I started selling drugs, twelve, thirteen years old" (Interview 2025). He referred to his mom as his "little sister" throughout the interview, mentioning he started doing what he did to take care of his mom, hence why he was never in school. Joe had the mentality of *why should I go to school when I'm making more money outside of school?* He strongly disliked the physical place and structure of school but enjoyed learning and the social community among his peers and teachers.

Joe would never call himself smart, but he is. I've edited his papers, and I can tell he's smart. Joe had many, many opinions that I don't agree with, but opinions I understand and respect. Contrary to what he probably thinks, as a PLA/teacher/human, I appreciate his point of view and integral willingness to learn. Because of those qualities, I was happy he agreed to do an interview with me. I'm not going to lie though; we had healthy disagreements frequently. Joe spoke from the perspective of a student who was chronically absent, while I wasn't. However, I watched my mom fight against a truancy charge for her and my sister. The case eventually went to court, and I witnessed firsthand the difficulties families experience from their perspective. During my interview with Joe and conversations that centered on my implications, my inner dialogue was conscious about my positionality. Even though there was a shared understanding of chronic absenteeism, my experience compared to his is *far* different. I want to make that known, because I hate when people claim to fully understand what it is like experiencing someone else's struggles when they are completely different. My grandma and grandpa (who grew up children

of Armenian immigrants) drilled into my head, every day of my life that I grew up with everything I possibly needed. From my point of view at least, I felt like it took a minute for Joe to understand that I knew my place in our conversation. My position as interviewer was to learn.

Questions one, two, and eight were the ones we spent the most time discussing, leading to a conversation about what would have kept Joe going to school when he was younger. Joe was making a substantial amount of money selling drugs when he was not in school, so there was a larger incentive associated with not going to school. Joe explained to me "Only way you're gonna get that [kid] to come to school is like 'yo how much you making selling drugs?' Then give that [kid] a hundred dollars he'll probably come to school every week" (Interview, 2025). Joe needed to make money some how to eat and support his mom. So, most days it was often a choice—go to school or sell to financially meet his families basic living expenses. If a child is worrying about food or money, school is going to be the last concern on their mind; so that is why Joe suggested *incentives*. I don't condone giving opportunity youth money like Joe suggests, but I do suggest giving students incentives that are actually motivating. An incentive that comes to mind is buying a student breakfast everyday that they come to school or adjusting the number of times depending on the motivation of the student. Another incentive that has been proven to increase engagement for opportunity youth are field trips (Casey, 2012). Exposing students to new environments during the hours of school will begin to associate school with meaningful learning that can take place outside of the classroom. Also, field trips are fun, and usually public schools can find funding for lower income students, you just have to advocate for it. Something more important that field trips provide are chances for students to create community among their peers!

Joe asserted that he would have gone to school more if he had a sense of community within the building, bonds with people. He said "like you got friends in school you're gonna wanna go and see your friends, you feel me? I didn't have friends in school, I had friends outside of school" (Interview, 2025). Most of the time, Joe had no motivation to go to school, but there was motivation to be out in his community; that motivation was money and friends. He explained that his friends outside of school, whether they meant to or not, enabled his behaviors. Joe rather be in his community because that's where he felt he belonged most.

Despite having little connection to the physical place of school, Joe graduated with overall good grades. He credits his success to the few social connections he had at school narrating that "having a girlfriend at that time kept me stable, no bull shit. Having a girlfriend made me wanna go to school sometimes" and "there was some teachers that I enjoyed like I wanted to go see them no bull shit" (Interview, 2025). When I heard this, I had a full circle moment. Before I started my literature review and interviews, I predicted that relationships were going to be the missing component to teaching opportunity youth. My theory of change centers relationships, so having this be my overarching finding made me feel proud. Who would have though that positive connections to people at school makes a difference for students who don't show up to school? Joe furthered this claim by mumbling "Some of those kids don't have a good home, and that affects a lot" (Interview, 2025). Going to school does not matter to children whose environment at home does not always support healthy mental, physical, and educational development. If you are a teacher and don't already know this, I hope it sticks with you that a child's home and family affect everything. It is impossible for children to separate themselves from what they experience outside of school, especially if adults who should be taking care of them neglect their responsibilities. As teachers, we need to make the classroom an environment

where students can learn and grow, while experiencing upsetting events that nobody has any control over. It's not anyone's job to *solve* problems that students come in with, but we can provide safety. Joe made sure that I understood this.

Compassion Fatigue

Towards the end of his interview, the mood shifted to the sad realities of what it means to be a teacher of students who may be consumed by street life. Joe pointed out the depressing parts of my future job, which I am fully aware of and try desperately not to think about, the primary concern being those *students who do not come back to school.* I've already gotten attached to students who stop coming to school, and it's a terrible feeling. I try to keep my inner monologue going when I work with kids, reminding myself to remove myself when I go home. But I've never been with the same kids everyday for a year— and I'm scared that my empathy for children is going to suffocate me.

Joe understood my point of view, adding that "Teachers do not get paid enough, first off all. Teaching is a job that I feel like you should love, so somebody that doesn't like teaching, you should be in the profession you like [ ]. Don't just do it for a check because those kids are going to grow up, and they're gonna be fucking useless like half of them are already" (Interview, 2025). I appreciated this point of view because I think about this everyday. If I don't figure out how to sustain my love for my profession, that will reflect in my teaching and negatively affect my students. I've had teachers before who I could tell they were mean because they were tired, not because they were a bad person. *Compassion fatigue* reflects a loss of interest in empathizing with others and a lack of energy for doing so for an extended amount of time (Stoewen, 2020). Compassion fatigue shows most often in human service work, such as an inner-city teacher. The reason why this is in my implications is because I'm just beginning to understand how to

separate myself from the kids I work with. I don't believe I have expertise in that area of my job, but now I know that this is something I need to work on when I am a student-teacher.

Establishing Trust with Returning Students

Over the past year and a half, I improved on establishing trust with people I didn't know in a short amount of time. Not just in my research, but as a Petey Greene Tutor. The Department of Youth Services takes care of a lot of kids that have varying stays. I worked with one student the full year, and some students I saw once or twice then never again. As a tutor, I need to use the students time as wisely as possible. Some students just need someone to talk to about their educational goals *one time*, to get them looking for opportunities. Most students involved with the Department of Youth Services have not had good experiences learning in school, often having teachers who give up easily or provide minimum encouragement. Most of my students described having little trust in their teachers, believing their just there for the check.

Establishing trust with Petey Greene students is the first thing I have to do in order to even start tutoring them. I have to get them to talk to me about their past school experiences, where they left off in their education, and how they learn best learn in order to help them. Most importantly, I must convey that I'm not there to judge them. It is so important to develop trust for students who have been pushed out because they learn to expect teachers to give up on them. This belief informed my action plan.

Action Plan

Professional development trainings are knowledge inquisition sessions that get a bad reputation. Maybe it is because school districts bring in material that is not relevant to their students needs, or teachers have little energy or motivation to take part. Professional development trainings are an integral part of positive teacher development, but in some districts,

professional development trainings are not accomplishing what they are supposed to. So, based on my findings, I made an outline for a half-day professional development training to educate teachers on the school-to-prison pipeline and create a space for teachers to reflect on their motivation for being a teacher. Below is a rough outline of my plan.

30 minutes

- I will present my research and findings, ending with my nine research questions on the board up front
- Explain activity, staff and faculty will be answering interview questions for themself in a journal.

1-2 hours

- Staff and faculty will go somewhere in the school and write a journal entry reflecting on each interview question.

1 hour

- Reconvene in room.
- Small group share out for questions 7-9, then large group reflection.

30 minutes – 1 hour

- Faculty and staff will write one paragraph summarizing their *philosophy of teaching* focusing on relationships.

Total time: 3-4 hours

The training will be no longer than three to four hours, because I believe a shorter training will increase meaningful participation.

Future Directions

Now that I've done research and haven't caused harm, there is one main direction I would take my research. Earlier in my paper, I mentioned that I did not want my first human subject research to be on children for many reasons; the main being that children are a vulnerable population. After doing undergraduate research with the support of Sociology, Education, and International Development professors and researchers, I feel confident that I could replicate this research with youth. More importantly, I now have one school and youth detention center that I would feel comfortable asking to do research in if I were given the opportunity to continue this study.

I am glad I stuck with my gut feeling and chose participants to be over the age of twenty-one. All participants shared traumatic experiences in response to my general interview questions; however, these events occurred at least a decade ago, which since then have been processed. I wanted at least some experience doing conversational interviews on sensitive topics with humans who conceptualized what they've been through and had some time to process the negative emotions associated with those experiences. Children are still experiencing their childhood, so I would be asking about *current/recent* experiences. After learning about research ethics and completing a full research project, I now feel prepared to include child voices in this research topic. However, there are changes that must be made to my current study to better support child participants.

The first addition to my research would be to integrate my methodology (interviews) as part of a humanities class unit plan. I believe that this inclusion will make the research feel less extractive and more co-constructed. In the first class, I would explain that I am there to do research with them. I would present my current findings and give context. In the second class,

students learn about human subject research. I will carefully go over the conceding forms, clearly stating exactly what the forms say they are agreeing to. Students will then take consent forms home for parents/guardians to sign if interested. Regardless of if taking part or not, students will write a journal entry reflecting on my interview questions, with the knowledge that no one will be reading what they write. This is a preparation activity for the student's eventual interview with me, and student show are not taking part in the interviews are still able to participate in this lesson plan. Depending on the structure of the classes and teacher preference, I will conduct the interviews throughout the next few days.

The second addition to my research would be to hire a clinician to be involved with the interview process. I would want a clinician available for any emotional harm that reflecting on memories may cause. I will offer to students if they would like a clinician to present in the room for their interview, or if they would like to speak with one after our interview. At youth detention facilities, there would need to be at least one other adult present in the room anyways. Most of the time, there is minimum three adult supports around the room or hallways when I tutor with Petey Greene. Because of differences in locations, I would rely on those working in the location I research at, to guide me on their protocols.

Lastly, I would alter two questions on my interview guide. First, I would skip number six entirely if the students are incarcerated because I already know the answer. I want to be sensitive about asking about the number of times a student was incarcerated, because one of my participants told me that was a triggering question to get asked. Second, I would alter question to *what can I do as a teacher to support my students who aren't coming to school?* I would then add a follow up question to further get their thinking like *what do you think is within my power as a teacher?* When those questions came up in Joe's interview, that is when he had the most ideas

and enthusiasm. I believe that asking this question to kids will also help them recognize I care about them, and I care about their opinions. Also, I hope this connection I made with myself to the research, will have students feeling safe with whatever information they shared with me. In human subject research, trust is everything.

Appendix

Interview Questions

1. Tell me about the neighborhood and where you grew up.

2. Tell me about your family/chosen family.

3. Describe the schools you attended including elementary, middle school, and high school.

4. How would you describe your school experience?

5. Were you ever disciplined in school? If so, tell me about the experience(s).

6. Do you have experience with the juvenile justice system? (You or a loved one)

7. Tell me about your current relationship with education.

8. What do you think schools can do to prevent students from ending up incarcerated?

9. What disciplinary actions would you put in place if you were the superintendent of the Worcester Public Schools district?

Interview Guide

1. Tell me about where you grew up.
    - neighborhood, Urban, Suburban, Rural
    - Social Class
    - Race
2. Tell me about your family/chosen family. (Past/present)
    - Family members in the home
    - Other important family members
    - Social class
    - Race
3. Describe the schools you attended including elementary, middle school, and high school.
    - Urban, suburban, rural
    - Class
    - Race
    - Private, charter, public
4. How would you describe your school experience?
    - Key memories
    - Academics
    - Teachers
    - Extracurricular
    - Social
    - Graduate, GED
5. Ask the following only if discipline has not yet emerged in any of the previous answers:

- Were you ever disciplined in school? If so, tell me about the experience(s).
    - Were you ever disciplined for something that was not your fault?
- What did you think then about the way you were disciplined?
- What do you think **now** about the way you were disciplined?
    - Is there a change in your thinking?

***Have a brief conversation about the school to prison pipeline if the participants are not familiar with it before continuing to the next question. ***

- **Do you know what the school-to-prison pipeline is?**
    - **If yes, move on**
    - **If no: Punitive disciplinary practices that further punish at-risk youth instead of caring for them. These practices push students out of school. Such as out of school suspension and expulsion**

6. Do you have any experience with the Juvenile Justice System?

- yourself, loved one

If yes: Do you think there is a relationship between the way you were disciplined in school and your subsequent incarceration?

If no: Do you think there is a relationship between the way a student is disciplined in school and if they end up incarcerated?

7. Describe your relationship with education. Did your relationship to education change over time?

- Follow up about LARC if not mentioned.
- Do you attend other education programs outside of LARC?
- Have your feelings changed over the course of your life?

8. What do you think schools can do to prevent students from ending up incarcerated?

9. What disciplinary actions would you put in place if you were the superintendent of the Worcester Public Schools district?

- If having trouble thinking of an answer, offer these scenarios
    - What discipline action would you suggest for a student who is skipping class, or not doing their homework, or fooling around when they should be listening, or getting into a physical/verbal altercation, or picking on another student, or using inappropriate language, or using their phone when they should be participating in class, or using nicotine (or drug related products) on school grounds

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