The Possibilities and Limitations of Change from Within: How Alternative Schools for Marginalized Youth in Toronto, Ontario Fare in the State Education System

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June 2020

A thesis submitted to McGill University in partial fulfillment of the requirements of the degree of Master of Arts

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Abstract

Canada's public schools reflect the nation-state's settler colonial, neoliberal climate by reproducing and contributing to the systemic and structural inequities endured by colonized subjects. This qualitative, multiple case study examines the experiences of students and teachers at four alternative schools for marginalized students in Toronto, Ontario—particularly students who are poor and working class, racialized, identify as LGBTQ+, and/or live with disabilities or mental health issues—by investigating why these students leave mainstream schools, and in turn, whether alternative schools are serving these students' needs via their relational dynamics, pedagogy, and curricula. Employing Grounded Theory, and based on interviews and focus groups with 19 students, 10 teachers, and one administrator, I argue that alternative schools are confined by institutional standards and provincial expectations that permeate state schools, and subsequently, are not devoid of neoliberal ideologies that blame, deviate, and pathologize marginalized students. Alternative schools nevertheless serve marginalized students as safe and caring communities that reject state schooling norms, resist bureaucratic schooling structures, provide extensive mental health assistance, and deliver some reformative pedagogy and curricula that tackle issues of oppression, notwithstanding the reality that alternative schools typically only mend symptoms of marginalization, rather than effectively transgress settler colonial and neoliberal power relations.

Resumé

Les écoles publiques du Canada reflètent le climat d'inégalités systémiques et structurelles créées par l'État-nation en reproduisant et en contribuant au climat colonial et néolibéral affligeant les personnes colonisées. Cette étude qualitative est basée sur les expériences des élèves et des enseignantes de quatre écoles publiques alternatives de la région de Toronto en Ontario qui desservent des élèves marginalisés (plus précisément, des élèves provenant de milieux pauvres et de la classe ouvrière, qui sont racialisées, qui s'identifient comme LGBTQ+ et/ou qui ont un handicap ou des troubles de santé mentale) en examinant pourquoi ces élèves quittent les écoles traditionnelles et, par conséquent, comment ces écoles alternatives répondent/ne répondent pas aux besoins des élèves via leurs dynamiques relationnelles, leurs pédagogies et leurs programmes. En s'appuyant sur la théorie ancrée, des entrevues et des discussions avec des groupes témoins composés de 19 étudiantes, 10 enseignantes et un administrateur ont révélé que ces écoles alternatives ont de la difficulté à atteindre leur plein potentiel parce qu'elles sont limitées par les standards institutionnels et les attentes provinciales. Ceci révèle que ces établissements ne sont pas épargnés d'une adhérence à l'idéologie néolibérale qui cible les étudiantes marginalisées en les considèrent comme anormaux. Néanmoins, ces écoles alternatives répondent aux besoins des élèves marginalisés en créant des communautés sécuritaires et bienveillantes qui rejettent les normes éducatives de l'État, qui résistent aux structures bureaucratiques, qui fournissent des services d'aide en matière de santé mentale, qui offrent des programmes d'études adaptés aux expériences d'oppression et qui promeuvent l'espoir. Il en demeure que des écoles alternatives réparent que les symptômes de la marginalisation au lieu de chercher à s'extirper des relations de pouvoir coloniales et néolibérales.

Acknowledgements

Most crucially, I would first like to acknowledge that my entire post-secondary education has taken place on unceded Indigenous territory. This degree in particular has been pursued on the island of Tiotia:ke, on Kanien'kehá:ka land, at an institution whose foundation is inextricable from the historical enslavement and continued oppression of Black and Indigenous peoples. I recognize the complicated and problematic implications of myself, a settler scholar, obtaining and benefitting from higher education on this land. My evolving awareness of this relationship has deeply impacted my intentions within this work.

It is important that I acknowledge my undergraduate education at Western University for providing me with the fundamental knowledge and motivation to do graduate work. Thank you to my Faculty of Information and Media Studies (FIMS) professors who introduced me to an interdisciplinary world of critical scholarship and hegemonic resistance, and to my sociology professors who ingrained in me a sociological imagination.

This experience would not have been nearly as fulfilling or transformational if not under the direction of my supervisor, Dr. Philip Howard, whose outstanding commitment to anti-racist equity work is inspiring. Dr. Howard's scholarly identity is not just confined to his research and teaching; he lives and stands by his work in praxis, embodying both an intellectual and pragmatic sincerity that distinguishes him as a superb mentor. The opportunity to learn from Dr. Howard's thought-provoking insights has been enjoyable, motivating, and above all, metamorphic. Dr. Howard's pedagogy—that is, his refined method of teaching me how to think, not what to think—has allowed my learning experience with him to be deeply authentic and sustainable. Philip, I cannot imagine having done my graduate studies under anyone's direction but yours, nor can I thank you enough for the tremendous, life-long impact you have had on me.

This thesis came to life thanks to the unique and intimate perspectives of the students, teachers, and staff members I worked with at their respective alternative schools. Thank you for welcoming me into your space, and for responding to my presence with such enthusiasm, vulnerability, and willingness to teach me about your lives. Our interactions have left an indelible mark on me.

I am grateful to the professors at McGill who have significantly impacted me through courses or other means. Thank you, Dr. Dawn Wiseman, for editing my work and providing me with helpful feedback countless times in my first year, Dr. Naomi Nichols, for your fascinating

coursework, and Dr. Teresa Strong-Wilson, for the opportunity to work with you. Thank you, Dr. Limin Jao, for supporting and encouraging me, and for providing me with numerous opportunities to develop as a graduate student, both within and outside of the work I did for you. Thank you, Dr. Kayla Johnson, for giving me the most incredible job I have ever had. You are an impactful mentor who enhances the experiences of your graduate students by trusting them, giving them autonomy, and meaningfully collaborating with them. I have learned so much from you in so little time, and feel extraordinarily lucky to have crossed paths with you.

Finally, I would not be where I am without the personal relationships that continually sustain me and remind me to keep pursuing this work. I do not take for granted the numerous individuals who unequivocally and wholeheartedly embrace me at my worst and celebrate me at my best, a dynamic that ebbed and flowed unwaveringly through the ups and downs of this journey. First and foremost, thank you, Mom, for everything you have given me that has brought me here. I would not have made it through this experience, nor many experiences before this, without your profound support, understanding, reliability, and of course, humour. Thank you to my grandparents for your generosity and words of encouragement. Thank you to those friends, old and new, near and far, who oversaw this process from start to finish and kept me sane throughout. I am incredibly grateful to Emma Baayen, Jordan Clarke, Ellie Deakin, Nicola Fairhead, Sarah Gowe, Stephanie Ho, Matilda Lee, Keira Loshuk, Ryan Pasquin, and Mimi Tsirkin, for never letting me go a day without feeling your ubiquitous support. A special thank you necessarily goes to Emma Benwell for being the most wonderful friend, and significant source of comfort I could have ever asked for, through this thesis, and through life.

CHAPTER 1
INTRODUCTION

1.1 Background and Context of Problem Under Investigation

Research in the sociology of education indicates that state schooling in settler colonial societies like Canada and the United States, reproduces systemic and structural inequities, consequently contributing to the ongoing oppression of colonized subjects—that is, marginalized youth in state schools—in often naturalized and routine ways (McNulty-Eitle & Eitle, 2004; Mendez & Knoff, 2003; Nolan, 2011; Ontario Human Rights Commission, 2003; Taylor & Peter, 2011; Toronto District School Board, 2018). The ordinary definition of a nation-state, which is critiqued by critical race and anti-colonial scholars, is a state housed by a sovereign government, whose inhabitants share commonalities in language, culture, politics, and origin of descent (Thobani, 2007; Walcott, 2014a; Veracini, 2015). While Canada in particular takes pride in its egalitarian reputation as a multicultural, inclusive mosaic, in actuality, it is incessantly and undeniably a settler colony since its settlers reside permanently on stolen Indigenous land, and facilitate ongoing processes of colonization (Veracini, 2015). The ways in which Canada's colonized subjects experience its public institutions—in this case, how marginalized youth experience state schooling—show that, despite popularized dichotomies to the United States and Canadian politicians' ongoing denial of Canada's colonial history (Assembly of First Nations of Quebec and Labrador, 2009; Aivalis, 2016; Dearing, 2009; Fontaine, 2016), Canada is no less a product of settler colonialism than the United States (Austin, 2010, pp. 27-29; Thobani, 2007, p. 144). In this thesis, I define marginalization in the context of settler colonial schooling as: the systemically and structurally disadvantaged lived experiences of poor and working class students, racialized (especially Black and Indigenous) students, LGBTQ+ students, and students living with disabilities or mental health issues who have historically been disproportionately subjected to deeply embedded zero-tolerance disciplinary practices, and pedagogical and curricular exclusion in state schools. These practices operate within, and necessarily because of, the white, heteropatriarchal, ableist, and classist relations central to the inequitable reproductive functioning of public institutions in settler colonies. Such practices are systematically ingrained into state schooling, resulting in disengagement at best, but more often than not for marginalized students, exceedingly high dropout rates, conflicts with the criminal justice system, barriers to

upward mobility, substance abuse, mental health issues, homelessness, and inescapable cycles of poverty (Children's Defense Fund, 2014; McCarthy & Hoge, 1987; McNulty-Eitle & Eitle, 2004; Mallett, 2016; National Low Income Housing Coalition, 2013; U.S. Department of Education, 2014; Salole & Abdulle, 2015). Marginalized students are socially constructed as deviant, dangerous, and disruptive in state schools, rather than underserved by them—a trope that has normalized oppressive pedagogical, curricular, and disciplinary practices (Bordieu & Passeron, 1970; Mallett, 2016; Salole & Abdulle, 2015), and reinforced neoliberal expectations of colonized subjects to adopt self-blame and personal responsibility for impositions by the nation-state that operate outside of their individual autonomy (Fine & Ruglis, 2009; Means, 2008; Orlowski, 2012; Ryan, 2012).

Historically, alternative schools in nation-states have had elitist objectives, but many of them, notably in Toronto, Ontario, which hosts the largest district of alternative schools in the world, have shifted towards being spaces that specifically seek to serve marginalized students in the state education sector, thanks to the lobbying efforts of marginalized students and parents, as well as some teachers in Toronto's public schools (Kozol, 1972; Rodrigues, 2017). This thesis necessarily contextualizes Canada as an intentionally and systematically constructed settler colonial nation-state, in contrast to its popularized egalitarian reputation as a multicultural, inclusive mosaic, devoid of the "isms" and assimilation that supposedly characterize the United States exclusively. Using Bordieu and Passeron's (1970) social reproduction theory, Becker's (1963; 1991) labelling theory, Kimberlé Crenshaw's (1989) intersectional theory, and more specific to Canada's late modern, settler colonial educational context—critical race theory (Gillborn, 2013), neoliberalism (Apple, 1996; Fine & Ruglis, 2009; Means, 2008; Ryan, 2012; Orlowski, 2012; Walcott & Abdillahi, 2019), the politics of disposability (Giroux, 2006), and anti-Blackness (Dumas, 2016; Dumas, 2018; Dumas & Nelson, 2016; Howard & James, 2019; Maynard, 2017; Nelson, 2016) as starting points—Canada's settler colonial trajectory, and how it manifests in state schooling, will become apparent through this work. These theoretical frameworks are pertinent to this research for their explanations of how schools reproduce socially constructed colonial identities encompassing deviance, danger, and disruption; the severity of this reproduction across multiple, intersecting identities (e.g. Black youth being more likely to get diagnosed with learning disabilities, yet ironically, being the least likely to receive proper supports [Advancement Project et al., 2011; Mallett, 2016]); as well as how students are

inequitably regarded, educated, and disciplined (Carter et al., 2014; Children's Defense Fund, 2014; Kim et al., 2010; Kupchik, 2010; Mendez & Knoff, 2003; National Low Income Housing Coalition, 2013; Nolan, 2011; Rocque, 2010). With this foundation established, this study specifically explores the relational dynamics and pedagogical and curricular practices of four alternative schools that endeavour to re-engage and educate marginalized youth in Ontario's Toronto District School Board (TDSB).

From a policy standpoint, the TDSB's (2018) efforts to address how its schools are complicit in cycles of oppression are worth noting. The TDSB's Equity Policy (2018) states: "The TDSB acknowledges that inequitable treatment leads to educational, social, and career outcomes that do not accurately reflect the abilities, experiences, contributions and potential of our students, employees, parents/guardians, caregivers and community partners" (p. 2). The TDSB (2018) also calls for an inclusive curriculum in recognizing how Eurocentrism and colonialism have historically dominated curricula, further alienating those already marginalized by the systemic and structural barriers of classroom learning. The Board's recognition of these realities has resulted in various equity, safety, and inclusion policies that both address the embeddedness of these inequitable structures and call for revised practices. Sara Ahmed (2012) nevertheless reminds us that the creation of more socially progressive policies does not mean that institutions actually implement those policies. Indeed, the existence of pseudo-progressive policies and their official status can falsely indicate that the issues they intend to address have been rectified when they have not. Historically, Canada has been reluctant to gather statistics on correlations between race, disability, dropout, suspension, and expulsion rates, requiring Canadian researchers to widely reference American trends on marginalized youth in the state education sector (Hudson, 2017; Ontario Human Rights Commission, 2003). Only in recent years has Ontario collected and released statistics that revealed failures of the system, mainly with respect to Black students' experiences in state schools (James & Samaroo, 2017; James & Turner, 2017). Given the historical absence of said statistics, as well as the nation-state's maintenance of a socially and politically positive reputation, this study seeks to investigate how, if at all, Toronto's alternative schools serve the needs of marginalized students.

1.2 Implication in and Motivation to do This Work

During the first year of my undergraduate studies, I stumbled into a course on education reform which commenced the process by which I started to critically think about my own experiences in state schooling. Since then, I have held two main critiques of my state education—particularly, my high school experience. The first is that my secondary education was overshadowed by academic disinterest and a lack of stimulation on my part, while I still received high grades due to what I now recognize as the simultaneous workings of grade inflation and the privilege I carried, and continue to carry upon entering institutional settings. The meaninglessness and inadequacy of my high school education became even more clear to me when I reached university and learned just how academically underprepared I was. Although I spent the first two years of my undergraduate degree playing what felt like a never-ending game of catch-up, for the first time in years, I felt intrigued and inspired by what I was learning. My second critique of high school relates to the ways in which I was institutionally conditioned—because I learned most of this at school—as an adolescent woman to be submissive, to be silent, to take up less space, to be self-conscious, to be self-deprecating, and above all, to be in a constant state of unadmitted fear. No doubt, I was subjected to gender roles and hierarchies earlier in my life, but high school is the first place I remember internalizing them, albeit somewhat subconsciously, through dichotomic practices like the policing of girls' bodies through dress codes, juxtaposed with the simultaneous dismissal and normalization of rape culture via widespread sexual harassment and assault. I think my experience would be similar to that of many women when I say high school was the first time I felt my body become a vessel of social meaning, though I did not have the knowledge at the time to understand or challenge such a concept, much less liberate myself from its confines.

My experiences in high school are, nevertheless, largely shaped by my white, middle class, cis-gendered, heterosexual, able-bodied identity. Although my criticisms of my state education are valid, my graduate studies, alongside my ongoing journey of making meaning of my life experiences through a critical lens, helped me recognize how I went through state schooling unscathed in ways that others were not, while remaining within an exclusive life trajectory that would grant me numerous opportunities for further upward mobility. It was when I realized that state schools actually represent and reproduce inequitable power dynamics that impact the lives of others more harmfully than they did my own, that I became interested in

exploring alternative schools that seek to serve marginalized students through the rejection of traditional schooling practices.

1.3 Research Positionality

It is further necessary to grapple with my positionality in relation to this research that widely focuses on marginalized students, given my inability to identify with numerous avenues of systemic and structural marginalization that impact colonized subjects. As a white, middle class, cis-gendered, heterosexual, able-bodied woman, I do not take this work lightly, nor am I unaware of what it means for someone like myself to perform research of this thematic nature. I recognize that my intervention warrants careful consideration, and that doing this work appropriately is a continual learning process. I further recognize my specific role as a settler pursuing higher education on Indigenous land, at an institution whose construction was and is fueled by slavery and colonialism. My settler perspective is limited, and so is state education as a research phenomenon for its exclusive construction by, and within, a settler colonial context. In praxis, I see my educational opportunities, such as my graduate studies, primarily as opportunities to highlight marginalized voices and experiences in the state education sector. And, while pursuing this degree has inevitably benefitted me intellectually, socially, and economically, I have not used this research opportunity to further elevate the statuses and perspectives of researchers like myself. This work exemplifies that I do not need elevation, and I hope this thesis evidently resists such a narrative.

1.4 Terms and Usage

This qualitative, multiple case study explores alternative secondary public schools purposed to serve marginalized students in the TDSB—one of Toronto's four public school boards. These alternative schools are differentiated in the Board by their accommodations towards a more specific student population, their smaller size, and their less conventional logistical and infrastructural characteristics. Mainstream schools make up the highest percentage of schools in the TDSB, serving a mass student population, closely following government-regulated curricula and state schooling social and pedagogical norms. While the terms "public school" and "state school" are, and can, be used interchangeably, I gravitate towards using "state school," (and by extension, "state schooling," "state schooling system," and "state education

system") in this thesis, so as to more explicitly connote a semantic reminder that this research takes place in a nation-state's public education system. The term "public school" is often used synonymously with "mainstream school" and "state school," but because the alternative schools in this study are also public schools, here, public schooling will be employed as an umbrella term for all public schools in the TDSB, Toronto, and Ontario. Subsequently, when referring to alternative schools and mainstream schools, I am referring to them as public schools and state schools—(not private institutions)—unless indicated otherwise. Other terms and vocabulary to be understood are: participants often refer to alternative schools as "alt schools," or "alts," and mainstream schools as "collegiates," "regular," or "normal" schools. Marginalization has already been defined in section 1.1, and should, for the remainder of this work, be understood as a systemic and structural phenomenon.

1.5 Explanation of Chapters

Chapter 2 outlines the theoretical foundations that I have chosen to inform this study by unpacking settler colonialism, the heteropatriarchy, white supremacy, social reproduction theory, labelling theory and discursive identity formation, intersectional theory, the politics of disposability and anti-Blackness, and a critical race analysis of neoliberalism, all to better understand the ways in which state schooling has come to be in its current form in Canada. Chapter 2 concludes by introducing anti-colonialism and critical hope—two theories wherein both the resistance of and aspirations for state education can be imagined in contemplation with the findings disclosed in Chapters 5, 6, 7, 8, and 9.

Chapter 3 reviews Canadian, American, and British literature on alternative schooling. Specific to Toronto, this chapter frequently references the TDSB's online resources for its alternative schools, policy documents, research reports, and relevant studies. Outside of the information made available by the TDSB, qualitative and quantitative studies conducted by the Ontario Human Rights Commission concerning discrimination in state schooling are brought forward. A notable source of information is the book *Alternative Schooling and Student Engagement: Canadian Stories of Democracy within Bureaucracy*—the first of its kind, serendipitously published in 2017 by alternative school teachers, administrators, and researchers in the TDSB. This book proved to be imperative and timely to supplementing this study.

Chapter 4 overviews the Grounded Theory methodology in relation to this research, a more specific description of this study, as well as the appropriate research methods employed.

Chapter 5 commences the findings of this study, introducing how the impersonal dynamics, hierarchies, and arbitrary formalities in state school bureaucracies are incompatible with marginalized students' needs, resulting in alienation and the ensuing desire and need for an alternative environment.

Chapter 6 outlines what works about alternative schools for marginalized students, with a focus on their deconstruction of bureaucracy, restorative and reconciliatory approaches to discipline, and the efforts to build an alternative community through small school sizes, the reconstruction of what it means to be "normal" for marginalized youth, and their maintenance of a culture of empathy and care. The ways in which practices of empathy and care can reproduce neoliberal ideologies of individualism and self-blame for institutionalized oppression will be highlighted and serve as a preface to Chapter 8.

Chapter 7 discusses the specific confines the state education system places on alternative secondary schools for marginalized students, outlining the difficulty of carving out space to assert an alternative identity while existing in a system that is already defined by dominant colonial and neoliberal schooling norms. Additionally, I discuss the ways in which alternative schools are denied sufficient advertising, with a particular focus on the deeply ingrained stigmatization of alternative schools for marginalized students.

Chapter 8 introduces how many students with mental health issues attend alternative schools, and the subsequent accommodations that are made for them. The ways in which mental health issues are both a manifestation and avenue of marginalization are discussed, as well as how perceptions of mental health issues are representative of a neoliberal mechanism through which marginalization becomes understood as an individual, rather than systemically or structurally imposed experience. This results in the pathologizing of marginalized students in alternative schools, and their ensuing adoption of self-blame and responsibility for oppressive circumstances out of their control. The individualistic lens through which marginalization is often viewed in alternative schools also renders the accommodations made for these students as temporary fixes to superficial problems, rather than actions that transform the systemic and structural barriers students face.

Chapter 9 re-introduces anti-colonialism and critical hope as analytic frameworks to unpack the resistance work being performed by a handful of teacher participants. This chapter highlights teachers who have systemic and structural understandings of marginalization and/or employ critical reformative pedagogical and curricular approaches.

Chapter 10 reiterates the findings of this study, makes recommendations for change, discusses the limitations of this study, proposes questions for future research, and closes with my parting thoughts as a researcher.

CHAPTER 2
CANADA'S SETTLER COLONIAL HISTORY AND PRESENT

2.1 Settler Colonialism

State schooling in Canada operates within a settler colonial context that widely informs how marginalized students experience public education. It is therefore crucial to understand the history of settler colonialism in Canada before unpacking the nation-state's conditions of state schooling. Settler colonialism is a unique mode of colonization that employs imperial physical, cultural, and symbolic violence to achieve total erasure of a nation's Indigenous peoples. In time, settlers attempt to systematically establish themselves as primary and dominant inhabitants of the land they have stolen, enforcing an unprecedented national identity by ingraining naturalized, permanent systems of oppression into the political, cultural, social, and economic makeup of what subsequently becomes a nation-state (Glenn, 2015; Veracini, 2015). The constructed and ongoingly maintained oppressive relations between colonizers and original inhabitants span beyond Indigenous erasure towards exploiting and subduing anyone who does not fit the mold of the "core of the nation" (Thobani, 2007)—that is, white, male, heterosexual, able-bodied subjects who are deemed as valuable, normal, and acceptable constructions of humanity (Dumas, 2016; Dumas, 2018; Dumas & Nelson, 2016; Giroux, 2006; Howard & James, 2019; Maynard, 2017; Nelson, 2016). Those not in the "core of the nation" are reduced to a sub-human status as the colonized subjects who are most notably impacted by heteropatriarchal, racist, classist, and ableist ideologies that centrally balance the core of the nation's power.

Settler colonialism is distinguishably an ongoing systemic and structural force, not an event, as some mainstream depictions of colonization illustrate. Since colonizers seek to permanently live on and benefit from the space they have colonized, acknowledging a nation-state's original inhabitants does not simply translate to reconciliation, despite the liberal portrayals that say this—the portrayals that Canada benefits from utilizing in building its national identity (Austin, 2010). Settler occupation of land remains, while Indigenous peoples continue to be confronted by relationships and processes that seek to annihilate their existence—a system that gradually yet totally grants settlers full, undisturbed custody of the nation they violently metamorphosed into a nation-state (Smith, 2012; Smith, 2016). Molefe Kete Asante (2006) asserts that in settler colonial societies "the colonizer did not only seize the lands, but also

minds" (p. ix). Applicable to Canada, the attempted erasure of Indigenous life has, effectively, dismissed settlers' accountability for their heinous reconstruction of Turtle Island into a nation-state that now maintains myriad intersectional, systematically oppressive conditions (Said, 1994; Glenn, 2015; Veracini, 2015).

2.2 Settler Colonialism in Canada

Sandra Hudson (2017), co-founder of Black Lives Matter Toronto, highlights that settler colonialism in Canada has been commonly misunderstood as solely an Indigenous issue. Indeed, the annihilation of Indigenous peoples is foundational to Canada's contemporary formation, but the commonly overlooked history of transatlantic slavery and the ongoing erasure of Black lives in Canada is equally crucial to understanding what Canada really is (Walcott, 2014b). Despite its historical reputation as an asylum of refuge for escaped African-American slaves, Canada in its ongoing construction as a nation-state engaged in the systematic enslavement of Black people on stolen Indigenous land, a state operation that functioned for more than 200 years (Austin, 2010, p. 27; Bakan, 2008; Thobani, 2007). Although slavery in Canada was abolished in 1834, its legacy translates not only to police brutality, mass incarceration, and Black people serving modern capitalism's need for cheap and temporary labour (Bashi, 2004), but social death: that is, the "ongoing purge of the Black from the category of the Human" (Walcott, 2014b), and the deeming of Black lives as "deviant, 'primitive,' and therefore less, if not altogether outside of, the human and therefore subject to violence" (Howard, 2018a). Recognizing the simultaneous roles that both anti-Indigenous and anti-Black racism played, and continue to play, in Canada's development as a nation-state is pivotal; yet, pertinently, it is the suppression of these historical realities, and in particular the late modern denial of anti-Black racism in Canada (Hudson, 2017; Thobani, 2007; Walcott, 2014b), that allows for the continual naturalized and routine upkeep of Indigenous erasure and anti-Blackness in state schools.

2.3 Heteropatriarchy and the Three Pillars of White Supremacy

While anti-Indigeneity and anti-Blackness are foundational to Canada's racist constitution, the ongoing settler colonial project does not end there. American feminist scholar Andrea Smith (2012) illustrates historically the ways in which settler colonialism in the United States is additionally upheld by the heteropatriarchy, Orientalism, and late modern capitalism.

Although Smith (2012) theorizes the American context, Canada's similar progressions to the United States on the bases of stolen land, annihilating Indigenous existence, transatlantic slavery, and the "out-of-place-ness" (Walcott, 2014b) of Black people in late, neoliberal modernity's definition of humanity, necessitate an application of, and expansion on her work here, in order to sufficiently contextualize the dynamics of settler colonialism that ultimately inform state schooling and the experiences of marginalized students.

2.3.1 History of the Heteropatriarchy and Indigenous Ways of Knowing Gender

Beginning in the 15th and 16th centuries, British and French settlers gradually implemented and normalized unprecedented hierarchical heteropatriarchal and white supremacist societal structures. To this effect, oppressive power relations of gender, race, and sexuality became ingrained into both Canada and the United States, which socially, politically, and economically benefitted white male settlers. Contrary to Indigenous ways of knowing men and women as equal, balancing parts, the Western patriarchy has historically relied on the "male/female binary, in which the male gender is perceived as strong, capable, wise, and composed and the female gender is perceived as weak, incompetent, naïve, and confused" (Arvin, Tuck, & Morrill, 2013, p. 13). The establishment of Western civilization engendered a transition from the equality of Indigenous women and men, to women being considered inferior to men in social, economic, and political spheres, while serving as domestically crucial persons to aid the construction and maintenance of the suburban nuclear family (Phillips, 2009; Smith, 2012). This oppressive gendered narrative was centred around the ideological superiority of *white* settlers, meaning that Indigenous men and women and people of colour were and are impacted differently by the intersection of racism and patriarchal conditions.

Heteronormativity and homophobia, additionally, play key roles in sustaining settler colonial societies. Smith (2012) argues that the amalgamation of heteronormativity and the patriarchy—that is, the heteropatriarchy—was, historically, the building block of the American nation-state, initiated through processes of colonization by Christian Right figures who idealized suburban nuclear families and demonized same-sex partnerships, so far as calling them a terrorizing threat to the safety of the state (p. 71). These principles not only maintained a familial structure that ensured the socioeconomic success of white males by maximizing their potential to excel in public and economic spheres, while designating their female partners to maintain their private lives (Coles, 2006; Phillips, 2009, Smith 2012); they also acted as a distraction from the

socioeconomic neglect of racialized urban areas, and deemed the resultant turmoil in such neighbourhoods as a rebellion against Christianity, rather than an outcome of excluding colonized subjects from social life.

2.3.2 Racial Relations and the Three Pillars of White Supremacy

In settler colonial societies, race intersects in various ways with the heteropatriarchy. Understanding these intersections necessitates illuminating Smith's (2012) three theoretically interconnected pillars of white supremacy: genocide/colonialism, slavery/capitalism, and Orientalism/war. Relaying the three pillars here serves the crucial role of unpacking how white supremacy has operated and continues to operate in nation-states, in spite of late modern understandings of Canada as a post-racial society. Genocide and colonialism are the necessary basis upon which the ongoing imposition of settler colonialism can begin, entailing the total nullification of a nation's original inhabitants, granting settlers uninhibited ownership of stolen Indigenous land. This stripping of Indigeneity resulting in a blank slate by which a state can then fabricate its new identity, makes constructing narratives of settlers as "rightful inheritors" to be conceivable and transmittable, simultaneously protecting settlers from accountability to the theft, exploitation, and violence that necessarily form a settler colony.

Slavery and capitalism drive the economic systems of nation-states. The origins of African-American and African-Canadian slavery trace back to the transatlantic slave trade that deemed Black people as innately "slave-able" property (Smith, 2012). While post-racialism would posit that such an idea is outdated and archaically cruel, slavery and capitalism presently maintain collaborative strength by routinizing Black slavery in mundane institutional formats like the prison industrial complex, or what Michelle Alexander (2010) calls the new Jim Crow (Maynard, 2017; Smith 2012; Smith, 2016). The slave-ability of Black bodies, masked as the criminal justice system, is compatible with capitalism since the criminalization of Blackness is metaphorically transferable to the historicized concept of Blackness and Black bodies as property. Yet, the privatization of property is a key component of capitalism, and uncoincidentally, it is Black and other racialized bodies that fill capitalism's incumbency for people of colour to populate cheap labour roles. Capitalism's unshakable power is harnessed in its successful ideological commodification of colonized subjects as labourers, who ultimately sell themselves and their livelihood for work that they are not the beneficiaries of (Smith, 2012). Simultaneously, since Black bodies are designated as slave-able and therefore sub-human (Bashi,

2004; Howard, 2018a; Walcott, 2014b), capitalism is fueled by the inevitable racial hierarchy that infuses mythical, meritocratic hope (Duncan-Andrade, 2009) into non-Black workers whose class consciousness optimizes that, at the very least, they are not slave-able, paradoxically motivating them to continue working under capitalism by envisioning eventual emancipation (Smith, 2012). The internalized commodification of non-Black workers in capitalist states particularly appeals to non-Black immigrants, migrants, and refugees who get swept up by the notion that their work will lead to upward mobility, when in actuality, nation-states like Canada opened its immigration laws and implemented multiculturalism as a way to fulfill cheap surplus labour needs (Ahmed, 2000; Marx et al., 1969; Thobani, 2007), a history that will be expanded on in sections *2.3.4, 2.3.5,* and *2.3.6.*

Extending beyond American and Canadian borders, the pillar of Orientalism and war is the final pillar driven by the notion of the West being superior to its exotic counterparts in the "Orient" who, it is assumed, pose a war threat to the well-being of the nation-state, rather than serving as slave-able property like Black people or existing as victims of genocide like Indigenous people. The logic of Orientalism manifests in anti-immigration rhetoric and Islamophobia that justifies reasoning to go to war, or in fact, to "embody war as a nation" (Smith, 2012).

The racialized, colonized subjects exploited by white supremacy can be seen as existing like three pillars, since pillars quite literally support hierarchical structures—in this case, nation-states. These pillars exist metaphorically as distinct frameworks by which we can understand each racialized avenue of white supremacy, and each racial group impacted by white supremacist logics and their substantially distinct experiences. At the same time, each pillar nevertheless stands because the others do too. For example, enslaving Black people to develop settler colonies on stolen Indigenous land, is a dynamic that encompasses two inseparable components of the formation of the nation-state. Smith (2012) reminds us that "in this model […] we see that we are victims of white supremacy, but complicit in it as well" (p. 69). Critiques of white feminism remind us that while all women are oppressed by the patriarchy, women of colour share a brutally different version of patriarchal marginalization that is racialized (Crenshaw, 1989). Women of colour, too, cannot be grouped together as one, and since differently racialized women face different kinds of racialized oppression, when one pillar attempts to liberate itself, another pillar can easily become further oppressed as a result. White supremacist and

heteropatriarchal civilizations are intentionally designed in such a way so all marginalized peoples cannot strengthen and unify themselves; in fact, one pillar might be encouraged to better their own lives by oppressing another pillar, like all oppressed non-Indigenous peoples, particularly people of colour, working and living on Indigenous lands under capitalism (Smith, 2012). Resistance against white supremacy, therefore, must be carefully configured so as to not strengthen the functioning of one pillar over another (Hudson, 2017; Smith, 2012).

2.3.3 Bilingualism, Biculturalism, and Multiculturalism in Canada

Coming to know a nation-state's immigration, language, and cultural policies helps to further contextualize its settler colonial past and present. Canada provides a particularly interesting language politics and pseudo-multiculturalism to be unpacked. Much scholarship on immigration policy in Canada, the United States, and Britain overlooks the global anti-Blackness that widely informs Western immigration policies. Canada's restrictive immigration policies that regulated and discriminated against immigrants based on racial and ethnic origins, skills, and education began in 1818 through the specific prohibition of Black people entering the country due to their purported inability to adapt to cold climates, as well as the potential for conflict via "race riots"—placing the blame on Black people for their own unwelcomeness (Bashi, 2004, Van Dyk, 2019). From 1885 on, specific and overarching immigration policies were continually implemented and amended to serve the motives of the nation-state as it were.

In 1963, the Royal Commission of Bilingualism and Biculturalism proclaimed the British and French as the co-existing founders and official cultures of Canada, and English and French as the country's official languages. The commission was followed by Pierre Trudeau's 1971 Multiculturalism Act, which opened Canada's doors widely to immigration for the first time since 1885. Considered together, the 1963 Royal Commission of Bilingualism and Biculturalism and the 1971 Multiculturalism Act falsely cemented Canada's settler status while purporting to welcome diversity and the value that different cultures and ethnic groups bring to Canada (Thobani, 2007; Walcott, 2014a). The 1963 Royal Commission of Bilingualism and Biculturalism completely overwrote Indigeneity in Canada, contributing to the erasure of Indigenous people by equating them with other racialized groups, denying them of their original status. Such a policy contradicts the later implemented 1971 Multiculturalism Act, but because the very nature of cultural genocide is to negate an entire Indigenous population's existence and

history, this contradiction is intended to go unnoticed under the guise of late modern multiculturalism (Haque, 2012).

2.3.4 Immigrants to Canada as Surplus Labour Value

The 1971 Multiculturalism Act is rooted in several nationalistic motivations, one being the post-World War II need for surplus labour following the Great Depression. State values promoted that substantial compensatory economic growth could be achieved through a labour surplus, thus requiring additional colonized subjects to achieve this end through opening Canada's borders to immigration. Subsequently, Canada shifted its identity narrative of white colonial superiority to welcoming cultural diversity. In the name of economic benefit for those making up the "core of the nation"—that is, white settlers (Thobani, 2007), Canada adopted a new, pseudo-superior identity, relating to the nation-state's facilitation of co-existing Western and non-Western cultures. Ironically, surplus labour was nevertheless mainly being performed by marginalized immigrants and lower-income racialized subjects who did not constitute the core of the nation, revealing the economic motivations of white supremacy, masked as multiculturalism (Ahmed, 2000; Marx et al., 1969; Thobani, 2007).

2.3.5 Multiculturalism as White Supremacy's Saviour

Paradoxical to the commonly understood meaning of multiculturalism, Canada's adoption of the ideology as a national value actually strengthened British and French white supremacy. According to Thobani (2007):

> Multiculturalism was to prove critical to the rescuing of Euro/white cultural supremacy: white subjects were constituted as tolerant and respectful of difference and diversity, while non-white people were instead constructed as perpetually and irremediably monocultural, in need of being taught the virtues of tolerance and cosmopolitanism under white supervision. (p. 148)

The dynamic between racialized Others versus those who make up the core of the nation is clear in Thobani's (2007) explanation. Multiculturalism in Canada actually allowed for the nation-state to preserve whiteness as superiority through the 1963 Royal Commission of Bilingualism and Biculturalism by positioning whites of French and English heritage as Canada's founding peoples. Thobani (2007) argues that over time, contemporary neoliberal multiculturalism has allowed Canada to reconstruct its meaning of whiteness to be a more "fashionable," "politically

acceptable," and "culturally 'tolerant' cosmopolitan whiteness" (p. 148), further ingraining its acceptable and mundane presence. Canada's present neoliberal climate is expanded on in *2.4.5.*

2.3.6 Multiculturalism as a National Brand

Into the 21st century, the 1971 Multiculturalism Act evolved into Canada's brand as a uniquely inclusive mosaic—a brand that could distinguish itself globally, if only nominally, from other nation-states like the United States (Thobani, 2007). Thobani (2007) explains the intent behind this brand development:

> Statist multiculturalism has proved to be more than simply a mode of reflecting cultural difference and managing it; it has actively constituted such difference as the most significant aspect of the nation's relations with its (internal) Others. Multiculturalism has sought to constitute people of colour as politically identifiable by their cultural backgrounds […] with the core of the nation continuing to be defined as bilingual and bicultural (that is, white). (p. 145)

Thobani (2007) points to an important contradiction and characteristic of statist multiculturalism, which is the inherent distinction between the racialized "politically identifiable" Others versus those of British and French descent who supposedly make up the core of the nation. This distinction may not always be noticeable in naturalized systems of oppression; and correspondingly, the less noticeable such a distinction is, the stronger the national brand.

2.4 Theorizing How Settler Colonialism Manifests in State Schools

> One of the key functions that education performs in hierarchical societies is sorting people into their respective societal positions: owner, laborer, manager. In a settler colonial structure, though, education must also do the additional unseemly work of justifying or blurring societal structures through narratives of societal promise, constant opportunity, and self-rationalizing myths of meritocracy […] Settler colonialism, with its architecture of racist capitalism, relies on narratives that blur its purposeful inequitable violence. Unfortunately, education's capitulation to the settler narratives of progress, upward mobility, and exceptionalism have deterred it from protecting spaces for unruly, transformative learning. (Patel, 2016, pp. 399-400)

Now that Canada's broader settler colonial history has been overviewed, the following section hones in on how settler colonial education operates in Canada. After providing a brief history on the settler colonial foundations of education, I outline the sociological and educational theories informing this study—namely, social reproduction theory, intersectional theory, labelling theory and discourse-identity, critical race theory, neoliberalism, the politics of

disposability, and anti-Blackness—for their tangible application of how colonized subjects experience state schooling in Canada today.

2.4.1 Foundations of Settler Colonial Education in Canada

As reviewed in Rosiland Hampton's (2017) doctoral dissertation, the beginnings of settler colonial education in Canada started in the 17th century with the creation of colleges and universities headed by French and British missionaries, purposed to evangelize and indoctrinate Indigenous peoples into Christianity, and adapt them to European culture, with the hope that they would spread Christian European beliefs in their own Indigenous communities (Miller, 1996; Wilder, 2013). A basic Christian education was also imposed on Black and Indigenous slaves (Trudel, 2013). Schools strictly fulfilled assimilation and indoctrination motivations for colonized subjects, whereas the education of white settlers' children took place at home (Hampton, 2017; Magnuson, 1992).

By the 19th century, perceptions of Indigenous populations started to shift. They were once seen as useful military allies and played an important role in the fur trade but were now seen as a social and economic burden. Therefore reserves (Leslie, 1982; Miller, 1996) and eventually residential schools were created to contain and assimilate Indigenous populations. It was in residential schools where thousands of Indigenous children experienced physical, sexual and psychological abuse, many of whom died in these spaces of oppression and assimilation (Truth and Reconciliation Commission, 2012). Simultaneously, the Black population grew in Canada due to the Fugitive Slave Act, which resulted in former American slaves from the transatlantic slave trade landing in Canada, and by the 20th century, desires to whitewash Canada and practice segregation were heightened. White parents did not want their children educated with Black children, resulting in school segregation (Backhouse, 1999), and as a result, many Black communities opened schools in Black community centres and churches for Black children who were denied access to state education (Hamilton, 2011; McLaren, 2004). With the creation of separate schooling for Indigenous children and the denial of Black children from state education, colonial colleges and universities' purposes were to educate the sons of colonizers and serve as sites that, through their curricula, justified slavery and colonization (Hampton, 2017; Pietsch, 2013; Wilder, 2013).

2.4.2 Social Reproduction Theory

Bordieu and Passeron (1970), Althusser (1971), and Bowles and Gintis's (1976) interrelated theories on inequitable social reproduction and institutionalized symbolic violence in schools is imperative to understanding settler colonialism's systematic manifestations in education. Institutionalized symbolic violence encapsulates the routine interactions and practices of educational authorities towards students in schools that are symbolically violent for their metaphorical impacts: that is, the language, rules, norms, and ideologies that reinforce uneven power dynamics between marginalized students and school authorities, harnessing the potential to transform into physical violence, too. Today, institutionalized symbolic violence manifests as sorting and streaming, exclusionary zero-tolerance disciplinary tactics, and a narrow provision of opportunities. These routine characteristics of schooling have become so ingrained into state education that they often go unnoticed and unchallenged. The cultural capital students enter school with—knowledge, skills, or previous education—typically determines the cultural capital they leave school with. Consequently, institutionalized symbolic violence in state schools operates to effectively subdue students who enter with little cultural capital, rather than providing them with the tools and upward mobility to leave school with the benefits of transformational learning that public education is purported to offer (Patel, 2016).

2.4.3 Intersectional Theory

The varying identities of colonized subjects implicated in inequitable social reproduction calls for citing Kimberlé Crenshaw's (1989) intersectional theory, which, from a Black feminist perspective, echoes the ways in which heteropatriarchal and racist dynamics intersect, as previously touched on in 2.3. Intersectionality asserts that various identity categories do not exist and function separately, but rather, are inextricably connected. Often in state schooling, the intersection of certain oppressed identities in one context contradicts the oppression of one of those identities' experiences in another context. For example, the same abilities and behaviours that stream white students into gifted programs with special accommodations and resources, deem students of colour as having learning disabilities, being disruptive, anti-social, or requiring discipline (Advancement Project et al., 2011; Mallett, 2016). Similarly, while males of colour are more likely to receive punitive discipline than girls, this is often not the case for LGBTQ+ girls (Himmelstein & Bruckner, 2011). Intersectional theory not only highlights the diversified

experiences of marginalization; it also illuminates the arbitrary contradictions in state schooling practices.

2.4.4 Labelling Theory and Discourse-Identity

Labelling theory in education, a sub-theory of the social construction of deviance, proposes that when teachers label their students based on their abilities and potential, these labels are not only biased, but students actually internalize these labels and subsequently act in ways to reinforce them through self-fulfilling prophecies (Becker, 1963; Becker, 1991). The language teachers use to describe students in state schools is often exclusive and pathologizing, and if internalized like labelling theory suggests, can have substantial impacts on students' identity formation and conceptualizations of themselves. Since marginalized students are often socially constructed as deviant, labelling theory would posit that their identities are externally fabricated in ways that might make them internalize stereotypically alienating or disruptive behaviours, contributing to further marginalization rather than upward mobility. Paul Gee (2000) calls this discourse-identity—that is, the ways in which we come to know ourselves through what others say to us and about us. Discourse-identity exists interconnectedly with other avenues in which identity is established: identity by nature, identity as deemed by institutions, and identity as commonly shared traits or experiences between members of various affinity groups. Discourse-identity interacts significantly with institutional-identity, by which discourse-identity is something an individual can identify with, and/or it is something that can be imposed on the individual by the authority of an institution. In conjunction with labelling theory, it is evident how marginalized students might have their identities imposed on them by state schools, and adopt those identities as their own, since discourse is one avenue through which one makes sense of themselves in relation to others. Indeed, when this discourse is generated by the authority of an institution, the influence of that discourse is going to be significant to how the individual comes to understand themselves as a social being. Since schools are not as contextually specific as other institutions, and exist as spaces catered to learning, self-development, and preparing individuals to live in broader society, how one sees themselves in school could largely impact how they see themselves, as a whole, outside of the education sector.

2.4.5 Critical Race Theory's Take on Neoliberal Education: The Politics of Disposability and Anti-Blackness

Critical race theory contends that schooling is a mediator through which white supremacy is maintained (Gillborn, 2013). Canada's settler colonial constitution adapted in the 1980s to the Reagan, Thatcher, and Mulroney era that marked the point at which neoliberal free market values like individualism and meritocracy began to be woven into state education by corporate forces (Fine & Ruglis, 2009; Means, 2008; Ryan, 2012). Neoliberalism has maintained and justified the nation-state's racist, heteropatriarchal structures through promoting laissez-faire ideologies of individual freedom and autonomy (Orlowski, 2012). According to Rinaldo Walcott and Idil Abdillahi (2019) in *BlackLife: Post-BLM and the Struggle for Freedom,* "central to this new dynamic is what we call the cultural arm of neoliberalism, in which moral regulation, guilt, and self-blame come to constitute the rationale for the wasted populations with those populations blaming themselves for the injustice done to them" (p. 40). Walcott and Abdillahi (2019) write for the context of Black people's lived experiences, but nevertheless, the "cultural arm of neoliberalism" has more broadly impacted other marginalized students too, by naturalizing social and economic inequities to explain away uneven student success rates, diverting attention from the systemic and structural forces that intentionally disadvantage colonized subjects outside of state schooling. Their oppression is only exacerbated therein, through zero-tolerance disciplinary protocols, and exclusive pedagogical and curricular practices, while simultaneously holding colonized subjects accountable for their circumstances and deeming upward mobility as something that is up to them to achieve on their own (Apple, 1996; Fine & Ruglis, 2009; Means, 2008; Giroux, 2006; Ryan, 2012).

When colonized subjects are falsely juxtaposed with their more privileged counterparts as unable to perform in the free market at the same capacity, what naturally results in neoliberal climates is a politics of disposability, encompassing how poor and working class, racialized (Giroux, 2006), and disabled communities in particular (Campbell, 2008; Schilling, 1993), are rendered as unable to contribute anything tangibly valuable to the free market (Fine & Ruglis, 2009; Ryan, 2012). The disposability of marginalized students is especially noteworthy for its assault on Black students in state schools. Anti-Blackness pervades in education in the following ways: being Black is incompatible with being human (Dumas, 2018); being Black is incompatible with childhood, resulting in the adultification of Black youth in state schools

(Dumas & Nelson, 2016; Nelson, 2016; Howard & James, 2019; Maynard, 2017); and, Black lives are rendered as deviant, burdensome, and disposable. Considerable research on Black students' experiences in Ontario's state schools has shown how anti-Blackness causes Black students to be subjected to significantly harsher exclusionary discipline compared to white, and even non-Black racialized students. These protocols, seen as necessary to control and contain the inherent perversity assigned to Black students, ostracizes them from state education, due to the mere fact that their existence is understood within mainstream colonial narratives as threatening to the learning environment for other (non-Black, but especially white) students, who are constructed as desirable to educate and deserving of an education (Dumas, 2016; Dumas, 2018; Howard & James, 2019; Patel, 2016).

2.4.6 Canada in Denial

Presumably with the goal of maintaining its popular liberal reputation as a multicultural, inclusive mosaic (Howard, 2018b; Thobani, 2007; Veracini, 2015), Canada's provinces have sparingly, if at all, collected statistics that draw correlations between race and student educational outcomes, particularly not in a quantitative, systematic way that would necessarily provide an overarching representation of how colonized and racialized subjects are disproportionately oppressed through and by state schooling (Hudson, 2017; Ontario Human Rights Commission, 2003). Since 2011, however, Ontario's TDSB has in fact collected and released statistics on suspensions and expulsions on the bases of gender, grade, and special education needs (Zheng, 2019). Only in 2017 were statistics collected on the correlation between race and suspensions and expulsions, revealing Black students as making up almost half of the expulsions in that year (James & Turner, 2017; Toronto District School Board, 2017). Consistently, racialized students have made up almost 80% of suspensions and expulsions in the TDSB, with white students only making up 22.15% of suspensions and expulsions, on average, between 2016 and 2018. With respect to family income, which inevitably overlaps with race and gender, students from poor and working class families make up the largest percentage of suspensions and expulsions, whereas students from the highest income families make up the lowest percentage. Since 2011, more than half of the students suspended and expelled in the TDSB have had special education needs, as well as formal and informal Independent Education Plans (IEPs) (James & Turner, 2017; Zheng, 2019). Notably, studies in the United States have found that especially with respect to race, marginalized students who are most substantially

impacted by zero-tolerance, exclusionary disciplinary protocols do not misbehave more than other students; rather, they are disproportionately targeted and flagged for misbehaving (Carter et al., 2014; James & Turner, 2017; Kim et al., 2010; Kupchik, 2010; Mendez & Knoff, 2003; Nolan, 2011; Rocque, 2010; Toronto District School Board, 2017). Here, the lived reality of labelling theory and the composition of a discourse-identity as experienced by marginalized, racialized students become fathomable, when the unreasonably excessive surveillance of colonized subjects in state schooling is reviewed (Becker, 1963; Becker, 1991).

Before hard statistics on marginalized students most impacted by suspensions and expulsions in Ontario's schools were released, the Ontario Human Rights Commission (2003) released a report in 2003 on students' perceptions of school disciplinary practices impacting Black, South Asian, Asian, white, and "other" (Aboriginal, Hispanic, and mixed-race) students in Toronto's schools, showing the awareness that racialized students, administrators, lawyers, community workers, parents, and academics have of their (now confirmed) discrimination in schools. These perceptions constituted the only information available about racialized students' experiences in the TDSB's schools until 2017, when the Board finally collected statistics on correlations between race and suspensions and expulsions, showing that students in the Board were well-aware of racially-driven discriminatory practices already happening, long before the TDSB officially addressed them. The results found that racial minorities, particularly Black students, are much more likely than white students to perceive alleged discrimination regarding how teachers treat said students, suspension practices surrounding these students, and the integration of and practices by police in schools. Further dialogue with other relevant members of the community affirmed the widespread belief that the Safe Schools Act and its "zero-tolerance" agenda has had a disproportionate impact on Black students. For example, a course director in an Ontario university's education faculty stated:

> I think anybody who looks at the issue honestly would have to acknowledge the disproportionate impact [on Black students]. A lot of people really believe that they don't look at race. It is the same reason that they don't collect statistics. It maintains the façade that everyone is treated the same, so there can't possibly be a discriminatory outcome. I can't say whether most people in the [school] system know about the disproportionate impact, but I think anyone who looks at it honestly would know it, and I think that there

> are lots of people who know it but would never say it. (Ontario Human Rights Commission, 2003).

With respect to disability, an expert on marginalized disabled youth in Ontario schools brought to attention how disabled youth are actually at risk of exercising stereotypical "behavioural problems" and "anti-social" behaviour, having caused them to historically collide with the Safe Schools Act more than non-disabled youth, showing how this policy's variables are unevenly applied to the students subjected to it. Race and disability intersect here as well, since racialized students, especially Black students, are more likely than white and other non-Black students to be deemed as having disabilities and/or behavioural issues, so that racialized and disabled youth experience segregated streams of formal schooling (Ontario Human Rights Commission, 2003).

Where such statistics are not available in Canada, the following American statistics on marginalized students impacted by suspensions and expulsions are offered for the purpose of further showing the broad relational trends within state education for marginalized students in Western nation-states, as well as how their marginalization is socially reproduced in state schools. These statistics show that children in poverty are more likely to become homeless, and that if a child is homeless, they are twice as likely as middle class students to be academically held back, subjected to punitive discipline in school, suspended, or expelled, particularly if they are a poor male of colour (Children's Defense Fund, 2014; McCarthy & Hoge, 1987; McNulty-Eitle & Eitle, 2004; National Low Income Housing Coalition, 2013). The U.S. Department of Education (2014) reports that the likelihood of an African-American student, particularly a male, getting suspended or expelled is 3.5 times more than that of white students, much as is the case for Black students in Toronto. Racialized youth are disproportionately poor, making the likelihood of a lower-income, racialized student being suspended or expelled extremely high (Children's Defense Fund, 2014; National Low Income Housing Coalition, 2013). Traumatic experiences like abuse or neglect affect students' abilities to learn, while increasing their chances of having special educational needs or disabilities. Students with learning disabilities and emotional disturbances are particularly at risk of subjection to punitive disciplinary practices and being ostracized from school altogether. Intersecting once again with race, racialized students are much more likely to be labelled with learning disabilities than white students (Advancement Project et al., 2011; Mallett, 2016). LGBTQ+ students are also at higher risk than heterosexual students are of being impacted by exclusionary zero-tolerance policies. One quantitative study in

the United States found LGBTQ+ students, particularly girls, are at 30-150% greater risk of expulsion, arrest, and conviction (Himmelstein & Bruckner, 2011). State schools can be hostile, homophobic environments for LGBTQ+ youth, requiring LGBTQ+ students to necessarily adopt defense mechanisms that, in turn, contribute to their chances of experiencing punitive discipline due to what would be deemed as behavioural issues (Kosciw et al., 2013; Savage & Schanding, 2013). Similarly, another quantitative study, this time in Canada, found that 64.2% of LGBTQ+ students feel unsafe in their schools, and that 30.2% of these students skip school because of this, compared to only 15.2% of non-LGBTQ+ students. This rate was highest for transgender students, where 43.5% report skipping school because they feel unsafe (Taylor & Peter, 2011).

A study of an anti-homophobia policy conducted in the TDSB, paralleled with the Board's official Equity Policy, found that educators in the TDSB experience difficulty navigating the resistance they face from religious and secular homophobia, as a response to implementing anti-homophobia education. Such findings suggest that teachers who want to practice anti-oppression work to challenge these statistics in their own classrooms are faced with systematic resistance, indicating a need for further research to be conducted more broadly on fostering teachers' attempts to do LGBTQ+ equity work in state schools (Goldstein et al., 2007).

2.4.7 Pseudo-Policy Reform

After the death of Jordan Manners, a young teen shot in his Toronto school in 2008, more than 130 recommendations were put forward to rectify the culture of fear and violence pervading TDSB schools. While the event of Manners' death served as the final catalyst for policy reform, these recommendations cannot, of course, be separated from the fact that marginalized youth are disproportionately subjected to institutional violence, escalated in state schooling by safe school policies, exclusive curricula, biased pedagogical approaches to guidance counselling and teaching, and more broadly, the ways in which state schools perpetuate the criminalization of marginalized students (McMurtry & Curling, 2008). In 2008, the Ministry of Education agreed to eliminate zero-tolerance, exclusionary discipline protocols and adopt Bill 212 to revise the Safe Schools Act, which has ultimately decreased suspensions and expulsions. As of the 2012/13 academic year, 7,796 students were suspended. However, in the same year of 2008 when Jordan Manners was killed, the School Resource Officer (SRO) program was implemented, placing 29 uniformed police officers into Toronto schools. This program faced resistance from students, parents, and community members, despite its alleged success according to the TDSB, which led

to the Board placing officers in 14 additional schools that same year (Planning and Priorities Committee, 2017). While crimes and suspension rates reportedly decreased, Fisher and Hennessy (2016) point to the problems with implementing such programs in urban contexts, as well as how marginalized students, particularly Black students, might react to the presence of officers in their schools, given the disproportionate impact of police brutality and mass incarceration on Black people in Canada and the United States (Alexander, 2010; Maynard, 2017). One of the groups lobbying against the SRO program emerged from a community of students and teachers named the Newly Organized Committee on Police in Schools who, in their open letter explained that:

> [T]hose students who report enjoying the presence of SRO's are those students who are already engaged with their school community. There's no information which suggests that this program provides any benefits to those students who are already on the margins, and there is much anecdotal data to suggest that those students already on the margins are further alienated by this program. (Newly Organized Committee on Police in Public Schools, 2011)

While the suspensions and expulsions in the TDSB decreased, the in-school disciplinary practices and institutional trauma that officers symbolize and reinforce for marginalized students remained pertinently troublesome. It was not until 2017 that the SRO program was finally suspended, due to a substantial number of students reporting feeling intimidated, targeted, and uncomfortable in the presence of uniformed officers at school (Planning and Priorities Committee, 2017). The TDSB's adoption and abolition of certain policies that have disproportionately negatively impacted marginalized students shows that the Board's initial impulses are colonial and neoliberal and are only removed when challenged by communities affected.

2.5 Resistance in Practice

I have addressed Canada's settler colonial context and its resulting implications for colonized subjects in state schools both historically and in the present. It is finally necessary and appropriate to imagine what effective resistance in a nation-state's neoliberal system of state education might look like. Accordingly, I offer anti-colonial theory and critical hope as additional analytic frameworks through which the practices, potential, and faults in alternative schools for marginalized students in Toronto can be examined.

2.5.1 Anti-Colonialism as an Analytic Framework

> Minority students are […] struggling to find a place within schools that allows their histories and experiences to be part of the curriculum and culture of the school. Student resistance is therefore not a general rejection of education and learning, as it is often perceived. Rather, it is often a rejection of the status quo in education that privileges certain voices and discourses while silencing and marginalizing others. (Dei et al., 2000, p. 172)

Anti-colonialism in Canada is contextualized within, and by, Canada's colonial relations of power, intended to resist the dominant, oppressive structures that are imbedded in the nation-state's "ideas, cultures, and histories of knowledge production, validation, and use" (Dei, 2006; Dei & Asgharzadeh, 2001, p. 300). George Dei, Toronto-based anti-racist and educator and researcher specializing in anti-racist and anti-colonial education, employs anti-colonial theory as an epistemology by which we can envision how to foster and advance the interests of colonized subjects and overturn power dynamics in a state education system. In their paper entitled "The Power of Social Theory: The Anti-Colonial Discursive Framework" Dei and Asgharzadeh (2001) designate that:

> The anti-colonial framework compels one not to ignore the interdependence and interrelatedness of sites like race, gender, class, sexuality, age, (dis)ability, and all other categories that serve as potential areas for oppression. Along with casting our gaze on race and racialization processes, the anti-colonial approach encourages us to interrogate the interlocking nature of systems of power and domination, of how dominance is reproduced and maintained, and how the disempowered are subjugated and kept under constant control. (p. 317)

Anti-colonialism is a grassroots epistemology that centres the knowledges and experiences of the oppressed to resist colonial relations by rejecting, challenging, organizing against, and demanding accountability of settlers (Dei, 2006; Kempf, 2009), while providing a common and shared space of struggle where marginalized peoples can "come to voice" (Dei & Asgharzadeh, 2001, p. 317). This epistemology values Indigenous knowledges in particular, and grounds itself in the "indigenous sense of collective and common colonial consciousness" (Dei & Asgharzadeh, 2001, p. 300). Anti-colonialism, as opposed to postcolonialism, situates itself in the resistance of what *is* a colonized nation-state, rather than what *was* a colonized nation-state, making it a fitting theoretical antidote to settler colonialism (Simmons & Dei, 2012), which, as I

have presented, is an ongoing and current process rather than a past event. Anti-colonialism radically opposes what Simmons and Dei (2012) deem the "mainstream privileging and intellectual affection" for the popularized postcolonial theory. Simmons and Dei (2012) postulate that the post has historically been more palatable than the anti because:

> The "post" conveniently implicates all, while the "anti" identifies the "bad guy" and carries with it a radical critique of the dominant, as the colonial oppressor whose antics and oppressive practices continue to script the lives of the subordinate and colonized even as [they] resist such dominance. Not many want to hear this raving of the anti-colonial. But the anti-colonial gives us a position that is implicating and revolutionary in its thinking. (p. 68)

Anti-colonialism sees the power to resist as not only belonging to the colonized, marginalized subjects, but also the colonizers, in recognizing that those with privilege and power also have the autonomy and ability to challenge the dominant means with which they benefit from (Dei & Asgharzadeh, 2001). Theoretically, anti-colonialism evokes productive discomfort by illuminating the settler colonial present. Practically, anti-colonialism grounds this reality in an actionable cause calling for resistance. Anti-colonialism is a suitable framework to analyze alternative schools from, due to their potential to act as sites of resistance against the state education system. Centring the voices of the oppressed while also including colonizers in the narrative additionally supports my research methods of interviewing marginalized students and teachers in alternative schools, which will be discussed in Chapter 4.

2.5.2 Critical Hope as an Analytic Framework

In conjunction with anti-colonialism is critical hope, a concept coined by Jeff Duncan-Andrade (2009), a scholar who researches the education of poor and racialized youth in the United States. Duncan-Andrade's (2009) definition of critical hope is grounded in its divergence from three other forms of hope that are frequently exhausted in political, social, and economic discourses: hokey hope, mythical hope, and hope deferred. Hokey hope is equated to what Martin Luther King Jr. called "the tranquilizing drug of gradualism" (p. 182)—that is, the individualistic, meritocratic narratives reinforced in urban schools that proclaim if marginalized students just work hard and behave, they will gain upward mobility (Fine & Ruglis, 2009; Means, 2008; Orlowski, 2012; Ryan, 2012; Walcott & Abdillahi, 2019), while neglecting to recognize systemic and structural inequities that largely and painfully inform the livelihoods of

poor youth of colour. Mythical hope is when an unlikely or unprecedented event symbolizing progression towards equity gives the masses the impression that uneven power dynamics have been neutralized. Obama's American presidential election is the most noticeable example of mythical hope, shown in the countless false narratives about a post-racial society and the attainability of the American dream that ensued as a result. Hope deferred is still a critical recognition of inequity, but it apathetically deems "the system" that creates inequity as impenetrable and not worth putting up a fight against. Teachers who defer hope, therefore, do not attempt to enact any transgressive pedagogy, but rather, exert hope in hope's most unrealistic forms: a utopic, equal society, or the designation that marginalized students will somehow work their way up into the middle class.

Critical hope consists of three principles: the material, the Socratic, and the audacious, and is based on Tupac Shakur's metaphor of "roses that grow from concrete"—that is, "young people who emerge in defiance of socially toxic environments" (p. 186). Educators can employ material hope by acknowledging that there are always cracks in the concrete, such as how their own teaching can harness transformational power, as well as using resources and networks available to help marginalized students. Socratic hope is the acknowledgement of and shared immersion in the pain caused by inequity, and in turn, the recognition of pain as a potential means through which justice can be sought. Audacious hope is practicing resilience in spite of the daunting inequity that grossly privileges certain groups so as to dominate and subdue others, creating what James Garbarino (1995) calls a socially toxic environment. Audacious hope stands in solidarity with marginalized communities and their suffering, and "defies the dominant ideology of defense, entitlement, and preservation of privileged bodies at the expense of the policing, disposal, and dispossession of marginalized 'others'" (p. 190). If teachers adopt the pain of marginalized students as their own pain, they are rejecting the individualism and fallacy of upward mobility that plague hokey, mythical, and deferred hope, by not putting the onus solely on students to change their life trajectories.

Harnessing a similar grassroots philosophy of resistance to anti-colonialism, critical hope centres and collaborates with marginalized students to identify their educational needs and aspirations, and produce novel circumstances by which they can re-engage in school. Critical hope recognizes the arduousness that defines equity work in education, while necessitating a pedagogy and methodology of resilience that can produce positive outcomes for marginalized

youth in socially toxic environments (Duncan-Andrade, 2009; Garbarino, 1995). Like anti-colonialism, critical hope is both a theoretical and practical measure through which alternative school practices and discourses fittingly can, and will, be analyzed in this thesis.

CHAPTER 3
WHAT ARE ALTERNATIVE SCHOOLS?

3.1 How Well-Researched are Alternative Schools Today?

With the exception of some noteworthy empirical literature (Berg, 2017; Etherington, 2013; Howard & James, 2019; James & Turner, 2017; James & Samaroo, 2017; James et al., 2015; Nelson, 2016; Solomon, 2017), research on alternative schools in Canada, particularly ones that cater to marginalized students, has been sparse. As a result, much of the research on alternative schools synthesized in this literature review is American and British, providing applicable points of reference on alternative schooling in other nation-states. Nevertheless, in 2017, Toronto alternative school educators and administrators collaborated to publish *Alternative Schooling and Student Engagement: Canadian Stories of Democracy within Bureaucracy,* which provides a timely overview of alternative schools in the city of Toronto. Since Toronto houses the largest district of alternative schools in the world, this book is a crucial contribution, though there remains a lack of research on alternative schools in the rest of Ontario and Canada. Moreover, while the aforementioned book is dedicated entirely to Toronto's alternative schools, it certainly does not discuss all of Toronto's alternative schools, showing how much is still unknown about alternative schooling in Toronto alone.

American and British alternative school literature overviews a wide variety of alternative schools and the purposes they endeavour to fulfill. *Alternative Schooling and Student Engagement: Canadian Stories of Democracy within Bureaucracy* (2017) illuminates the Toronto context, effectively describing the types of students served and the actions taken by Toronto's alternative schools. Further, the general literature on alternative schools tends to take a more quantitative approach, whereas this book analyzes Toronto's alternative schools more qualitatively. Because this book does not use the same quantitative method of categorizing alternative schools that American and British literature has, the book's investigation of Toronto's alternative schools is not so much about defining them per se, as it is about synthesizing and identifying contiguity in their epistemologies, motives, successes, and failures.

3.2 Tightly and Loosely Coupled Systems: Defining an Alternative School in a State Education System

3.2.1 Mainstream Schools as Tightly Coupled to the State Education System

Alternative public schools typically exist within a state school board district that also houses mainstream public schools, meaning that public alternative schools in nation-states are still state schools operating within a settler colonial, neoliberal system of education. Since they are supposed to operate alternatively, however, how both types of schools co-exist and run different programs within the same system has been a marked topic of debate. American alternative education researchers have employed the theory of tight and loose coupling to conceptualize the ways in which alternative and mainstream schools distinctly coincide (Bascia & Maton, 2016; Meyer & Rowan, 1977; Miles & Darling-Hammond, 1998; Siskin, 1994; Weick, 1976). Mainstream schools are tightly coupled with state education systems, whereas alternative schools are more loosely coupled to the rules and norms of state education systems. Tight coupling entails a rigid structure to be followed, whereas loose coupling translates to more flexible and malleable operations. Mainstream schools, which are tightly coupled to ministries and departments of education, increase their perceived legitimacy through reinforced rules and norms that are also known as the "grammar of schooling" (Tyack & Cuban, 1995). That is, they sort students by age and perceived academic ability, divide curricula into subjects and grades, prioritize independent work over collaboration, lack variety in classroom instruction and activities, maintain hierarchical teacher-student relationships, and are often devoid of intellectual stimulation—all normalized characteristics of "real school" (Goodlad, 1984; Te Riele, 2009; Tyack & Cuban, 1995). These characteristics reinforce neoliberal notions of meritocracy, individualism, and responsibility that students are expected to adopt as sole determinants of their own perceived successes and failures. The standardization and close bureaucratic supervision that overarch tightly coupled systems are representative of settler colonialism's tendency to design systems that engage and accommodate the dominant group, and as a result, neglect and ostracize the non-dominant, colonized subjects (Bascia & Maton, 2017; Dei et al., 2000; Meyer & Rowan, 1977).

3.2.2 Alternative Schools as Loosely Coupled to the State Education System

Alternative schools are, theoretically, loosely coupled to ministries and departments of education, meaning that they have more leeway and flexibility to operate in ways that might

better serve their student populations. Alternative schools are typically much smaller than mainstream schools, which contributes to their ability to flexibly operate, and allows for closer interpersonal relations between students and teachers. Loosely coupled schools aim to decrease the stress that surrounds the often overwhelming workloads that alienate marginalized students in particular, by allowing for more independent work plans, malleable and adaptable assignments, home or independent study, co-op/work experience/apprenticeships, and curricular innovation. These teaching and learning methods are not absent in mainstream contexts, but loose coupling potentially grants more freedom for such methods to be utilized more widely in alternative settings (Bascia & Fine, 2012; Bascia & Maton, 2017; National Schools Public Relations Association, 1977; Raywid, 1994; Smith et al., 1976; Weick, 1976).

3.2.3 Alternative Schools as Loosely Coupled but Constrained

Although alternative schools are loosely coupled to the state education system, the exclusive neoliberal agenda that drives and informs state schooling is pervasive and ideologically dominant, making it difficult for alternative schools to reach their potential to serve marginalized students in particular, due to pressures for them to become more standardized (Levin, 2017). Such pervasiveness and dominance are reflective of the broader settler colonial structures that have been ingrained in Canada's state schools historically and presently, rendering their imprint and impact as more powerful than the force of any one school. Moreover, alternative schools are usually met with more hesitation from boards and ministries of education than mainstream schools because they are perceived to be more burdensome and costly due to the customized programming and accommodations they provide. In the United States and Britain during the 1960s and 70s, alternative schools were solely supported through donations and grants, not public funding (National School Public Relations Association, 1977). Despite their perceived costliness and need for customized programming, alternative schools are typically underfunded in comparison to mainstream schools, as is the case with the TDSB (Toronto District School Board, 2014b), showing that alternative schools are undervalued and undermined despite their perceived need for additional supports.

3.3 Types of Alternative Schools and Why They Exist

Alternative schooling has extended into to many avenues of education since its initial introduction in the 1960s and 70s with the expansion of mass public education. John Fritz, a

Canadian educator who studies Canadian and American alternative schools, claims that the four purposes of alternative schools are: 1. To provide a last chance at continuing secondary education for students who dropout of or "disrupt" mainstream schools. 2. To intake students who are not satisfied with their mainstream education for various reasons; used as a temporary "retreat" under the expectation that students will return to mainstream school. The concept of school as a retreat starkly contrasts with the concept of school as a last chance, likely rendering these schools as elitist. 3. To serve as experimental spaces that test and evaluate different prototypes of schooling structures and procedures that, if successful, could be used in the mainstream system. 4. To act as developmental ad hoc programs that adapt to and align with students' needs at the time they emerge, which actually embraces the flexibility and loose coupling that alternative schools are supposed to have by definition (Fritz, 1975). The terms employed to describe alternative schools are often used interchangeably and vary depending on the context they are being discussed in, which makes the process of defining alternative education a perplexing and open-ended phenomenon. According to Glines (1972) and Smith et al. (1976), the following types of alternative schools are what are widely documented as historically and currently existing:

i) free schools—few constraints and teachers, students are free to plan and implement their own learning experiences;
ii) open schools—unstructured, group learning, not divided by grades, physically open space;
iii) continuation schools—for students with life situations that have resulted in decreased attendance/dropout;
iv) storefront schools/street academies—located where they are accessible to dropout/suspended/expelled students who need another school to go to;
v) identity-based schools—organized around a particular student identity that is traditionally ostracized in mainstream schools and requires more support;
vi) schools without walls—emphasis on community rather than classroom learning;
vii) fundamental schools—"back to the basics" mandates such as 3 Rs;
viii) environmental schools—teach and embody environmental activism and environmentally-conscious lifestyles;

ix) multicultural schools—houses students of various racial and ethnic backgrounds, prioritizes cultural pluralism and bilingualism in curricula;

x) educational parks—many different learning centres within that range from kindergarten to continuing education;

xi) year round alternative schools—run for 12 months per year with several semesters and enrollment periods;

xii) and elitist alternative schools—which are privatized versions of any of the aforementioned schools.

Generally speaking, Toronto's alternative schools, and the schools in this study, would fall in the category of year round, continuation, and storefront schools, since these schools cater to circumstances that align most with marginalized students (Bascia & Maton, 2017). Toronto also has identity-based alternative schools, such as the Africentric Alternative School, the Triangle Program for LGBTQ+ students, and Wandering Spirit Survival School for Indigenous students (Berg, 2017; Toronto District School Board, 2019a; Toronto District School Board, 2019b; Triangle Program, 2019). Studies of the Africentric Alternative School and Triangle program found that both initiatives thrive on the freedom of being able to practice Africentric, queer, and Indigenous-focused pedagogy and curricula to effectively engage Black and LGBTQ+ youth who have historically been marginalized in state schooling, but nonetheless struggle to practice these epistemologies in their full form given the constraints of provincial standards delegated by the Ministry of Education (Berg, 2017; Howard & James, 2019; Solomon, 2017).

Other categorizations, such as Mary Anne Raywid's (1994), identify three different categories of alternative schools. Raywid's categories have prevailed as the most widely referenced system for categorizing alternative schools. Known for their advanced innovations, Type 1 schools, or "Popular Innovations" are choice-based schools where students and parents remove themselves from the mainstream system in search of different programming or instructional techniques. Raywid (1994) refers to these schools as:

> [O]rganizational and administrative departures from the traditional, as well as programmatic innovations" [that] "sometimes resemble magnet schools and in some locales constitute some or all of the options in choice systems […] likely to reflect programmatic themes or emphases pertaining to content or instructional strategy, or both. (p. 27)

Type 1 schools foster the personal growth and development of allegedly "gifted" or "advanced" students with mandates such as meeting the needs of students who require more individualized, exploratory, or autonomous learning in flexible classroom structures with adapted curricula. Students are typically on a first name basis with teachers and granted the liberty to roam freely around the school without permission (Hymes & Bullock, 1975). Some scholars would consider these choice schools as "elitist," "exclusive," or "all-white" (often rural/suburban) free schools for middle-to-upper class children (Rodrigues, 2017). Jonathon Kozol (1972) believes these schools are "a great deal too much like a sandbox for the children of the SS Guards at Auschwitz" (p. 11). Subsequently, these would be spaces that reproduce settler colonial, neoliberal relations as they manifest in state schooling. As overviewed in Chapter 2, students deemed gifted or advanced are usually white and middle class, whereas poor/working class and racialized students in particular not only have their abilities undermined, but if they exercise the same behaviours that their "gifted" white, middle class counterparts do, they are more likely to be penalized for those same behaviours (Carter et al., 2014; Gee, 2000; James & Turner, 2017; Kim et al., 2010; Kupchik, 2010; Mendez & Knoff, 2003; Nolan, 2011; Rocque, 2010; Toronto District School Board, 2017). Beyond the moral issues of such schools, Kozol (1972) also argues that if marginalized youth make their way into gifted programs, they often do not benefit from or relate to the imposition of elitist cultural traits that these programs host.

Type 2 schools or "Last Chance Programs" are neither a choice nor an option; rather, students are sentenced to them for one final attempt at completing school before being expelled. Type 2 schools have been compared to "soft jails" for their inclusion of in-school suspension programs, cool-out programs, and long-term placements for "disruptive" individuals. Zero-tolerance, exclusionary discipline protocols that disproportionately target marginalized students in state schools feed those same students into alternative disciplinary settings like Type 2 schools as a solution. Disciplinary schools like these more brutally practice punitive protocols that further dehumanize and displace marginalized students rather than provide them with a "last chance." A study of Type 2 schools conducted in Florida during the 1979-1980 school year showed that Type 2 schools did nothing to solve the problems that brought students to them in the first place, having made approximately 58,000 assignments to in-school suspension programs. Further analyses showed that in-school suspension programs made no difference in dropout or referral rates, corporal punishment, suspension, or expulsion, revealing that the

supposed purposes of Type 2 schools were not fulfilled at all (Office of Planning and Budgeting, 1981; Raywid, 1994). An additional American study of one urban alternative middle school for expelled students sought to investigate if the school acted as a safe rehabilitative space, or if it further pushed marginalized students through the school-to-prison pipeline (Kennedy-Lewis, 2015). The study found two distinct types of teachers at the school. One set of teachers, who were mostly male, were disciplinarian and militant and saw their students as bodies to be managed and controlled, whereas the other set of teachers, guidance counsellors, and social workers who were mostly female, believed in personally accommodating students and assisting them with their socioemotional development. The disciplinary and militant philosophy of the male teachers tended to dominate the dynamics at this school, and this culture reinforced exclusionary, zero-tolerance policies that initially got students expelled (Kennedy-Lewis, 2015).

Type 3 schools, or "Remedial Focus" programs are for students who need academic, social, or emotional rehabilitation. These schools are temporary rehabilitation centres where students are meant to return to the mainstream system thereafter. Type 3 schools are the most expensive to operate due to their need for very low student-teacher ratios (Raywid, 1982).

Raywid (1982) reports Type 1 schools as being the most effective and successful, but notably, they are designed for the most privileged students (Hymes & Bullock, 1975; Rodrigues, 2017). They are less costly than Type 3 programs because student-teacher ratios are similar to mainstream schools, and supposedly, the successes are more noticeable and long-term, as they often do not exist to address underachievement in the first place. According to Raywid (1982), students who were never interested in school or were unsuccessful are most likely to transform their attitudes, behaviours, and accomplishments in Type 1 schools.

3.4 The Spectrum of Alternative Schools: From Exclusivity to Equity

Despite the fact that Raywid's (1982) three types of alternative schools have been widely referenced by alternative education scholars, I contend that alternative schooling is more nuanced and expansive than the categories Raywid (1982) provides. Given that Type 1 schools are choice-based, it is necessary to question *who* gets to make choices when it comes to schooling, and *what* those choices are based on. Kozol (1972) argues that some people's anti-system, anti-skill, and anti-credentials attitudes (which are often characteristic of Type 1 school supporters) are certainly not rooted in a deep need for radical reform or activism because these

students possess a sense of intellectual and financial security in their life, despite some, if any, precarity they may have experienced. On the other hand, the parents of poor children recognize:

> (a) that their own children do not have protection of this kind, (b) that, without a certain degree of skillful and aggressive adaptation to the real conditions of the system they are fighting, they will simply not survive, [and] (c) that much of the substance of the white-oriented counter culture is not of real assistance in that struggle and in that adaptation. (Kozol, 1972, p. 38).

Kozol highlights the pertinence of identity politics in recognizing who goes to alternative schools and for what reasons. In the case of Canada, this would require addressing how both privileged and marginalized identities are formed in a nation-state's settler colonial, neoliberal climate. Another study done at an alternative school for working class students in Ontario's Niagara region (Etherington, 2013) revealed how the motives and dynamics at that alternative school were much more complex than Raywid's (1982) simplification. Despite the fact that the school is supposed to be an alternative space geared towards working class youth, it actually reinforced individualistic, middle class values and emphasized the importance of obtaining higher education, which, Etherington (2013) purported, could degrade rather than uplift the identities of working class students. The school is seemingly caught between competing interests of wanting to "do better" while nonetheless claiming to foster an environment more conducive to working class students, highlighting how alternative schools can easily get swept up in their own imposed ideas of what marginalized students need, rather than actually serving their needs, which can be vastly different from what they are seen as needing. Encouraging higher education as a path of upward mobility for all students is falling into the liberal trap of deeming state education as an equalizer that, if pursued rigorously by any individual, will lead to dominant, colonial notions of a successful future (Patel, 2016). This myth ignores the inequities in education systems, placing responsibility for failure on the individual, which exacerbates the alienation marginalized students already experience (Etherington, 2013).

Due to the stigma that surrounds alternative schools for marginalized students, they are usually not a first choice for students, but rather a referral or "last resort." Thus, the definition of Type 1 schools does not pertain to the schools central to this study. Additionally, since Type 1 schools are the most effective according to Raywid (1982), I ask Raywid: what does "success" look like and how does it change across educational contexts? What kinds of students are

"successful?" While Type 2 schools seem to only accelerate the zero-tolerance, exclusionary discipline that places students in them to begin with, Type 3 schools, and their socioemotional rehabilitation tactics seem to pertain most to Toronto's alternative schools, although, this definition does not at all wholly capture them.

3.5 Historical Overview of Alternative Schools

Alternative education programs have existed in Canada and the United States for almost as long as mass public education has existed (Semel & Sadovnik, 2008). For example, it has always been common for mainstream schools to house internal programs like special education and vocational training for students who do not succeed with standardized curricula and pedagogy (Miles & Darling-Hammond, 1998). While these programs might be different from other classes in mainstream schools, they nonetheless exist within a mainstream school and are inevitably affected by its dominant rules and norms (Meyer & Rowan, 1977). More crucially, these programs operate under a deficit paradigm, despite how well-intentioned those who create and work within them might be. Alternative schools created under the same hegemonic force are inherently problematic in the same ways, although, more specific kinds of alternative schools were developed in addition to these programs in mainstream schools, to cater to the more diversified needs of students while taking pressure off mainstream schools to do so (Darling-Hammond et al., 2002).

Toronto and the Greater Toronto Area could be considered trailblazers in housing alternative schools, beginning with a small group of alternative schools formed in downtown Toronto, North York, Etobicoke, and Scarborough, the first of which was SEED, in 1968. Still running, it is the oldest alternative school in Toronto (Kozol, 1972; Levin, 2017; Rothstein, 2017). Not out of the ordinary, alternative schools in Toronto have white, middle class roots (James & Samaroo, 2017; Rodrigues, 2017), as can be deduced from the Ontario Ministry of Education's Hall-Dennis report, *Living and Learning,* a publication that referenced historically progressive educational philosophies that inspired a group of more privileged parents, students, and teachers in the 1970s to lobby for the creation of alternative schools. In rejecting state education practices, they advocated for more critical thinking and equitable child-centred learning that made students active participants in their own education (Azzarello, 2017). Eligibility, and in turn, success, at these schools required academic motivation independent work

skills (Levin, 2017), but because these alternative schools were started by white, middle class lobbyists, they were not designed with marginalized students in mind (Azzarello, 2017; James & Samaroo, 2017; O'Rouke, 2017; Shuttleworth, 2017; Smaller & Wells, 2017). Many students who needed alternative schools at the time did not have academic motivation or independent work skills, so three more alternative schools opened in 1973 to serve these students specifically (Levin, 2017).

3.5.1 The Political Climate of Alternative Schools

Over time, alternative schools were both positively and negatively affected by various political parties rotating in and out of power, with funding, resources, and policies fluctuating between the rise of alternative schools in the 1970s and now. Toronto's district of alternative schools has grown immensely to 19 elementary schools and 21 secondary schools (Toronto District School Board, 2014a) which has made Toronto home to the largest alternative school district in the world (Rodrigues, 2017). Although Toronto's alternative schools are still actively growing and developing, they have been significantly impacted by Ontario's evolving social and political climate. Marked by the "Common Sense Revolution" of 1995 that began with the election of the provincial Conservative party, a shift to neoliberal market-driven educational policies in Ontario began (Azzarello, 2017), and were most explicitly connected to Bill 160, The Education Quality Improvement Act, Bill 104, and The Fewer School Boards Act, both implemented in 1996. Bill 160, notably, centralized control over education policies by transferring decision-making powers in education from local school boards to the government, resulting in a loss of material and physical resources, difficulty accessing funding due to rigid bureaucratic structures, increased class sizes, and reduced curricular choice for students (Anderson & Jaafar, 2003; MacLellan, 2009; Sattler, 2012). Bill 104 merged numerous school boards, going from 129 to 72 in Ontario, further increasing the bureaucracy in the 72 left (Azzarello, 2017). Today, Ontario's education system, and consequently Toronto's schools, are directed by market-driven, neoliberal ideologies that measure educational outcomes through the means of efficiency, centralization, accountability, and top-down bureaucratic control (Azzarello, 2017; Bascia & Maton, 2016; Meyer & Rowan, 1977; Miles & Darling-Hammond, 1998, Siskin, 1994). Although there were problems inherent to the initial alternative school movement in Toronto such as its classist origins, notable progression was dismantled by the new Conservative government in 1995, which shut down the Anti-Racism Secretariat created by the

New Democratic Party previously in power, and began the process of removing pro-equity goals from future curriculum policy documents (Anderson & Jaafar, 2003; Azzarello, 2017).

3.6 Current Situation with Toronto's Alternative Schools

Currently, there are 108 public secondary schools in the TDSB, 21 of which are alternative secondary schools. There are 451 public elementary schools in the TDSB, 19 of which are alternative elementary schools (Toronto District School Board, 2014a). According to the TDSB's website, last updated in 2014:

> Alternative schools are places where students find their way through learning environments that vary widely and often include self-directed projects, experiential learning, business and entrepreneurial mentorship programs, strong co-op programs and credit recovery opportunities—all while earning OSSD [Ontario Secondary School Diploma] credits. Here [one] may find extraordinary art and word galleries, classrooms with comfy couches, and teachers mentoring their students. These are schools where students need a new way—to find their way. And they do. (Toronto District School Board, 2014a)

This mandate overarches the 40 TDSB alternative elementary and secondary schools, and moreover, the category of "alternative school" is therefore not particularly definitive, since, among all 40 schools, there is so much variety.

In the TDSB, alternative schools are led by Principals, but Principals typically administer the operations of multiple schools from a distance, meaning they are not physically present at every school they head, but rather go in periodically when necessary. The individual on-site every day making decisions and physically running the school is the Curriculum Leader. The Curriculum Leaders and teachers are likely to have, and are supposed to have, more independence than they would in a traditional school setting. This is to allow for problems to be solved and students to be helped without having to constantly follow administrative and bureaucratic protocol and approval (Bascia & Maton, 2016). Toronto's alternative schools focus on two streams: program (arts, drama, music, sports, environmental, etc.) and identity (Africentric, LGBTQ+, etc.) (James & Samaroo, 2017).

Generally, alternative schools are much smaller in size than mainstream schools, with alternative secondary schools housing student populations between 90 and 150 students (Toronto

District School Board, 2014a). Consequently, most alternative schools receive less funding than mainstream schools and therefore, are usually structured as "schools within a school"—that is, they often occupy one hallway or one floor of a larger public school (James & Samaroo, 2017; Toronto District School Board, 2014b). A prominent aspect of Toronto's alternative schools today is how staff and students have room to experiment with different ways of organizing their school and be innovative with the curriculum (Bascia, Carr-Harris, Fine-Meyer, & Zurzolo, 2014), which have been successful pedagogies in some contexts. For example, one study of an alternative school in the United States (Watson, 2011) examined how the school sought to overcome the challenges faced by marginalized students. The study found that students appreciated the school's pedagogical flexibility in accommodating many different learning styles and life situations, resulting in students being more motivated to do schoolwork, knowing that they could do so in a way that was most comfortable and suitable to them. This flexible pedagogy allowed for students to be engaged and self-reflective in their learning, supporting the abundance of literature on learner-centred approaches and differentiated instruction that encourage the customization and personalization of instruction for marginalized students. This school lets students work at their own pace to "overcome the culture of schools that hold time constant" (Watson, 2011, p. 1519), which helps create a more liberating atmosphere for students. Students also appreciated the small size of the school as it allows for more personal interactions through open, caring, and collaborative relationships with teachers, and they believed that graduation rates would increase in the United States if more schools were like this alternative school. Despite the positive elements of the school reported in the study, teachers and students noted feelings of alienation and isolation within a state school district where alternative schools are not the norm (Watson, 2011).

Toronto's alternative secondary schools tend to be more socioeconomically challenged and disadvantaged than Toronto's alternative elementary schools (Brown, 2017; Toronto District School Board, 2014b). Many alternative schools came to be prior to the amalgamation of the TDSB and most of the current Scarborough alternative schools started as individual schools within the Centre for Alternative Studies (Brown, 2017). As of 2016-17 school year, 1.6% of all Toronto students, or 3,955 out of 245,421 were attending alternative schools. The TDSB's report on alternative schools in 2016-17 (Brown, 2017) contained a study comparing alternative elementary school students to alternative secondary school students. It was found that 89% of

elementary students took academic (university-level) courses whereas only 51% of secondary students did, 7% of elementary students took applied (college-level) courses whereas 45% of secondary students did, 8% of elementary students had previously been suspended whereas 36% of secondary students had, 77% of elementary students graduated in four years from high school whereas 16% of secondary students did, 58% of elementary students applied to university whereas 8% of secondary students did, 68% of elementary students had a parent who attended university whereas 34% of secondary students did, 5% of elementary students were Black (the Africentric Alternative School should be taken into account as making up a portion of this) whereas 19% of secondary students were, 71% of elementary students were white whereas 42% of secondary students were, 4% of elementary students were South Asian whereas 12% of secondary students were, and 86% of elementary students had two parent families whereas 66% of secondary students did (Brown, 2017). Parekh (2013) published a similar report called *Structured Pathways* which found that alternative secondary school students, compared to all other TDSB students, were much more likely to be "at-risk," were twice as likely to be taking non-academic courses in grades 9 and 10, had much lower graduation rates, and much lower post-secondary access. Despite being "at-risk" and clearly facing barriers, this report found that students attending the TDSB's alternative secondary schools had a sense of belonging that was much higher than at other schools.

3.7 More to Learn

Alternative school research in Western contexts certainly requires deeper investigation. While alternative schools have been widely researched in the United States and Britain, much of this research is either outdated, or not grounded in equitable, critical, anti-racist, or anti-colonial theoretical frameworks. *Alternative Schooling and Student Engagement: Canadian Stories of Democracy within Bureaucracy* (2017) gives a sufficient glimpse into Toronto's alternative schools for marginalized students, as well as a realistic historical uncovering of those same schools' elitist origins. This book shows just how much there is to look at in Toronto alone, so as to begin investigating alternative schools in Canada more broadly. I hope this study accomplishes reaching a similar depth of exposure.

CHAPTER 4
METHODOLOGY AND METHODS

4.1 Description of Study Context

This qualitative, multiple case study explores the experiences and perspectives of students, teachers, and staff at four alternative secondary schools that endeavour to serve marginalized youth in the TDSB. The TDSB houses 21 alternative secondary schools, containing three independently run schools and two families of nine schools each, called *Alternative Schools West* and *Alternative Schools East and Year Round Schools*. My research questions ask:

1. a) How and why do students, teachers, and administrators attend and work in alternative schools for marginalized students, and why do they believe alternative schools are necessary? b) To what extent are the needs of marginalized students in these schools being met? c) Why or why not?
2. What are the day-to-day pedagogical and curricular approaches and relational dynamics that characterize alternative schools with mandates of educating marginalized students?
3. According to students, teachers, and administrators, what are the essential characteristics of an alternative school that endeavours to serve marginalized students?

Of the 21 alternative schools in the TDSB, three operate independently from the two families out of local high schools. I chose my research sites based on neighbourhood and student demographics and the following specific criteria: the school has a mandate of serving marginalized students, stakeholders like teachers and staff agree that the school seeks to serve marginalized students, and the students at the school identify as being marginalized. My choices were also impacted by what schools were available for me to conduct research at—that is, the TDSB only allows for one research project at a time to be run in its schools. Several alternative schools were already hosting research projects, limiting my options. Notably, some of these schools are more well-known in Toronto's alternative education community, as they are some of the city's original alternative schools, and/or have built reputations through other means, so many of these schools were not available to me as they were already being researched. My study focuses on lesser-known alternative schools, helping to fill that research gap.

This study investigates four alternative secondary schools, three of which are located in a statistically lower-income, racialized neighbourhood, and the other, although not located in the

same neighbourhood, is intentionally placed in an accessible location for students across the Greater Toronto Area. Since alternative school locations are few in comparison to mainstream schools, which can be found all over the city, many students endure long commutes by car and public transit to get to school every day. Consequently, while location demographics and poverty rates are relevant to the neighbourhoods the schools are in, the neighbourhoods students travel from are equally relevant. Besides geographical factors, another noteworthy characteristic of the schools in this study is that two of the four are year round alternative schools, which caters to marginalized students with their flexible, quadmestered[1] schedule (Glines, 1972; Smith et al., 1976). The self-identification approach for marginalized students is inherently subjective, since being marginalized can mean different things to different students and can imply varying levels of awareness in their perceptions of self. Nevertheless, this work takes an anti-colonial approach that centres marginalized voices, making self-identification a necessary and important component.

4.2 Methods

4.2.1 Recruiting Schools, Recruiting Participants, and Consent

I chose to focus on alternative secondary schools for two reasons. First, there are more alternative secondary schools than there are elementary schools geared towards marginalized students in Toronto (Brown, 2017; Toronto District School Board, 2014b). Second, both McGill's Research Ethics Board III and the TDSB's External Research Review Committee recommended this narrowed demographic given the presumably advanced intellectual discussions the interviews would entail, ages of consent, and the likelihood of elementary students having less autonomy than secondary students in choosing to attend an alternative school. After receiving ethics approval, I first turned to the TDSB's website for its alternative secondary schools. I reduced the number of schools based on their online mandates, which were vague, and not necessarily up to date. A few schools' mandates, which did not claim to serve marginalized students, did not align with the goals of this project. My remaining options had similarly written mandates and often used interchangeable language, which did not effectively differentiate the schools. In other words, the descriptions of schools published on the TDSB's

[1] Rather than the typical two semester model, there are four semesters that run from August to July to accommodate dropout, suspended, and/or expelled students re-enrolling. They can enroll during a flexible time period at the beginning of each term.

website are meant to be general guides, but do not necessarily help to highlight nuances between different schools. Thus, narrowing down my research sites required the important step of in-person visits to several of the 21 schools. I then chose my research sites based on the ways their Curriculum Leaders (on-site head of school), teachers, and/or Principals described the students they serve, the relational dynamics of the school, pedagogies employed, and curricula delivered. I looked for inclusive and critical pedagogy and curricula that spoke to marginalized student populations. Speaking only to the staff of the schools was limiting, but I was unable to speak to students until my project had been fully approved by the Board, which it had not yet been during these preliminary visits. While these visits were helpful to me choosing the schools I would focus on, I was limited by the fact that the information gathered during these visits was still inevitably superficial. My choices were also impacted by school leaders' responsiveness and willingness to participate.

I provided optional self-identification forms pertaining to students' marginalization, which were helpful to me as a researcher describing their individual experiences as marginalized individuals in a state schooling system. All students chose to fill out all or parts of these forms. The self-identification forms were an important component of fulfilling Grounded Theory's requirement of interacting directly with the data, for they allowed me to interact with the data more deeply by knowing more context on the subjects behind the data.

4.2.2 Semi-Structured Interviews and Focus Groups

Semi-structured interviews and focus groups allow participants the freedom to discuss what they desire, both within and outside of my own questions, opening the discussion to see through the interactive process how participants make meaning of their experiences in ways that I, as a researcher, have not necessarily framed my questions to address. Semi-structured interviews and focus groups allow participants to not only answer the researcher's questions, but to construct and tell their own stories. According to Seidman (2006), "every word that people use in telling their stories is a microcosm of their consciousness. Individuals' consciousness gives access to the most complicated social and educational issues, because social and educational issues are abstractions based on the concrete experience of people" (p. 7). These microcosms of consciousness are exactly what I needed access to in order to answer my research questions sufficiently. I had 15 questions for students and 16 questions for teachers and staff members. I asked all of my questions but allowed and encouraged the conversation to evolve as the

participants wished. This open dialogue often led to me asking additional questions that were influenced by the participants' own discussions.

4.2.3 Logistics

Over a two-week time period, I conducted in-person, semi-structured interviews and focus groups with 19 students, 10 teachers, and one administrator on-site at four alternative secondary schools. Participants' preferences and time constraints determined whether they partook in an interview or focus group. For example, at two schools, focus groups were conducted with students whereas at two other schools, students felt more comfortable participating in individual interviews. This could mean two things: in individual interviews, students gave me access to information that they would not have otherwise shared in a group setting. Contrarily, not having other students present to discuss the interview questions might have diminished the potential for a deeper conversation. Often, student focus groups were more fruitful and lengthy than individual interviews, so I recognize that the data from schools where I conducted individual interviews with students may not be as rich as the data collected from schools where I ran focus groups. I compensated for this by attempting to draw as much information from the shorter, less in-depth interviews as I did from the longer, more engaging focus groups. Additionally, while I individually interviewed most teachers, time limits at one school required me to conduct a focus group with two teachers rather than individual interviews with each of them. Three follow-up phone interviews were conducted with three staff members for the purpose of obtaining further information on the operations and logistics of the schools. The 25 interviews and focus groups were recorded on my personal laptop's audio software, some running as short as seven minutes, to as long as two and a half hours. Longer sessions were broken up by intermissions.

4.3 Grounded Theory Methodology

I used Grounded Theory (Charmaz, 2004; Glaser, 1992; Strauss & Corbin, 1998) as my methodological approach to analyzing my data for the ways in which it engages with participants' insights to build theoretical knowledge, in conversation with previously existing scholarly theoretical knowledge. Grounded Theory was formulated in the early 1990s to provide sociological researchers with a methodology that allowed them to extract new, context-specific theories from data—that is, theories *grounded* in the data from which they are derived, rather

than traditional manifestations of data analysis that take place within, and only within, previously existing theoretical frameworks (Mills et al., 2014). Grounded Theory nonetheless honours the constitution of theories that researchers choose to frame their studies with but utilizes actual data to construct novel theories as the outcome of the research. Grounded Theory intends to exploit the process of data analysis to its full potential within the specific context that the data is being consulted. Thus, there are always new theories that can emerge from the data in a new analytic context (Charmaz, 2004; Glaser, 1992; Strauss & Corbin, 1998). The concept that there is always potential for further analysis is true in each individual analytic context too, necessitating the use of the constant comparative method inherent to Grounded Theory. Constant comparative method requires the researcher to study their data, note emerging codes and sub-codes (recurring categories or themes in the data) as part of their subjective meaning-making process, and define these codes and sub-codes to support their significance. It is crucial for researchers utilizing Grounded Theory to also acknowledge that while meaning is being made from participants' words, their own subjectivity interplays with this process in the theories that they claim are emerging from the data (Cruz, 2015). Studying the data and coding should be conducted simultaneously and interchangeably over time in order to achieve constant comparison (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). What occurs is a deep, iterative process of continually refining codes and sub-codes, with an end goal of different, or altered, codes and sub-codes from where the researcher began. It is also important to note throughout this process any negative cases that disprove or contradict recurring codes. Hypothetically, the researcher should eventually reach a point in constant comparison where the codes and sub-codes no longer change, solidifying that the researcher has sufficiently optimized code development in that particular research context (Glaser, 1992).

4.3.1 Why Grounded Theory Suits This Study

The ways in which I make meaning of participants' experiences in alternative schools in the remainder of this work are undeniably inseparable from my suppositions that Canada is a nation-state, that state schooling in Canada is a reflection of the nation-state's settler colonial history and present, and that colonized subjects in state schools endure severe marginalization in both symbolic and violent forms that reproduce inequitable social relations and indeed, fortify state power structures. Anti-colonialism and Grounded Theory are compatible in this context since anti-colonialism prioritizes centring the historically silenced epistemologies of colonized,

marginalized subjects, wherein using Grounded Theory, novel theories from these historically silenced voices can emerge. Since I have intended to formulate theories from these very perspectives, the way anti-colonialism centres these perspectives, and the way Grounded Theory extrapolates theory that emerges from these perspectives, has allowed me to do so.

4.4 Coding

I transcribed and analyzed the interviews and focus groups in the order that they were initially conducted, so as to trigger the same thought processes and shifting mindset I initially had when collecting the data. I employed a line-by-line open coding method, while assigning memos to each code to support their significance (Charmaz, 2004). These codes began as a written list that I transferred to a virtual mind map. Crucially, the mind map allowed for me to see relationships of contiguity (Maxwell & Miller, 2008) between various codes and sub-codes. Being able to categorize and see all emerging themes in one space (unlike a multiple-paged list), allowed me to simultaneously contemplate my codes in their entirety. The first half of transcripts I read and coded required me to almost completely transform my codes from their original points of departure, likely into a mind map much too large for the analysis that a Master's thesis allows for. This process illustrates just how significantly my process of meaning-making evolved after studying the data—an important and ongoing step towards creating a set of authentic codes that are profoundly true to the study conducted. After the halfway point, my codes rarely changed if only for minor alterations. This saturation in the data solidified to me that I had exhausted the data to its full potential in this specific context. Some codes, like "short fuses" and "falling through the cracks" were inspired directly from the language used by participants. Grounded Theory also requires the designation of low-level codes, which act as neutral[2] foundations under which sub-codes—the specifics, the real human experiences as described by participants—can reside. These low-level codes helped me organize how I structured my findings and mapped out the ways in which I was making meaning of the data.

4.4.1 Distinguishing Between Similarity and Contiguity in Coding

An intricate method of categorizing data in qualitative research is identifying contiguity, rather than similarity, between sources of data (House, 2005; Maxwell & Miller, 2008). Similarity means that there are common traits between two items, whereas contiguity is a

[2] As neutral as possible.

connection drawn between two things that is not necessarily obvious or superficially identifiable (Dey, 1999; Maxwell & Miller, 2008). Using contiguity to code optimizes the potential to achieve a more nuanced and profound analysis of a particular phenomenon. Contiguity, as a tool, powerfully harnesses the skill to unveil unprecedented findings, for there may not exist another context-specific opportunity to make such detailed connections, at least evidently, to unpack the less obvious truths of social realities (House, 2005; Maxwell & Miller, 2008). My findings begin using similarity by depicting a more linear, categorical perspective illustrated by participants, gradually transitioning to utilizing contiguity to illuminate the connections between participants' unique epistemologies, intended to bring forward original, grounded theories.

CHAPTER 5
STORIES OF DISPLACEMENT IN THE STATE EDUCATION SYSTEM: HOW MARGINALIZED STUDENTS END UP IN ALTERNATIVE SCHOOLS

When student participants were asked why they left the mainstream sector and switched to alternative schools, their answers varied with respect to the systemic and structural social and educational circumstances that brought them there. Many of their testimonies also included the additional matter of battling mental health issues, which only exacerbated the struggles students described. Several students, like Darryl, sought out alternative schools because they were either on the verge, or already had been, pushed out of or expelled from mainstream schools:

> I was on the brink of getting expelled because I was not showing up to my classes due to anxiety and depression at the time.

Students like Nikita and Zayn noted that they struggled academically in mainstream schools and needed differentiated instruction or reduced course loads, which are more commonly offered at alternative schools:

> **Nikita:** I had taken online courses before, and they didn't really work for me. I ended up just dropping them […] So I figured, okay, online school isn't for me. So that's not a possibility, and obviously at my traditional school, it wasn't working out for me that well. They wanted me—if I wanted to return—I would have had to take four classes which, once again, that's like a lot of classes, a lot of extra stress, that I don't really need or want.

> **Zayn:** I was trying to do four classes in one day, but it was too much for me. I was already a very depressed and angry person and my home life isn't the best.

Some students, like Josie, are simply seeking a way to make up credits, another accommodation often found in alternative schools:

> I was looking for a place to get my credits 'cause I left school for about four months. I didn't drop out technically, but I was trying to find an alternative.

Numerous students find themselves displaced in the state education system due to being in stressful and/or unstable living circumstances, like Quinn:

> What made me go through a number of schools is I'm in foster care and move around a lot.

Many students turned to alternative schools because they felt unsafe or anxious about attending their previous schools, like Keisha:

> I failed like 4 or 5 classes so I'm coming back to retake most of them […] When I was in class, I wasn't mentally in class. And the collegiate system, they didn't really help me while I was in class. They just expected that I show up to class so I was ready to learn but I was never really ready to learn, so anything that they taught me never got processed […] The biggest thing for me was mental health issues. I wouldn't go to school for like weeks and months on end just because going to school was a big stressor and going near the building, I couldn't even do that.

On a similar note, some students recounted stories of rejection, alienation, and outright harassment by school leaders and staff that caused them to feel ostracized and to switch schools, like Jocelyn:

> I had a label on my IEP that one of my teachers also had back when they were a student. And because of that, this teacher assumed that I would learn the same way they did, and that they could teach me the same way they were taught as a student. And when that didn't work—because I'm a different person—they got really, really pissed, which basically turned into me being harassed by a Vice Principal and a teacher because I'm not learning the way they wanted me to and that Vice Principal was also in charge of the Spec. Ed. Department, so my support from there was cut off as well. […] So, at the end of the year, I just…during the whole summer, I was very, very anxious about going back there.

These testimonies demonstrate that there are multiple reasons students attend alternative schools, and that many of these reasons are related to mental health struggles. Within the overarching trends that account for how and why marginalized students attend alternative schools, each student's journey is nuanced and multifaceted due to interrelated struggles. Most notably, their experiences are largely informed by, or manifest in, mental health issues that are sometimes the cause of the problems students face in school, but are often a product of their social circumstances too. When asked what the biggest differences are between mainstream and alternative schools, a glaring commonality expressed by numerous students and teachers was the impenetrable bureaucracy in mainstream schools, its uniquely negative impacts on marginalized students and, crucially, the resulting neglect of their mental health needs as a result of an impersonal, hierarchical, and arbitrarily formal schooling system.

5.1 State Schools are Rigid Bureaucracies

Students and teachers who have attended or worked in state schools both within and outside of the TDSB are unified by their negative bureaucratic experiences, marked by a spectrum of impersonal to outright negligent treatment, hierarchical structures, and arbitrary

formalities to be followed. Many of these experiences, as reflected on by participants, took place in mainstream schools that they attended or worked in before switching to an alternative school that they now prefer. Nevertheless, alternative schools are not exempt from the practices that drive marginalized students away from mainstream schools; after all, alternative schools are still state schools that reside in the state education system. The purpose of this chapter is not to dichotomize mainstream and alternative schools. Rather, it is to map the experiences that led marginalized students to seek an alternative environment to complete their secondary education in, as well as lay a foundation for the rest of the thesis, wherein students and teachers compare their past experiences in the state education system to their current ones in alternative schools, which will be expanded on in Chapters 6, 7, and 8.

5.1.1 Impersonal Dynamics

Vince, a teacher at Alt School 1, discusses how efficient course delivery in mainstream schools can occur at the expense of personal interactions with students:

> At a collegiate […] you teach the lesson, whatever, whatever, whatever, and the class is done. And it's very hard to pick up on issues because you don't necessarily have to know your students as well as you do here […] You don't necessarily pick up on…that kid might be having a rough day or oh, they're struggling with this, they're struggling with that […] A lot of stuff falls through the cracks.

Vince's description, "you teach the lesson, whatever, whatever, whatever, and the class is done" reflects a fast-paced, impersonal approach to teaching. While personal interaction with students is not necessarily synonymous with successfully teaching a lesson, Vince highlights that its absence results in students' issues being overlooked, showing how impersonal dynamics can actually lead to neglect. Teachers regularly see students and thus serve as important mediators for communicating students' well-being to the staff that are designated to attend to students' well-being, like counsellors, social workers, crisis workers, or child and youth workers. This gap in communication and absence of opportunity to connect with students on a personal level, results in marginalized students—the students who arguably need substantially more specialized attention—not getting the support they need, while still having to perform in school according to standardized expectations, alongside their more privileged peers. Beth, a teacher at Alt School 3, reflects on her previous experiences teaching in a mainstream school with large class sizes that inhibited the opportunity for meaningful student-teacher interactions in her classroom:

> I used to say to my students—because I taught compulsory subjects with at least 35 students in each one, on average, so it's 105 students per semester, you have 75 minute classes in a day, 35 students, you do the math—"you get 2 minutes of my attention each day, that's not fair on you, it's not possible for me to meet all your learning needs, but let's make it positive."

While individual interactions are just one of many approaches that can be taken to meet students' needs, Beth's description presents a jarring reality of the impacts large class sizes can have on the opportunity for students and teachers to properly interact. The benefits of smaller class sizes, as seen in many alternative schools, will be explored later in section *6.3.1*. Beth recognizes the resulting inequity of limited personal interactions with students. Notwithstanding, the most Beth can do is say "but let's make it positive," ultimately revealing her powerlessness within the bureaucracy of the school she was working in at the time.

5.1.2 Hierarchies

The impersonal nature of schooling that participants discussed above, additionally corresponds with student-teacher hierarchies. Yasmina, a teacher at Alt School 1, speaks to how deeply ingrained hierarchical structures were in the mainstream schools she previously worked at:

> There's such a distinction between who are students and who are teachers, and when those hierarchies exist between individuals occupying the same space, you're going to run into contention in spaces like those. Even if you aren't necessarily someone who abides by that hierarchy or prescribes to it, you've fallen into that designation, and that's a hurdle. I find it to be incredibly hard to navigate that space.

Yasmina's use of the word "navigate" implies freedom—something she found challenging to have in her previous teaching experiences. Similar to Beth, Yasmina also alludes to the powerlessness the individual teacher has in a school bureaucracy, by highlighting how even if one intentionally resists the hierarchies within their school, it is impossible to remove oneself from them altogether. If Yasmina finds it difficult to navigate the hierarchy, this brings attention to just how difficult it might be for students, and marginalized students in particular, to navigate those same hierarchies in state schools. Lee, a 21-year-old student at Alt School 1 who lives with mental health issues, in precarious economic conditions, and was previously in unstable living circumstances believes:

> There always seems to be an imagined hierarchy in those mainstream schools, right. Like there definitely seems to be levels to it.

Lee's use of the word "imagined" seems to challenge the actual validity of hierarchies in mainstream schools, relating to the ways in which bureaucracies reinforce arbitrary formalities, even if these formalities seem abstracted from reality.

5.1.3 Arbitrary Formalities

George, an 18-year-old male student at Alt School 4 living with mental health issues and in precarious economic conditions discusses the often unhelpful arbitrary formalities that pervade the educational protocols in mainstream schools:

> At mainstream schools, there is[3] multiple focuses on a couple of things. There is how the work gets done, when it gets done, and that it gets done. That's the focuses for mainstream schools. So, they want you to complete it in a specific way, in a specific room, you know, like a test. They want you to do the test…"no, we want you to do it in this room at this time." So, they have these three different things you have to do here. You have to do it this way and it has to be done by this time.

George describes seemingly unreasonable constraints enforced by abstract, bureaucratic rules, and several participants highlighted the ways in which mainstream institutions rarely justify these seemingly arbitrary practices. Keisha, an 18-year-old female student at Alt School 1 living with various mental health issues, and in precarious economic conditions, gives an example of this:

> My social worker who I've known since grade eight, like ever since I've had my anxiety and that kind of stuff—she went on maternity leave for the first time, so I was kind of anxious about her leaving and me meeting a new social worker, and that social worker deemed that I wasn't deserving of an IEP because "anxiety isn't an actual learning disorder." So they took it away and I failed my literacy test […] they were like, "no, you get nothing […] You don't have an IEP, you don't have any of your old accommodations."

Similar to the teachers Beth and Yasmina, Keisha highlights the unbeatable power dynamic between the bureaucracy and the individual. The support she was fortunate enough to have received from her previous social worker was immediately diminished as a result of one positional change in the school's administration. The fact that Keisha's former social worker had known her since grade eight makes it likely that the accommodations Keisha had were legitimate and necessary. The volatile disregard of Keisha's accommodations shows how, often within bureaucracies, students have little to no say in the decisions that affect them most. In this case, it

[3] participants' words are quoted verbatim.

meant Keisha's new social worker dismissing her previous accommodations with seemingly no rationale supporting the decision, and not to mention, impersonally and uncompassionately dealing with Keisha: "no, you get nothing […] you don't have an IEP, you don't have any of your old accommodations." From the sounds of it, Keisha's experience was one-sided, in that she had no opportunity to defend herself or her rights to have her previous accommodations. This finality of bureaucratic action strips students of their autonomy to rightfully intervene in circumstances that they are implicated in. In her works *On Being Included* and *Living a Feminist Life,* Sara Ahmed (2012; 2017) discusses institutional pushback through the metaphor of a brick wall, coined by Ahmed's research participants attempting to do diversity work in universities. They describe this work as a "banging your head against a brick wall job." The brick wall metaphor resonates with the impenetrability of bureaucracy in mainstream schools that the participants in this study describe. Diversity workers and marginalized students share common ground—that is, their existence, by default, resists institutional norms and power structures.

5.2 Pointing Out the Inequity: Marginalized Students Falling Through the Cracks

Vince's analogy of "stuff fall[ing] through the cracks" in *5.1.1* speaks to the marginalized students who struggle to be successful in a bureaucratic state education system (and who are still not free from the state education system just because they enter an alternative school). The bureaucracies in state schools are constraining, yet simultaneously, marginalized students fall through the cracks of these bureaucracies all the time, due to the inequitable ways in which state schools are structured. Equity rejects neoliberal notions of individualism that place blame on individuals for social and economic disparities and see societal institutions like public education as equalizing entities (Orlowski, 2012; Patel, 2016; Ryan, 2012). The infiltration of neoliberal educational values in state schools will be discussed at length in Chapter 8, but here my focus will be on how marginalized students fall through the cracks of an inequitable state schooling system. Nolan, an 18-year-old male, South Asian student at Alt School 1, analogises equity in the following way:

> Not everybody has the same life and same situation. For example, a doctor giving the same medicine to every patient…a patient who has a heart disease and a patient who has a brain disease don't get the same medication because they're totally different patients…same with schools, you don't have the same students.

Despite the disparities as outlined by Nolan, Cameron, a teacher at Alt School 2, explains:

> A lot of times, the system is programmed in a way to make things easier for staff and admin, but not necessarily for students, especially the ones who don't have the same resources.

Access to resources—that is, access to tutoring, extracurriculars, enrichment programs, healthcare, therapy, and the luxury of time—correlates with social and cultural capital, socioeconomic status, and class, which inevitably intersect with race, gender and sexuality, (dis)ability, and mental health. Not only do capital, socioeconomics, and class relate to a student's access to resources, but a student's race, gender and sexuality, (dis)ability, or mental health might mean they need access to more resources than are offered to the "average" student. If state schools are already not designed with students in mind, like Cameron argues, then how much more rigid is this design for marginalized students, who likely need additional compensation in such a system, if following the principles of equity?

5.2.1 Alternative Schools Shouldn't be a Knee-Jerk Reaction

According to participants, alternative schools for marginalized students typically exist as a backup or last resort, meaning that marginalized students are required to fall through the cracks, often numerous times, before finding a school that might work for them. Yasmina, a teacher at Alt School 1, understands this style of alternative school enrollment as a knee-jerk reaction:

> It's often a reactive knee-jerk reaction—the enrollment—and that's problematic. What's going on in mainstream spaces where alternative is only something that happens after something has already happened? So I think about that a lot. A lot of kids do fall through the cracks.

Yasmina poses an important question that challenges why alternative schools are only seen as a viable option after mainstream schooling has failed. This phenomenon is worthwhile to examine in conjunction with the metaphor of marginalized students falling through the cracks. How large are the cracks that marginalized students are falling through? How far do they fall before they are caught, if they are caught at all? Lee, a student at Alt School 1, pleas for increased awareness of alternative schools and the necessary purposes they serve:

> Ultimately I think there would be a smaller percentage of people falling through the cracks if this [Alt School 1] was the mainstream […] I know people who never even got the chance to go through this […] I don't know if this is being published anywhere, cause if it is, that's amazing. That's how we get the conversation started is studies and stuff that will illustrate how beneficial they actually are.

Lee highlights how some marginalized students fail to find alternative schools at all, implying that, while they already exist too distantly as backups and last resorts, many students do not even know these backups and last resorts exist. Participants' perspectives on alternative school awareness and the place they hold in the state schooling system will be expanded on more in Chapter 7.

5.2.2 Short Fuses

Marina, a teacher at Alt School 3, has extensive experience working between multiple alternative schools for marginalized students on a weekly basis. Having previously worked in mainstream schools, she makes the following comparison:

> What happens is, students that you might find in this school [Alt School 3] and then in a mainstream school, there is a shorter fuse for them.

Marina actually references an intolerance for marginalized students in claiming there is a "shorter fuse" for them in mainstream schools. This resonates deeper than bureaucracy being an impersonal environment; indeed, marginalized students can experience personal interactions that are often quite negative. This short fuse, as described by student participants, often manifests in violent ways. Highlighted below is a conversation had in a focus group at Alt School 4, where student participants talked extensively about their experiences in mainstream schools involving hierarchical harassment, punitive discipline, and rejection. Jocelyn, a 15-year-old student who identifies as LGBTQ+ and living with mental health issues, testifies the following:

> I was put in a program when I was a little kid which is really stupid—"the gifted program"—joy! I'm sorry, I really don't like the word. It makes it sound like it's some magical thing for smart people. What it really means is my brain developed weirdly, so I got put in a classroom with a bunch of other kids. The program itself was great. All throughout middle school, all the learning was adapted to how I needed to learn. The problem is, that didn't carry to high school at all because gifted kid assignments were "here's something you're interested in, here's how you learn, now do something with it." That's not how the real world works, that's not how high school worked. So I was very unprepared for high school, which led to me getting a lot of bad grades and passing a couple classes by the margin. Not because I didn't know the work […] But I wasn't used to the formats they were doing it in […] I had trouble grasping it and no one would help me at all. Then I got harassed by a teacher that then cut off my support. The Vice Principal, who also harassed me, was also in charge of the Spec Ed. department.

Jocelyn's academic struggles are representative of an unfortunately rigid academic model, but these struggles pale in comparison to the harassment she received, as well as being stripped of her access to the academic resources that she clearly needed. Stephanie, an 18-year-old female,

South Asian student who identifies as living with mental health issues, looks back on her experiences in both mainstream elementary and secondary school:

> When I was younger, I had this really mean teacher that would just pull me aside from all the other students and make me sit there and stare at a wall, and she'll come and just give me the work […] She was like "if you can do it correctly I'll let you sit back in your group," and I would never understand what she was saying and she wouldn't explain it to me and that really…I always kept it in the back of my head, like "oh, I'm dumb. This teacher told me I was dumb." […] I'll always remember that […] I thought high school would be better, but when I went to a regular high school, teachers wouldn't understand […] I have an IEP too, but like I would always mention it but no one would consider it. I went to a day treatment program for my mental health, like I kind of understood that I have to advocate for myself and stuff.

Dalia, a 19-year-old Black female student unsure of her sexuality, living with mental health issues, and in precarious economic conditions, reflects on similar experiences to Stephanie:

> My mainstream school experience was in elementary school and during my early years in grade two, we had this one teacher who used to pick on me and call me stupid and keep me in after school, during recess, because I just wasn't performing the right way […] When I stepped into that class, I cried cause I didn't want to be there. And going there and going to home school just further reinforced my isolation to the point where people don't know this, but I couldn't and I still can't really communicate properly. I couldn't step out of my house […] I didn't even want to open the door.

Dalia's statement "I couldn't step out of my house […] I didn't even want to open the door" illustrates the actual margins wherein she resided at her most vulnerable point in her education. Her desire to be isolated reflects how marginalized students might react to the ostracization that short fuses in mainstream schools cause—that is, marginalized students settle, or give into their marginalization as an understandable reaction to the alienation they experience at school, contributing further to their marginalization, which in turn, benefits the nation-state. Dalia not wanting to open the door to her house is a directly transferable metaphor that exemplifies the barrier between the private life of colonized subjects in the margins and public life in a settler colony—the latter being such a socially toxic environment (Garbarino, 1995), that those who are already in the margins, remain there to preserve and protect themselves, at the expense of attaining any chance at upward mobility.

Stephanie and Dalia's experiences illuminate a particular nuance to the short fuse metaphor. The hierarchical harassment and punitive discipline they experienced could certainly represent a short fuse. But a short fuse, in some cases, might mean rejection—having resources

taken away—as experienced by Jocelyn (though she was harassed too). A short fuse might imply giving up on or stopping something. In these cases, the short fuse represents the impersonal dynamics in bureaucracies. Stephanie and Dalia, on the contrary, received extra, more punitive, and potentially more harmful attention. As a result of this attention, they were continually tyrannized by their teachers. Depending on the marginalized student, a short fuse can manifest in different ways. It is perhaps no coincidence that Jocelyn's experiences as a white student in the gifted program differ from the experiences of Stephanie and Dalia who are both racialized.

5.3 Conclusion

This chapter overviewed the reasons marginalized students leave mainstream schools and switch to alternatives. Participants heavily focused on the bureaucracy in mainstream schools, and specifically, the impersonal dynamics, hierarchies, and abstract formalities within those bureaucracies. I introduced the concept of short fuses in bureaucracies and their disproportionate impact on marginalized students. Throughout, I highlighted how the universally negative aspects of bureaucracy are experienced differently, and more severely by marginalized students, and how their experiences pertain to a trend of them falling through the cracks of the state education system. A particularly notable nuance to the ways in which marginalized students experience bureaucracy is the extra negative attention they receive from teachers, as opposed to having an impersonal experience altogether. Chapter 6 will discuss participants' experiences in their current alternative schools.

CHAPTER 6
WHAT WORKS FOR MARGINALIZED STUDENTS IN ALTERNATIVE SCHOOLS

When asked what alternative schools do to re-engage marginalized students, participants widely referenced the interpersonal efforts made by teachers and staff to resist the particularly alienating institutional norms in state schools that reproduce inequitable educational outcomes. This chapter outlines how these interpersonal efforts manifest in three ways: the deconstruction of bureaucracy, restorative and reconciliatory approaches to discipline, and cultivating community. The cultivation of community, indeed, appears to be a powerful component of alternative schools, particularly in that such a characteristic is not necessarily measured by concrete practices, but rather, is sustained by the longevity of atmospheric qualities, like small school sizes, the normalization of marginalized identities that are traditionally ostracized in state school environments, and ubiquitous empathy and care.

6.1 Teachers' Efforts to Deconstruct Bureaucracy: Eliminating Hierarchies, Building Relationships, and Challenging Arbitrary Formalities

Teachers in alternative schools make efforts to deconstruct the hierarchies that traditionally exist between students and teachers in state schools. For example, a common, quick-fix practice in many alternative schools, including the ones in this study, is teachers going by their first names rather than Mr./Ms./Mrs./Miss. Deconstructing hierarchies takes place on a more long-term interpersonal level as well—in other words, changes that are not made overnight. Charlie for instance, discusses her efforts at Alt School 4 to deconstruct the ingrained power dynamics that often exist between teachers, students, and parents by forming intimate and equitable relationships between all stakeholders—an often unprecedented initiative:

> When a child has suddenly felt trust to be in a space and to have a relationship with an authority figure, when maybe that's been a part of their struggle, and even a part of a parent's struggle being in the institution of education as well […] I'm often working with parents that come with their own experiences having worked with teachers or admin in the past that haven't been positive, and having to show that this is a place where it's not always going to be perfect, but we're working on the same page, that we want the same thing for their child—to be successful—and that we're a part of the conversation, and part of that team. I've had very open and frank conversations with parents that come in, it seems like with their fists raised almost. They're ready to be argumentative because that's historically what they've had to be in order to survive or have the needs of their child met. And so,

> reframing that dialogue, even for parents I find, is something that we're often doing from a teacher piece.

Research on the relationships between parents and state schooling has shown that parents from marginalized communities take precautions and enact protective measures that parents of students from dominant, privileged groups are not required to do, in order to ensure the safety and survival of their children in alienating, degrading, and even violent educational environments (Dei, 1993; Freeman, 2009; Howard & James, 2019; Kozik-Rosabal, 2000; Reynolds, 2010). For example, Black parents are hyperaware that their children are at higher risk than non-Black students are of unwarranted, punitive discipline (Dei, 1993; Reynolds, 2010). Black parents are also wary of enrolling their children in state schools whose curricula centres whiteness and ceases to acknowledge Black history, culture, and existence, understandably leading them to seek alternative forms of education for their Black children, like homeschooling or Africentric schools (Dei 1993; Fields-Smith & Williams, 2009; Howard & James, 2019; Ray, 2015). Marginalized students also become forthright and defensive in socially toxic environments (Garbarino, 1995), as a result of being unreasonably targeted by disciplinary protocols, being denied of equitable access to educational opportunities and upward mobility, and/or being ostracized by authority figures and their peers at school (Chambers & McCready, 2011; Holmes & Cahill, 2008). Charlie's understanding of how parents of marginalized students are traditionally regarded by authority figures in state schools, as well as her restorative and reconciliatory approach to responding to these parents (a theme that will be explored deeper in 6.2), could potentially contribute to fostering a climate conducive to critical hope, or anti-colonial perspectives in alternative education. Moreover, parents of Black children are often excluded from state schools by the double standard of being perceived as unfit and incapable of playing an integral role in their child's education, yet, note feelings of unwelcomeness in the school communities that they make efforts to become involved with (Howard & James, 2019). Not shutting parents out, but rather, acknowledging them as marginalized too, and welcoming them into the school community as critical stakeholders, is certainly more congruent with the anti-colonial epistemology of resistance that centres the voices of colonized subjects. This requires dismantling conventional hierarchies, which it sounds like Charlie is trying to do in the way she describes her interpersonal relations with parents and students. Significantly, at other points, Charlie discussed her queer identity and the exclusion she felt in her own experiences in

state schools where she learned heteronormative curricula. Perhaps her own marginalized identity gives rise to her empathy and efforts to relate to marginalized parents, showing the importance of having teachers in alternative schools who reflect the student bodies—namely, staff members who can identify with the students they are attempting to re-engage—a theme that will be explored more deeply in Chapter 8, section *8.2.1*.

Andre discusses how the elimination of symbolic formalities at Alt School 2 fosters a space in which marginalized students can reclaim power and choice and feel more at ease:

> Trying to work with the students. Give them the realization that they have power and choice. Take away some of the vestiges of the system. The simple things like having the anthem every day, or ever, cause to some students something as simple as that can send a signal that this place is about rules, about following these norms that don't always…that—"I don't identify with because I haven't been treated well by this country or by this society. So why do I actually stand to attention and salute the flag when this country doesn't serve me?" […] The fact that we don't have a Principal or VP here every day, allows I think for a certain level of relaxation or a relaxed feel […] And you don't have that sort of official authority figure here every day that could suspend or expel or discipline, that it's part of their official power, so that helps I think create the climate.

Opening the day with the national anthem in Canada is a mandatory policy in state schools according to the Education Act (Ontario Ministry of Education, 1989). Symbolic of settler colonial patriotism, Andre resists this imposed practice by the nation-state in recognizing that marginalized students are not well-served by the nation-state. Appropriately, this provokes questioning who the national anthem is for, and in turn, what harm is caused by obligating marginalized students to participate in a ritual that ultimately represents and celebrates their oppression. Additionally, since several alternative schools are headed by one Principal who is not physically in each building every day, not having such an archetypal authority figure present could help marginalized students (who have likely conflicted with such a figure in the past) feel more at ease, particularly in their transition to a new school. This is not to say, of course, that teachers do not also represent a certain level of authority, but it does contribute to eliminating "some of the vestiges of the system," as Andre indicates.

Carl from Alt School 1 discusses his efforts to eliminate the red tape that often hinders access to assistance and resources for marginalized students:

> Especially with teaching, where you have to have paperwork to explain that the kid needs help and then if you get enough paperwork, you can get some assistance, but by the time you get that assistance, the kid's already gone. Right […] Everyone's trying to prove that their job is important rather than doing what's right and getting help for the kids. *You*

> *know what's right;* you don't need paperwork. You should act on it instead of getting the paperwork that allows you to get somebody else that says they also think it's okay that we get this kid the help they need and then it's 8 weeks, 12 weeks, a year later—they get some help. It should be instantaneous but instead it's turned into a bureaucratic nightmare.

Carl's argument that teachers "should act on it instead of getting the paperwork" enforces that teachers should not let the formalities of their job stop them from doing the most important parts of their job. While the sentiment is valid, and rings true to resisting bureaucracy, taking such a measure—which Carl seems to be framing as a simple deed that other teachers just lack the willingness or consciousness to do—is realistically not always possible, not only for logistical reasons, but for the sake of teachers' job security. As discussed in Chapter 5, individuals often have little power to exercise their agency within bureaucratic structures. Hierarchies in bureaucracies exist for teachers and administrators too, and a teacher who rests at the bottom of the hierarchy—namely, teachers from minority groups, or newer teachers—would be less likely to overrule formal protocols in the way that Carl suggests.

Josie, a female student at Alt School 1, unsure of her sexuality, living with mental health issues, in precarious economic conditions, and unstable living circumstances, discusses how Dan, a teacher at Alt School 1, adapts rigid grading standards to accommodate marginalized students:

> I don't know about the other teachers but I know Dan specifically—he can take into account and alter your mark at the end—judging based on… "okay maybe this test was kind of an anomaly or you didn't do this cause you weren't here cause you were sick or whatever." He'll alter the mark to what he thinks you deserve and it'll only go up from what you originally had and I think that's a really good way, because sometimes you get so caught up in the marks. Especially if you have test anxiety and you can't perform well. Even in class when you're not doing well and he knows, well, that's not you.

Josie's statement that "sometimes you get so caught up in the marks" challenges the weight that grades traditionally hold by alluding to their triviality in light of the barriers students may face in meeting academic markers of success. The flexibility of Dan's grading scheme could help to reshape the actual values associated with grades, through embracing that grades are influenced by multiple factors and should not necessarily be taken at face value, that they do not correlate with students' worth, nor do they necessarily accurately represent students' intelligence and capabilities. The restructuring of the values surrounding grades and academics will be discussed further in Chapter 8, section *8.1.1.*

6.2 Restorative and Reconciliatory Approaches to Discipline

Several student participants reflected on the traumatizing impacts that punitive forms of discipline have had on them in state schooling, and in turn, discussed their appreciation for the restorative and reconciliatory approaches to discipline they have experienced in alternative schools. Quinn, a Black female student at Alt School 3, living with mental health issues and a disability comments:

> In alternative schools, it's like smaller classes so they […] They can tell when we are struggling […] They will come to you and like you know, they won't embarrass you or anything. And they won't be like, "you're late" and this and that. Because I can tell you that I think that affects kids. Also, like when a teacher, like in the middle of a class, would be like "oh you're late." Like you're embarrassing the child and everything. It's good that they don't do that.

Here, Quinn highlights how traditionally, punitive forms of discipline cause feelings of humiliation that, understandably, can have long-term traumatizing impacts on students. As discussed in Chapter 2, section *2.4.4*, labelling theory posits that when an individual is deemed as a particular "kind of person" (Gee, 2000) enough times, the likelihood of them believing they are that "kind of person" and subsequently adopting behaviours that are reflective of that identity is higher (Becker, 1963; Becker, 1991). Consistent with Quinn's testament, Remi, a female student of mixed racial origin (Asian, Spanish, white), who identifies as LGBTQ+, living with mental health issues, and in precarious economic conditions, and Lee, discuss how teachers at Alt School 1 recognize why marginalized students might struggle with attendance:

> **Remi:** The teachers at this school, they don't look at you as a bad person or as a bad student because you miss school, for example. If you do miss school they don't treat you any less […] as a person, and that helps somebody who's missing school because of mental health issues…
>
> **Lee:** Or any marginalized student for that matter who struggles getting to school…
>
> **Remi:** From my experience, I miss school because of mental health issues and there's also kids with mental health issues, especially with thinking about going to school and just thinking about how many teachers […] when they see me, stops me from even going to school at all and it just becomes like a feedback loop where you're so scared to come to school and then you don't come to school […] And so yeah, I just find that Alt School 1 helps.

Relating to Quinn's point that punitive discipline "affects kids," Remi's description of teachers not "look[ing] at you as a bad person or as a bad student because you miss school" reveals the

toll that such personifications can take on marginalized students' self-esteem, as well as how their sense of worth becomes invested in arbitrary, traditional measures of success, like with grades, as discussed in section 6.1. Stephanie discusses the accommodations and attentiveness teachers pay to students struggling academically at Alt School 4, as opposed to more punitive approaches that she notes being subjected to in the past:

> I feel like in this school the teachers are really welcoming and understanding and they're not like, raising their voices if you don't understand something. At my previous schools, the teachers have yelled at me for asking them to repeat a question or to sit down and just explain it to me one more time. And here teachers are actually willing to do that […] They just want you to succeed.

Quinn, Remi, Lee, and Stephanie's descriptions represent an awareness at alternative schools of the harmful impacts punitive forms of discipline can have, even though they are regarded as standard practice in state schooling. Since alternative schools of this nature are supposed to re-engage marginalized students, the recognition that their students were likely victimized by harmful disciplinary approaches in the past is necessary.

Victoria, a teacher at Alt School 3, deconstructs "deviant" behaviours wherein the stigma that typically surrounds these behaviours is only further exacerbated when performed by marginalized students:

> If a student comes high to your class, it's not the end of the world. We're not flipping out on students; we're not telling them to leave. If a student swears, you may not even acknowledge it. So, the level of discipline and rigidness doesn't exist as much in alternative schools. I think that there is more compassion and understanding of the larger picture and what students are going through and I think also like, being more critical of punitive forms of discipline versus restorative justice, and I think that that's a big thing in alternative schools and that's something that I'm really enjoying being in them.

Having an "understanding of the larger picture and what students are going through," as Victoria says, could translate to recognizing how systemic and structural marginalization can manifest in various "deviant" behaviours, and that the urgency of attending to these microcosms pales in comparison to the urgency of providing a safe and comfortable environment for vulnerable students. Victoria also proposes "being more critical of punitive forms of discipline," which aligns with Quinn's argument that punitive discipline is embarrassing and can "affect kids." Since broader research also reveals that punitive forms of discipline disproportionately target marginalized students and further contribute to their oppression (Carter et al., 2014; James & Turner, 2017; Kim et al., 2010; Kennedy et al., 2017; Kupchik, 2010; Mendez & Knoff, 2003;

Nolan, 2011; Ontario Human Rights Commission, 2003; Rocque, 2010; Toronto District School Board, 2009; Toronto District School Board, 2017), it would make sense that alternative schools, if they are to foster an environment conducive to the needs of marginalized students, might be more critical and resistant of such protocols. In this case, the recognition that there could be more harm in punishing a student for swearing or being high, rather than just overlooking or forgiving those behaviours, would be an example of resistance that exemplifies Victoria's suggested criticality. The anti-colonial becomes a possibility here, in the explicit rejection of institutional norms in favour of restorative approaches implemented in marginalized students' best interests. Restorative justice does not avoid accountability; rather, it reframes its mechanisms (Llewellyn & Howse, 1998; Zehr, 1990). In an alternative school, this could look more like helping students find healthier coping mechanisms and methods of expressing themselves and their struggles, or getting them access to a therapist or an addictions counsellor. The availability and provision of access to these services will be expanded on in Chapter 8, section *8.1.2.*

6.3 Building Community

6.3.1 The Benefits of a Small School

When student and teacher participants were asked how they feel when they walk into school every day, if they like their school, and/or what the differences are between their current alternative school and other schools they have attended or worked at, the theme of community prevailed. Three noteworthy characteristics that constitute not just an alternative school, but an alternative community, according to participants, are small size, the normalization of students who do not traditionally fit the norm, and a culture of empathy and care. Charlie from Alt School 4, explains how the small size of alternative schools allows staff to do the work of caring and community building:

> I think it has a lot to do with working as a close-knit team. Right. So, I think an alt school needs to be small. It means that we're a community as opposed to a community school as opposed to just a school. That this is a place that students want to be, to be safe to be here.

Charlie uses small size as a differentiator between an environment being just a school versus an actual community, and how the logistics of a smaller-sized school allow for the close-knit team dynamic that is pertinent to building community. Seeing the job of teaching as a team effort certainly resists more typical individualistic understandings of how state schools are run. Marina

and Carl, teachers from Alt School 3 and Alt School 1, discuss how small schools enable the development of more personal and intimate relationships between students and teachers. These relationships are directly transferable to the empathy and care that ensues in alternative schools, which will be expanded on in section *6.3.3.* Marina says:

> It's smaller. So, you know, when you're not here as a student, you're missed. And because it's like a genuine community, like you're missed. And then there is a prevailing issue as to why you're here. So then the level of concern is a little heightened. And that also I think helps affirm the students, like it validates the student and their kind of self-efficacy because there is a genuine concern and care for you know, safety, security, soundness of person. And then that is also a positive that can help re-engage the student.

Marina makes the connection that the ways in which teachers value and account for students not only helps to build community, but can actually contribute to repairing students' self-esteem. This could be very significant for marginalized students. Furthering Marina's point, Carl describes:

> We have a general understanding of what they're doing on the weekends, we know when they've had a good day and a bad day, we spend a lot of time talking with them at lunch time or just organizing breakfast, those kinds of things. So we spend a lot of time working one on one. Working one on one is extremely difficult to do in a regular high school. There's just not enough hours in the day […] We have smaller class sizes […] And you're dealing with a whole bunch of kids who also understand where the rest of the students are coming from cause they're going through very similar things. So for the kids it's very important that they also understand what everybody's going through.

In addition to highlighting teachers' close involvement with students' lives, Carl points to a solidarity between students that is sealed by their ability to relate to one another and withstand similar difficult circumstances. This solidarity between students will be expanded on below.

6.3.2 Where Not Being the Norm is the Norm: The Solidarity in Relatability

Students in alternative schools are unified by their marginalization and can therefore empathize with and respect one another's struggles within and beyond state schooling. Because the alternative schools in this study do not house dominant social and economic groups of students that state schooling environments are more broadly designed to serve, marginalized students are enabled to be themselves and feel like *they* are "normal" at school. Jocelyn and George, students at Alt School 4, discuss the school's high population of LGBTQ+ students, and how more subtle forms of acceptance powerfully naturalize marginalized identities that are traditionally alienated:

> **Jocelyn:** I couldn't walk down the hallway holding my girlfriend's hand without us being called a few slurs. And here it's just normal, like nobody cares. It's not paid any attention to as something that bothers anybody and that's how it should be. At the beginning of the year, I could just walk around and my girlfriend and I could hold hands and it was fine. It was completely and utterly accepted. Nobody said anything about it. Whereas at my old school, I'd be in the bathrooms having panic attacks and being called a word that I'm not going to say.

> **George:** No one that I know of hides their identity or any portion of themselves that is super core to getting to know them […] There's an unsaid rule really that everybody knows that you just treat people here with respect in general. It's a constant thing. No one really has to say it. You kind of just feel it […] There are a bunch of students who identify as being in the LGBTQ community. And that's just an accepted thing […] It's not talked about as if it's a different thing, it's just the way it is, so there's definitely a huge normalization of it […] They don't make a big deal about pronouncing that to the world because that in itself suggests that there is something different, which even if there is something different, suggesting that there is sometimes has a negative connotation.

Both Jocelyn and George highlight an incredibly important nuance to acceptance and inclusivity at Alt School 4—that is, how valuable the simply unspoken normalization of LGBTQ+ (or other marginalized identities) at Alt School 4 makes their identities a non-issue, which could have empowering impacts by allowing marginalized students to move past what has historically been used against them in other institutional environments. George makes an important distinction that drawing attention to identity—that is, the louder, more explicit acceptance, can generate unwarranted negative attention. In the same way dominant group identities are normalized by the fact that they are not discussed, Alt School 4, according to Jocelyn and George, accomplishes this dynamic with identities that are traditionally scrutinized—pointing to, seemingly, a balance struck between equity-driven, outward acceptance, and the necessary social impartiality that constitutes normalcy. The way George says "you can just feel it" speaks to an unquantifiable atmosphere, demonstrating why schools should not be wholly examined through concrete or rational measures of success, but rather, the more subtle relational dynamics that account for more than just running a school. Remi comments on how the acceptance at Alt School 1 is partly enabled by hierarchies not existing between actual students:

> Just feeling that acceptance from the staff and also from the students here […] There's no hierarchy between students […] We're all equal as students. It's okay for everybody to talk to everybody […] I feel very comfortable in this place and I know that there are people that accept me and do care about me and that helps a lot and in the middle of the courses that helps as well. Just knowing that I am accepted as who I am in this building. I feel happy to be here.

Zayn from Alt School 2, makes a telling remark about the harm in the identity restraint marginalized students carry out to cope in socially toxic school environments:

> I really like the fact that I can be open about who I am instead of hiding who I am. Hiding who I am just brought me more pain.

Zayn's distinction that hiding his identity brought him *more* pain implies that he was already in pain before feeling compelled to subdue parts of himself. Zayn's comment illustrates the systemic and structural oppression that marginalized students face outside of school, making something that is already difficult—suppressing one's identity to fit the status quo—likely even more wearing. It is therefore crucial that alternative schools provide empathetic and caring environments to compensate for the foundational vulnerability of their student populations.

6.3.3 Empathy and Care

A prevalent theme that emerged in conversations about how alternative schools foster communities conducive to marginalized students' needs was the culture of empathy and care. The necessity and importance of empathy and care, particularly for marginalized students, is obvious, yet still, many student participants noted alternative schools being anomalous in their provision of such an environment. Beth, a teacher, describes this environment at Alt School 3:

> It means a safe place where people will want to come to […] And that is all about the people, it's about the caring adults in the buildings […] I think we're very privileged here to have […] eight caring full-time staff, and I like to think that the students think that as well […] We did have a climate survey that the TDSB did a couple of years ago. Most schools had damning results where the students didn't feel cared for at all. We had staggeringly good results because we are a community. When the students come through the door, we joke at each intake…we say, "you're either going to find us really annoying or really endearing." The kids are going to get greeted with "hey, how are you doing, how are you doing." We're going to get up in their face, because we want to know how you're doing, we want to invest in that, so to me that's what it means to be at a place that serves marginalized students. It's not fixing. It's caring. It's not just fluffy caring.

The distinction Beth makes between fixing, caring, and "fluffy" caring is important. The notion of fixing students prevails in neoliberal educational contexts that alienate marginalized youth (Bulman, 2005), whereas the implications of "fluffy" caring are identifiable in popularized, colonial discourses of cosmopolitanism, voluntourism, and global citizenship that ignore systemic and structural inequity in naïve favour of one singular and/or global "community" (Jefferess, 2012; Mahrouse, 2012). None of these contexts effectively—and arguably,

intentionally—serve the best interests of the populations such approaches claim to serve. Quinn attests to the caring environment at Alt School 3:

> I have nothing…nothing bad to say about here. Like usually, like I'd be like "oh I'm going to this hellhole again" and I don't feel that way when I come here because they work with you. They don't work against you, you know. But in mainstream schools that are normal, a lot of them, like a lot of teachers, like they would make this joke, like "oh well, I still get my cheque anyways." You don't hear that here, like they want to help you.

Quinn describes how at Alt School 3, teachers have a genuine desire to work with, not against, marginalized students, and take their job in doing so seriously. She frames these teachers as rejecting a familiar apathetic attitude that sees the profession as a means to a financial end, regardless of the efforts (or lack thereof) put in to assist students. There is an important nuance to be cautious of in positive discussions around caring for marginalized students, however. Even when a student feels like a well-intentioned teacher is working with them, falling into the trap of neoliberal, individualistic mechanisms of care is a possibility in the absence of more explicit "fixing" rhetoric. Several student participants, while applauding the caring and empathetic efforts of teachers, illuminate marginalized students being made to feel, largely, like they play a role in their fate and that once *the students* come to *realize* this, then, and only then, will teachers reciprocate helpful engagement. This is evident in Quinn's expansion on the student-teacher dynamics at Alt School 3:

> They're more one on one. And they will literally stay after school instead of going home, just to help you. You're like a priority in this school. Yeah, that's right […] So if you want to make yourself a priority, they will like, give you the same energy you know, like if you go and talk to them about something they will keep checking on you but if you don't, they won't know to do it […] It's just amazing because I never had, like I had foster parents that just didn't care. I went to school with people that didn't care. So, for my whole life I was just doing bad stuff. And then I came here, and it just showed me that you know what, there's actually people that care about you. You just have to find them […] So yeah, they fight for us a lot.

In discussing the care Quinn feels she receives at Alt School 3, she also designates this care as available only *after* a student makes themselves a priority—that if students fail to engage in a way that makes their presence known, teachers "won't know to do it"—to initiate the interactions that marginalized students necessarily need. If the benefit of doubt is given to this anecdote, then the following question still prevails: if the purpose of these alternative schools is to serve marginalized students, would it not be reasonable to expect teachers to "know to do

it"—to care for and re-engage with marginalized students without requiring the students themselves to lay the foundations for this dynamic to occur? Or, is the anecdote more accurately that students have to prove themselves as the "right" kind of marginalized student—the student who was born into disadvantageous circumstances but has a "good" attitude and desire to leave that life behind and change the trajectory of their future, and therefore, teachers are graciously willing to work with them. Lee, a student at Alt School 1, describes the responsibility he learned to adopt at Alt School 1 that correlates with such a trope:

> When I first came here I had that mentality like I wouldn't be showing up to school […] But having that experience where they're incredibly understanding and not mad at you, you tend to start developing that behaviour or that habit of "well, I'm messing up, I better start showing up and talking to teachers" right, instead of avoiding them. That definitely is something that I experienced that's changed in my behaviour in the way that I have approached problems […] There's a feeling like they can actually do their job, like they're actually succeeding in what they're doing […] They feel success when they see a student actually listening to them and actually succeeding that wasn't heading into a proper life trajectory and can actively change that.

While developing more productive habits for himself is not a bad thing, Lee's comment brings forward an important dichotomy by contrasting the caring teachers who are always there for the student when *the student* is ready, against the marginalized student making poor choices. The anecdote is that the onus is completely left to the student to pull themselves up by their bootstraps, so they will be able to reap benefits from those teachers—the supportive adults who have been there all along. This perception that marginalized students are the key players in changing their life circumstances harmfully disregards more powerful impacts that systemic and structural inequity have on the trajectories of colonized subjects' lives. Martin, an 18-year-old male living with a disability from Alt School 1, explains:

> There's a lot of human resources here […] I think that it's more personal here and because it's on a smaller scale […] There is an incentive here, because all our resources want us to do well. I do believe that […] there's a lot of experienced people here and they understand a lot of the troubles that teens have had and I think that they really do wanna help us get to where we want to be on an individual […] it's really about helping the individual.

The ways that Martin interprets the benefits of a small school similarly points to an incentive for students to do better for themselves by meeting the teachers halfway. Martin precisely understands this dynamic through individualism too, by arguing "it's really about helping the

individual"—again, an interpretation likely cast on students by teachers that it is on the *students and only the students* to gain upward mobility.

6.4 Conclusion

Indeed, the small size of alternative schools allows for more of a community to be built—one that has several positive outcomes like providing a place for students who do not fit the norm to unify on this basis and feel safe to be themselves at school. Additionally, the smaller size of alternative schools certainly allows for more interpersonal dynamics between students and teachers that allow for them to have relationships they may not be able to have in mainstream schools, if not just for logistical reasons. Nevertheless, the ways in which teachers deal with marginalized students are not so much about radical change and adaptation, as they are about just simply engaging them in a community, and while many students appreciate these more empathetic and caring environments, the nature of this empathy and care has been necessarily questioned through the ways in which neoliberal, individual values infiltrate state schools—even alternatives, resulting in an onus being placed on marginalized students to gain upward mobility themselves. This can often result in ignoring how systemic inequitable structures play a substantial role in the life outcomes of marginalized students, and in their reasoning for needing an alternative school. This phenomenon will be further expanded on in Chapter 8.

CHAPTER 7
THE LIMITATIONS OF ALTERNATIVE SCHOOLS THAT EXIST WITHIN A STATE EDUCATION SYSTEM

This chapter outlines how the limitations to alternative secondary schools relate back to their existence within a settler colonial state education system. It became clear that in order to fairly investigate participants' experiences in alternative schools, and specifically, how alternative schools are or are not serving the needs of marginalized students, it was necessary to address the ways in which participants see alternative schools as being constrained by the state schooling system they reside in, a trend discussed previously in Chapter 3. The alternative schools in this study exist within the same system whose practices they are meant to steer away from. My data reveals that since alternative schools exist within a settler colonial educational context, they too, like mainstream schools, are ideologically impacted and informed by the institutional norms that characterize state schooling. This is not to say that alternative schools cannot serve as spaces of resistance; after all, anti-colonial thought takes place within a settler colonial context, and it is not unreasonable to argue that effective change in a system can take place within, not just outside of, that system. Despite the systemic and structural barriers that challenge alternative education, the alternative schools in this study nevertheless maintain some noteworthy differences from mainstream schools, as discussed in Chapter 6. The alternative schools in this study are faced with additional difficulties in establishing and accrediting themselves within the TDSB and Ontario's Ministry of Education. The advertising they are deprived of causes students who need them to be unaware of their existence, and the stigma that surrounds alternative schools contributes to widespread misconceptions about what they are and who their students are, further impacting potential enrollment, as well as public recognition.

7.1 Square Peg, Round Hole: Trying to be an Alternative State School

Many teacher participants discussed an incompatibility of the alternative school model with the state schooling system and its standardized expectations. These conversations typically drew on the constraints to alternative schools' freedom with constructing alternative scheduling (though, several student participants positively referenced the later start times, take-home components, and shorter hours at their schools), meeting standardized provincial expectations,

and the fear of funding cuts. Marina presents her overarching understanding of the confines that alternative schools face by pointing to the gap between theories of alternative schooling and how alternative schools operate in practice:

> In theory, they are a 100% wonderful thing. In praxis, how the staff make it work, they are fantastic. Where it gets a little muddy is with the bureaucracy and the sense that you know, an alternative school is staffed the same way a mainstream school is staffed […] And that's because, you know…like we have a union with its rules, we have a Ministry of Education with its funding guidelines, you have a TDSB with its budgetary requirements, yet you have an alternative school. So the alternative school is supposed to function in an alternative manner that's flexible and equitable, yet at the same time, conform to very standardized systems placed on it and that is like, that's antithetical to one another, that's not in sync […] I do think that if the infrastructure allowed for a little more alternative thinking, funding, scheduling—that would make it the perfect solution.

Marina describes alternative schools and the systematic expectations of state schooling as incompatible. Being expected to operate within two distinct approaches to schooling also burdens alternative schools with the extra work of filling multiple roles with limited funding and resources. The adage that oppressed groups have to perform at double, triple, or quadruple the rate that privileged groups do to even a racist, classist, sexist, ableist playing field translates to the additional, and often invisible labour alternative schools have to do while operating in a state education system. Andre, a teacher at Alt School 2, believes that the ideological confines on alternative schools are not so much within the TDSB, but rather, Ontario's Ministry of Education and current government:

> So, I'd say in the Board, they have a pretty positive view of what we're doing. I'd say from the provincial point of view, I don't think they get it. We're getting more and more directives from them saying "why aren't your instructional hours the same as the collegiate?" or "why is your timetable like this?" And they're auditing alternative schools […] They don't care if your name is alternative or if you're working with all marginalized students […] If your schedule doesn't line up with their norms, then they question your funding. And now the concern with the provincial government of Doug Ford—the Conservative government—is, are they going to look at alternative schools as low hanging fruit and just slash—tell the boards to slash funding for us—for the grants that we rely on?

Andre's statement brings to attention how alternative schools are sometimes denied the liberty to execute alternative practices. While the stakeholders in the schools doing the work might see and really believe in their purpose to re-engage students who have been historically underserved by state schools, perhaps the Ministry only sees them as institutions to house the students who "disrupt" the mainstream system. Andre's description also references the rigidity and impersonal

nature of bureaucracies that participants discussed in Chapter 5—seen here in the Ministry's inability to adapt to multiple or alternative forms of scheduling, which is a necessary component to these schools being able to provide alternative programming. Andre also signals a fear that other participants made note of, being that alternative schools are already underfunded compared to mainstream schools, and participants feel like the schools are always at risk of further funding cuts. This fear was escalated by the 2018 provincial election of the Conservative Party, which has voiced multiple plans to make drastic cuts to public education funding (Draaisma, 2019). Charlie, a teacher at Alt School 4, has similar views to Andre regarding the TDSB's positive view of alternative schools, and the simultaneous spectre of alternative schools' future financial restraints:

> I appreciate the TDSB. I think it's one of the few boards that fights to have alternative schools […] especially when we look at neighboring boards and how many alternative schools they have and […] how they view those purposes of the schools […] I worry about the times that we are moving into, in terms of current governments and cutbacks. I think alternative schools could be part of those cutbacks because we don't always have the same degree of achievement […] It has been about having to fight for or show what the purpose is of alternative schools, that we *have* a purpose in terms of re-engagement, that success is not purely defined as credit accumulation […] We need to start like, acknowledging that success happens far before that […] When it comes to bean counting, and when each student has sadly a dollar amount tied to them according to the Ministry, that's when the bureaucracy, I find, gets caught up. […] For example, if a student has been non-attending—if they're over the age of 18—and they're non-attending for 15 consecutive days, we have to take them off roll. And I think that just adds to further marginalization.

Charlie challenges the validity of provincial standards like credit accumulation, arguing that they can further marginalize students by pushing them out of the system when they show behaviours that paradoxically require re-engagement, which alludes to the "falling through the cracks" metaphor discussed in Chapter 5. She also points to the surplus labour that alternative schools must perform just to keep their place, like Marina does, as well as the fight some staff put up just to prove their school's existence is worthwhile. Charlie also highlights that the Ministry of Education gives minimal feedback and collaboration on how to create an alternative learning environment, leaving the schools with little guidance and immense pressure to perform in a way that will not jeopardize their operations:

> The discussions we've had over curriculum being 110 hours, and how do we meet those 110 hours from a day to day basis? That's been part of the conversations that we've had, with very little clarity coming from the Ministry. Like, what does blended learning look

> like? What do they want to see if a student is doing online? How do they see that attendance being met? There's very little clarity.

Alana, another teacher at Alt School 4, discusses issues that arise in alternative schools when they are audited, something that happened at Alt School 4, and happens in other cities at other alternative schools too:

> **Alana:** I think we're lucky to have them [alternative schools]. They [alternative schools] don't exist everywhere. They did an audit in Ottawa a few years ago and the results of the audit from all the alternative schools was they shut them all.
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> **Alexandra:** How many were there, do you know?
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> **Alana:** Ten. Less than in Toronto. And we got audited as well—our program—which is why we're now a mainstream curriculum. We used to do an hour of class every day, five classes or four teachers teaching four a semester, and then with online component, so they audited and deemed that we couldn't prove that the kids had done the work, basically, and so the TDSB got fined a lot of money […] Like, three quarters of a million dollars is a big fine. But they shut the ones in Ottawa, they hit the Ottawa school boards with fines, Ottawa said, "okay" and shut them.

In the same way that Dalia chose to isolate herself as a result of the punitive harassment she was subjected to in school, alternative schools may feel inclined to halt their operations rather than continue the laborious fight to stay open if they are constantly being monitored and scrutinized by state education standards. Yasmina highlights an interpersonal example of the misalignment with meeting marginalized students' needs and simultaneously, provincial education standards, as well as the inherent inequity in expecting marginalized students to meet universal, standardized expectations:

> We just came out of exams and it was kind of a really incredible thing to bear witness to, just the level of stress present in the population—a population that is already carrying a lot of stress. You know, these kids coming to school is like an A+ right. Having these required exams is something that adds stress onto something that's already really hard for a lot of them to do.

Yasmina acknowledges that marginalized students are already withstanding more stress than, perhaps, an "average" student population, pointing to the fact that even making it into school is an accomplishment sometimes, and bringing forward the question of whether completing exams is really worth compromising the emotional state of already vulnerable students, which will be explored more in Chapter 8.

The incompatibility of alternative schools' operational and logistical needs with standardized provincial expectations ranges from conflicting mainstream and alternative ideologies, scheduling needs versus expectations, underfunding and fear of future funding cuts, and contentions with Ontario's current government. Teachers do not see the Board as an issue so much as the overarching provincial expectations coming from the Ministry that impede alternative schools' abilities to be alternative and deny them credibility for being functional, just because they attempt to stray from some state schooling norms.

7.2 Advertising

Several participants agreed that alternative schools are not well-advertised. Many students found out about them by chance, through word of mouth, or very late into their high school careers, and there are even teachers and staff in the Board who were/are unaware of alternative schools or have misconceptions of them. The latter will be expanded on more in section 7.3. Tony, an administrator, relates the lack of advertising to the underfunding that participants referenced in 7.1:

> [We] have very small schools and a very small budget. [We] can't afford to advertise. Smaller places get smaller, bigger places get bigger. Why? The small places have a small budget and the big places have a big budget […] Something [we are] continually trying to rectify is the advertising.

Even some of the teachers who now work in alternative schools were unaware of their existence prior to being assigned to work in them. While they all note being happy working in them now, many of their testimonies show that working in an alternative school is not a choice so much as it is a job placement. Given the vulnerable populations that alternative schools are supposed to re-engage, would it not be appropriate to assign teachers with critical equity orientations to such schools? Andre from Alt School 2 points to a superintendent in the Board being unaware of alternative schools' existence, specifically regarding the year round schooling model that alternative schools commonly adopt:

> I would say that when I started here, we were almost like not really well known. There was even a story in the Toronto Star when Dalton McGuinty was the Premier that said "TDSB is exploring year round schooling as a model." Because Dalton McGuinty apparently was big on that idea. And then we were sitting around the table going "what do you mean explore—we exist!" So, one of our teachers wrote a letter saying, "we actually exist, the Board has us already." So, one superintendent in the Board had no idea that that actually had started five years earlier.

According to participants, the year round schooling model caters to marginalized students by providing them with more flexible opportunity windows to register on an ad hoc basis. The year round schooling model has "quadmesters"—four terms—running year round, in which students can enroll at the beginning of any quadmester. So, while the accommodations are there, the reality that the students who need alternative schools may not find out about them persists. Nikita, a 19-year-old student at Alt School 3 who identifies as LGBTQ+ and living with mental health issues, says:

> The only reason I found out about it was because I was looking at options to finish high school and my guidance counselor directly recommended it to me. When you're applying to high schools and stuff, they don't really give you any options. They don't tell you about it and you kind of just have to mostly find out about it on your own. Or for me personally, I was struggling throughout all my four years and no one ever said anything to me like "maybe this school isn't right for you, maybe there's something better." So, it's kind of like they hide them away a bit, almost like they're a bad thing, but it's really good to be here.

Nikita struggled for four years before being recommended an alternative school and argues that students are unfortunately left to their own devices to seek other options when they are struggling to complete their education. This, again, contributes to the additional and often invisible labour that marginalized groups are expected to perform in order to attain equitable means. Nikita also alludes to the stigma that surrounds alternative schools in her statement "they hide them away a bit, almost like they're a bad thing" which will be expanded on in 7.3. Remi from Alt School 1 explains:

> I feel like it wasn't advertised well to me because first it was only told to me by my therapist, which, there's nothing wrong with that, but she told my school about it in a meeting that was designed to discuss me as being a problem, and so then she mentioned Alt School 1 is a good opportunity for Remi. And so my school just kept pushing and that's why it was so negative in my mind, but would be a place that I would go to if I fail, but that's not what Alt School 1 is at all, and I don't feel it was very well advertised to me.

Remi learned about alternative schools through what was potentially a very pathologizing and ostracizing mechanism—that is, in "a meeting that was designed to discuss [her] as being a problem." As discussed previously in Chapter 5, alternative school only became an option for students like Remi after she had suffered for a substantial period of time. In contrast to several students' experiences of not having alternative schools sufficiently advertised to them, Lee from

Alt School 1 notes it was advertised to him how he feels it should have been, though he recognizes that his experience is an anomaly:

> I guess the message [the advertising], it's kind of like broken telephone right […] I think my experience with how it was advertised is how it should have been advertised, and I also in fact realize that's not the majority. It was advertised for people who might have social ineptitudes but who are higher academically, or like higher IQs and stuff like that. I chose to come here 100%. I missed my entire grade twelve year because I just couldn't show up. Having a school that was advertised in that way was very appealing for me […] I just got lucky.

It is noteworthy that Lee says Alt School 1 was advertised to him as "people who might have social ineptitudes but who are higher academically." His statement, like Nikita and Remi's, is indicative of a stigma that normally exists surrounding alternative schools. Alternative school reputations are bound by stereotypes and misconceptions, corresponding with poor advertising. The poor advertising of alternative schools, and the resulting lack of awareness and knowledge of them is prevalent on a student, staff, and administrative level, and the persistent stigmatization of these spaces contributes further to their own marginalization in the state education system.

7.3 Stigma

In their focus group, students at Alt School 1—a school with a uniquely large population of academic, university-bound students—agreed that alternative schools are plagued by unbecoming stereotypes and misconceptions, in part because of, but also sustained by, insufficient advertising. Simultaneously, this conversation revealed how students internalize the mainstream ideologies that harm alternative schools' reputations and ostracize the "types of students" who attend alternative schools, generating a compelling contradiction between students attempting to deconstruct alternative school stigmas in their defense, while also promoting other kinds of stigmas about the schools and their students. In his book *Hollywood Goes to High School: Cinema, Schools, and American Culture*, Robert Bulman (2005) highlights how American Hollywood films depict students at inner-city state schools as not having "the right manners, the right behavior, or the right values to succeed in school" (p. 51). These students are typically portrayed as violent gang members, criminals carrying weapons, and working class "animals," which suggests that the problems in these schools are "rooted in student behavior, and, furthermore, that their behavior is rooted in an inferior culture" (p. 51). Bulman's (2005) analysis relevantly prefaces the focus group discussion that unfolded at Alt School 1:

> **Alexandra:** Do you think these kinds of alternative schools need to be advertised better? Cause it seems you almost found them really late in the game, or almost by fluke.
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> **Keisha:** Well I knew alternative schools out there existed but like, I always thought, you know, I'll get better and I'll feel better and I don't need to go to alternative school cause like, I can handle my life well enough to be able to go to just a regular old public school. And then it hit me that going to an alternative school is not a bad thing. It's gonna help me a lot more with succeeding […] The preconception of an alternative school is completely different than what they actually are. I thought that they were just for people who wanted to get the open courses or college courses. I never thought I would get to take the university biology class or the classes I wanted to take that actually interested me. Now I know it's for people of all mental capacities I guess.
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> **Nolan:** When I'd first heard of alternative schools I thought of students with disabilities or students in a wheelchair […] I didn't think I was qualified […] I had this idea that they were for weaker people who really need help where I'm just—I don't have any health issues making me need that school so yeah, that's a stigma where people assume that alternative schools are for physically disabled kids but it's not like that. It's for anyone who needs help […] Their parents passed away or something like that. They're physically fine but life kind of hit them hard so even for them an alternative school is good.

In their efforts to highlight that alternative schools are accessible and inclusive—that they do not narrowly cater to just one "type of student"—Keisha and Nolan seem to portray an ableist mentality with "physically disabled kids" at the bottom of the hierarchy. Keisha realizes now that alternative schools are "for people of all mental capacities" and similarly, Nolan used to think they were for "weaker" people, when really, they are for "anyone who needs help," like those whose "parents passed away" or are "physically fine but life kind of hit them hard"—identities that Nolan perhaps sees as more palatable, acceptable, or human. Nolan in particular, is also reductively simplifying marginalization by associating one issue with one student, as opposed to a more intersectional understanding. The intersectionality of marginalization is evident in this study alone, in how many student participants have identified with typically between two to four factors that engender their systemic and structural oppression. Josie, a student at Alt School 1, recalls:

> My mom thought that alternative schools were […] for kids with disabilities or had like behavioural issues […] But when I actually went…it was all word of mouth like friends and stuff told me about it.

Similar to Nolan, Josie's mother thought alternative schools were "for kids with disabilities" to make a distinction between Josie and those students, and the negative connotations associated

with disabled identities (Campbell, 2008). Remi and Lee discuss the clichés and stereotypes surrounding alternative schools that they believed prior to attending Alt School 1:

> **Remi:** My mom looked at Alt School 1 and she saw how the students look here and they looked nothing like the picture that my mother showed me a few years ago. They were like, very stereotypical alternative kids.
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> **Lee:** Like mohawks.
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> **Remi:** Yeah and like piercings and […] She was like, "you don't want to go here" and I remember being really scared about what the students would be like. I felt like I wouldn't fit in and would just want to get out as soon as possible. When I did go here, I did feel like I did make the choice that I was going to Alt School 1, but I wasn't happy with that choice. I felt it was bad that I had to go here because I didn't understand what Alt School 1 really was. I had this negative idea about it which was completely false and what pushed me to go here was I felt too embarrassed to go back to the collegiate after missing so much time.

Remi and Lee are evidently influenced by the quintessential stereotypes about "deviant" students that Bulman (2005) points out, by constructing negative images of a certain "kind of person" (Gee, 2000) at a certain kind of school—a school that Remi was not eager to attend. Similar to Keisha and Nolan, they distinguish themselves from these students, seemingly viewing themselves as more acceptable or palatable marginalized students. At Alt School 4, students had a similar discussion in their focus group about the stigmas, clichés, and stereotypes surrounding alternative schools, but did not hierarchize marginalization or distinguish themselves as the "right" kind of student. While some students at Alt School 4 are academically inclined and move on to post-secondary education after, students at Alt School 4 did not explicitly identify with this component, whereas participants at Alt School 1 did in various discussions. Gabby, a 19-year-old female student at Alt School 4 of mixed racial origin (Chinese and white), with a history of mental health issues says:

> There is a huge stigma. And I know that funding would be up if the numbers were up […] I legitimately had staff at my previous school have a meeting to figure out how I was going to move forward at the end of the grade 10 year. The quote was "why would you go to an alternative school? That's for kids who bring knives to school." That was from a staff member. And that's not even an outside person, that's an internal TDSB employee, so how are alternative schools going to grow, and have a better reputation, when there's not even an understanding with the people who could be recommending them to students…like it's…I think it's pretty crazy.

Unlike the previously mentioned TDSB employees who were unaware of alternative schools, Gabby identifies a teacher who knew them well, but constructed an incredibly negative and

stereotypical image of marginalized students who attend them, falling into the same designations that Bulman (2005) critiques in American Hollywood films' depictions of students in inner-city state schools. Instead of distinguishing herself as one of the "good" marginalized students, Gabby instead points to the harm of the unfavourable misconceptions surrounding alternative schools. Dalia recalls an interaction she had in summer school:

> Even though our school is doing pretty well for an alternative school, it's just kind of pushed aside. I also wish the stigma of alternative schools stopped. I remember in summer school I was doing well, and I was like "this is pretty easy" and someone was like "are you sure? You went to an *alternative school"* and I was like "okay, clearly somebody's trying to insult me right now."

In the same way that Alt School 1 students differentiated themselves from their original assumptions of what an alternative school student is, the student Dalia spoke to in summer school differentiated their self from her, by doubting Dalia's academic abilities and scorning her for attending an alternative school.

7.4 Conclusion

This chapter demonstrated how alternative schools fare in the state education system; how they are seen by students, teachers, staff, and the general public; and the barriers alternative schools face to actually *being* alternative, according to participants. Seemingly, alternative schools still exist under the radar, and their purposes are not widely recognized or respected, particularly by the Ministry of Education. Participants noted that while alternative schools are already underfunded, they worry about future funding cuts due to the Ministry's underappreciation of them and disregard of their needs, as well as the Conservative government's anticipations for reduced funding in Ontario's public education sector (Draaisma, 2019). The lack of advertising and ensuing knowledge deficits on alternative schools impact students' chances of discovering them, and even teachers' and administrators' awareness of them, despite the fact that Toronto has such a uniquely large district of alternative schools. Consequently, the stigmatized reputations of alternative schools prevail, and alternative school communities themselves are not exempt from stigmatized discourses, as revealed in the focus group discussion at Alt School 1, which will be further expanded on in Chapter 8.

CHAPTER 8
DOING GOOD DOESN'T ALWAYS DO GOOD: ADDRESSING THE SYMPTOMS, NOT THE CAUSES

> A single event cannot, by itself, provide the healing and long-term sustenance required to maintain hope amid conditions of suffering. (Duncan-Andrade, 2009, p. 184)

Student and teacher participants discussed the prevalent epidemic of mental health issues among marginalized students and how alternative schools address this obstacle. They mainly do this by prioritizing nurturing students' well-being alongside their academic engagement and achievement (often, only the latter is addressed in state schools), and providing ample mental health resources and normalizing mental health issues, rather than stigmatizing them. This chapter transitions into an analysis of how mental health accommodations can frame students' marginalization as individualized rather than systemically and structurally produced. That is, mental health issues are often well-accommodated at alternative schools, but these interventions exist in lieu of a keener focus on their root causes relating to race, class, gender and sexuality, and/or (dis)ability. This individualized, symptomatic approach is well-intentioned and well-received based on the positive feedback expressed by students and teachers; however, mental health accommodations likely only provide temporary relief from the broader, powerfully ingrained systemic and structural barriers that deeply inform the lived experiences of marginalized students.

8.1 The Mental Health Epidemic in Alternative Schools

Mental health issues—specified by participants as depression, anxiety, suicidal tendencies and ideation, panic disorder, OCD, and ADHD—are widespread in alternative schools, both as a symptom and an avenue of students' marginalization. The pervasiveness of mental health issues is something that the schools in this study have in common, but they are also differentiated by the intersectional nuances of individual students' experiences with this phenomenon. Where the students and the schools differ are the ways in which students' mental health needs manifest as various symptoms, as well as the life situations and pathways of those students. Carl, a teacher, describes how students' mental health issues manifest at Alt School 1:

> Unfortunately, if that kid wants to take their life, they do so […] This school allows them a few more years so they can get into a better place, a better frame of mind, and it might take a while, but once they get there, you know, two, three, four years later, they're going to be different people. So, you allow them a time where they feel comfortable, where they enjoy being back at school. Some of them will get that love of learning and want to move on and flourish but in the grand scheme of things, your atmosphere at your school allows them the opportunity to keep on going rather than be at home by themselves […] There's hundreds and hundreds and hundreds of cases where we've had to take kids to the hospital, where we've actually picked them up at the hospital and brought them to the school, honestly there's hundreds, probably over a thousand cases in the last twenty years.

Carl points to how the flexibility and atmosphere of alternative schools, as described in Chapter 6, buys more time for marginalized students to take care of their mental health. Many alternative schools, like Alt School 4, are only able to enroll students 16 years of age and older, but Charlie, a teacher, argues that there are crucial benefits to accepting students younger than 16 to treat their mental health concerns earlier in their high school career:

> If we were beginning to open our doors and catch them earlier—just two years ahead provides a huge opportunity for interventions […] Parents have a much stronger role before the age of 16 with regards to mental health. As soon as a kid is 16 years old in the medical system, there is a different consent piece. There's always that 18 in the Board, minors are 18 or under 18, but within a medical system a parent can insist on a child, like, having medical interventions at 14, 15 and they lose that opportunity as soon as they turn 16. So, we're thinking we might be able to better support them if we're seeing them at 14 and 15 and working with them two years prior.

Charlie draws attention to the importance of early interventions, but this too, has its limits because it requires parental presence, awareness, and involvement—something that many students do not necessarily have. More importantly, though, Charlie argues that parents are more likely to be involved with their children before the age of 16, so if Alt School 4 could take students younger than 16, the potential for greater parental involvement could help with mental health interventions for those students. Parental collaboration with teachers, where possible, would also be helpful since teachers at alternative schools are still teachers, not trained mental health professionals. Alana, another teacher at Alt School 4, discusses the impact the weight of students' mental health issues can have on her teaching job:

> Sometimes you have a hard week and lots of people are struggling and it's hard not to empathize with when everyone's feeling anxious or depressed and they bring that energy into the room […] It's hard to work against that all the time. It's hard to be the beacon of positivity when no one else is feeling it and that is my job here, a fair bit, so that's tiring.

What might be additional work put in by teachers to accommodate mental health issues does not go unnoticed by students. Keisha, a student, describes how Alt School 1 helps ease her mental health issues so she can focus on academics:

> The biggest thing for me was mental health issues. I wouldn't go to school for like weeks and months on end just because going to school was a big stressor and going near the building, I couldn't even do that, so the school [Alt School 1] being really relaxed and cool with everything helps a lot with me and they do a lot of the advocating and the pre-thinking […] So I can just come and focus on my education and not worry about all the what ifs and everything else.

Keisha's indication that teachers do the "advocating" and "pre-thinking" exemplifies how teachers prepare and expect to deal with mental health issues at Alt School 1. This work does not put so much onus on the students to rectify their issues alone. In fact, alternative schools actually prioritize the mental well-being of their students before academics and encourage them to come to school and use the resources as coping mechanisms.

8.1.1 Redefining Success and Putting Mental Health Before Academics

At the alternative schools in this study, attending to students' well-being is just as important as other traditional measures of success, like academic engagement and achievement. Beth, a teacher at Alt School 3, reflects on the importance of meeting students' basic needs *before* they can be successful in other aspects of schooling:

> For some of them, coming in the school building every day is a much bigger achievement, for some of them, getting dressed and getting out of the house, or the shelter, or the foster home, or the couch they're sleeping on, is huge and we try to honour that […] You have to have your needs met before you can actually do any good […] We say this on a regular basis: "we don't care about your school work right now, we care about your safety, number one. We care about your well-being, health, let's focus on that." […] Because we have other people involved in the school, we're able to help students with that before the academics. We'll get to that when they do.

In his work on critical hope, Duncan-Andrade (2009) overviews recent research on correlations between hope, health, and life outcomes, which has found that utilizing hope as a mechanism to combat everyday stressors produces substantially positive outcomes in people's well-being, but this "control of destiny" is unevenly distributed in social hierarchies, rendering marginalized students' lives as largely controlled by systemic and structural inequities rather than their own autonomous action. Duncan-Andrade (2009) reminds us that:

> At the bottom of this social gradient, where urban youth are positioned, this "control of destiny" is almost nonexistent. David Williams, of the Harvard School of Public Health, argues that this results in the "accumulation of multiple negative stressors, and it's so many of them it's as if someone is being hit from every single side. And it's not only that they are dealing with a lot of stress, [it's that] they have few resources to cope. (p. 185; Adelman, 2008)

Inequity is strikingly apparent in the metaphor "it's as if someone is being hit from every single side." This overwhelming reality touches on a theme explored in Chapter 6: how alternative schools might be required to wear too many hats—namely, meeting marginalized students' basic human needs, while also providing them with an education. Not to mention—are teachers really cut out for this work? Duncan-Andrade (2009) comments on this phenomenon:

> The implications of chronic stress for teaching and learning are profound. Consider Abraham Maslow's (1943) hierarchy of needs, which defined a person's primary human needs (food, clothing, shelter, and safety) as prerequisites for pursuing needs higher up on the scale (such as education). When we connect the dots between Maslow's framework and the latest research on inequality, a serious dilemma is revealed for urban youth whose exposure to unremitting stressors leaves most, sometimes all, of their primary human needs under constant attack. When we are unwilling to confront these harsh realities of social inequality with our pedagogy—to cultivate their "control of destiny"—all we have left to offer youth is hope deferred. This offer comes when we ask our students to set their sights on some temporally distant (and highly unlikely) future well-being […] The student path is almost always individualistic in nature and […] students come to perceive a significant gap between their most pressing needs and the education we offer them. (p. 185)

Zayn, a student at Alt School 2, and Josie, a student at Alt School 1, expand on their own experiences with requiring their basic needs being met before taking on schoolwork:

> **Zayn:** They care for our mental health and our well-being before anything else. So, if you have financial issues or if someone's dealing with stress, they look at that seriously. If someone is dealing with problems at home, […] they work with you, they help, they make sure you're okay at home and school before you do work. They make sure you're mentally stable before you do work. They make sure you will be 100% focused on work and not worrying about anything else.

> **Josie:** When I didn't come back for a week and then I started coming back, the biggest thing was not that I had to do everything, it was just being in the building […] They just want you to be there and that's the most important thing. Even if you can't do the work, there's not so much pressure there […] They just want you to try to get into the routine of being there so you won't feel like when you have an anxiety thing to just curl up like a hermit cause that's when it snowballs. It's all about the habits and the self-care and I think it's really good.

Both Zayn and Josie's comments convey how their schools reduce the pressure that often surrounds academic engagement and achievement, instead simplifying circumstances at school for students by eliminating and reframing expectations for them. Nevertheless, there are the individualizing narratives that often ensue when teachers grapple with students' marginalization. That is, it is not common knowledge that these students are "being hit from every single side," and the considerable task of defending against these hits requires a sacrifice that most teachers are not willing or able to make (Duncan-Andrade, 2009, p. 185). This frequently employed neoliberal, individualistic stance will be expanded on more in section 8.2.

8.1.2 Mental Health Resources and Normalizing Mental Health Issues

Mental health issues are tangibly addressed and de-stigmatized by the numerous resources that the alternative schools in this study employ specifically for students' mental health needs. Typical resources include mental health counsellors, child and youth workers, social workers, partnerships with mental health clinics and hospitals, and direct lines of contact with psychologists, psychiatrists, and therapists. Carl, a teacher from Alt School 1, discusses how collaborations with these resources not only help to meet the needs of marginalized students, but also help the teachers better understand their roles as mediators between students and mental health professionals:

> We've been lucky enough since 2000 onwards to have a great relationship with some of the mental health hospitals in the area […] They would send psychologists, psychiatrists, social workers. We've had a lot of time spent with them, which allows us to understand more what the needs are of our kids who are coming with those mental health issues. So, we're more able to meet their needs. Having that many people who are understanding allows the kids to feel they're in a completely different environment than a regular collegiate.

The way an alternative school might distinguish itself as unconventional is evident in the number of people the schools have specifically dedicated to working with students' mental health issues. This is not exclusive to the professional resources either; as Carl explains, teachers become more

attuned to the mental health challenges their students face as a result of the presence of appropriate resources in alternative schools. Chapter 5 highlighted how state school bureaucracies limit students' abilities to receive and utilize basic accommodations and resources. Charlie, a teacher from Alt School 4, discusses the school's efforts to exhaust its mental health resources and work outside of bureaucracy to ensure marginalized students have consistent mental health assistance that exists and functions for them outside of school to have a more sustainable impact. Charlie states:

> Working with parents in that way, working with mental health and addictions nurses, reaching out to any resources that we have available […] Just exhausting our resources to meet the needs of the students to try and help them get back on track and have long-term support. And also knowing that […] when the Board provides a resource like a social worker, that that social worker goes on March break and they go on summer break, but mental health needs continue. And so, making sure that the child ultimately has supports outside the Board is the best way to support a kid that's marginalized. Knowing that mental health goes hand-in-hand with multiple degrees of marginalization, right, and what their experiences or their past experiences of trauma may be as well.

Charlie's statement suggests that alternative schools are not just schools with additional mental health resources; they can actually be catalysts for providing students with long-term mental health assistance, particularly in situations where a student has not previously accessed resources of this nature. Remi and Lee, students at Alt School 1, explain the benefits of an in-house mental health counsellor at their school:

> **Remi:** You can tell her about your struggles and […] just knowing that there's somebody there that I can talk to […] just knowing that she won't give me bad advice or cast my feelings aside. She can help me have a healthy perspective on things. It is huge and it's really beneficial for my mental health and I feel that it's very beneficial for all the students' mental health.
>
> **Lee:** Having somebody there that can actually help you figure out what's going on in your own life and make sense of it all is huge […] But that's one of the huge benefits to an alternative school, is having people that don't just educate you on calculus.

A specific example of these resources in action is given by Quinn, a student at Alt School 3, whose school social worker supported her through a crisis:

> Well I suffer with a lot of mental health issues and last year around November, I was going through a really bad breakup and I called the social worker in the school and I told her what had happened, and she was ready to call the police because I hurt myself […] She came to the hospital, she made sure I was okay. She calls like every single time she

> doesn't see me at school for more than two days. She will call and check to see if I'm okay.

Alt School 3 has full-time mental health staff, which helps with their ability to substantially intervene when a student is in a crisis. However, some participants highlighted how, unfortunately, the mental health resources in their school are only part-time, and/or are responsible for multiple schools. Given the severity that being at the bottom of a social gradient in a socially toxic environment can have (Adelman, 2008; Duncan-Andrade, 2009), full-time mental health staff is not an unreasonable necessity, particularly since alternative schools often have to perform more roles than they are capable.

8.2 Neoliberal Perceptions of Marginalization as Individualized

As supportive and accommodating as alternative schools can be, the actual rhetoric surrounding students' marginalization, spoken by both teachers and students themselves, takes a neoliberal approach that individualizes the problem and blames students and their immediate communities for their marginalization, placing the onus on students to solve their marginalization. This common narrative pathologizes students and their communities, while reinforcing harmful stereotypes that ignore systemic and structural experiences of oppression, both within and outside of school. Consequently, it is likely that the accommodating and flexible nature of alternative schools, while helpful, is limited to assisting students through situational struggles rather than transcending systemic and structural barriers that marginalize them. As classism, racism, heterosexism, and ableism operate in mundane ways, neoliberal individualism is subtly weaved into positive, well-intentioned narratives about how marginalized students are accommodated for their mental health. Vince, a teacher at Alt School 1, discusses the nature of students' marginalization:

> When people ask, "what is the focus of your school?" […] My answer is something along the lines of trying to give students the opportunities, or, trying to help students that have not otherwise been successful in a mainstream school, for whatever reason that could be: mental health problems, just needing a smaller, more caring type of environment. It could be helping them navigate a more complicated situation at home. We've had students that have had parents that are ill, or other issues at home and whatever it is that is sort of getting in the way of being successful…giving them either the tools or the help or the flexibility that they need to be able to still reach their academic potential regardless of other obstacles in their life—that they wouldn't be able to do, say, at a regular high school.

The statement of students "needing a smaller, more caring type of environment" frames the default mainstream environment as normal, the students who need a different environment as aberrant, and that "smaller, more caring type of environment" as special. How might it be the fault of the environment, rather than the students themselves, for requiring a different, smaller, more caring type of environment? What external structures might put students in a vulnerable enough position to need a smaller, more caring environment? "Navigating a more complicated situation at home" and students with ill parents reinforce "broken home" tropes and if it does not pathologize the students themselves, it pathologizes their "dysfunctional" families, blaming them for their children's struggles. It is necessary to instead ask how class, race, gender and sexuality, and disability contribute to these complicated situations at home, or contribute to health disparities so much so that a students' ability to attend school is hindered by their parents' illness. Cameron, a teacher at Alt School 2, seems to discuss individualistic rather than systemic or structural reasons as to why alternative schools are flexible with deadlines:

> Flexibility around deadlines—that's a huge thing. Really speaks from a marginalized point as well because a lot of times there is a very legitimate reason why a student can't meet a deadline. Collegiates discourage giving extensions without notes. Well, there's a whole hidden element of oppression to that because a lot of doctors charge for that and kids don't necessarily have the status to go see a doctor and get a note so, I mean, there's a lot of very good reasons: they can't get a ride, or they're babysitting. I feel like being able to allow more options and having a supportive staff and admin that allows you to do those things and make those acceptances is huge.

Cameron's statement is twofold. He recognizes systemic and structural oppression by addressing the "whole hidden element of oppression" to requiring doctor's notes for students who do not "have the status to go see a doctor and get a note." Nevertheless, he proceeds to reduce reasons for students needing extensions to not having a ride or babysitting, and stops there. While these reasons may be superficially true, they sound trivial when stated in isolation, and it is further necessary to ask how these circumstances are reflections of broader systemic and structural oppression that conflicts with schools' requirements. For instance, how might a classed and raced analysis of access to transportation better explain why a student might not have a ride to school? How might having to babysit be better explained by a classed and raced analysis of poor and working class families that require parents to take on multiple jobs, or require marginalized students to obtain jobs to support their family? Alana, a teacher from Alt School 4, discusses the student demographics at her school:

> Many of the kids are marginalized just because of family situations, so we are just the consistent adults, in a consistent warm place, with food and with usually relatively smiling faces. Different adults to bounce ideas off of.

Alana describes many of the students' marginalization as being *"just"* because of family situations—which, is actually not a form of systemic or structural marginalization on its own, since a family's disenfranchisement is inevitably related to broader social and economic barriers. Alana also pathologizes the adults in these situations, as well as the homes students come from, by referring to the school as "consistently warm" and the teachers in the school as the "consistent adults" and "different adults to bounce ideas off of." A school that is "consistently warm" is inherently being juxtaposed to the "broken home" trope discussed earlier in this section. "Consistent adults" at Alt School 4 implies that the adults in the students' lives are inconsistent and are thus to blame for their marginalization, and therefore having "different adults to bounce ideas off of" necessitates asking whether "different" implicitly just means better and improved. Tony, an administrator, intentionally or not, seems to blame the negative influence of marginalized students' communities on preventing them from upward mobility:

> Some of those students […] The pull or the limits of their family or community is just overwhelming. I've had a number of students saying, "this is all that's expected of me—to get a job, to finish high school." I had one young man who kept on saying "the only expectation for me is to become a gang member. That's the only expectation. Everybody's expecting me to do that." But he was a very talented musician, a wonderful writer, and had this innate ability to communicate in song and through his lyrics, but he felt the pull of his community and the identity that he gathered from that was strong.

Tony's statement implies that marginalized students' immediate communities hold them back. While one's community can have an impact on them, that community is also defined by the structures that it is confined by. It is also much fairer to assume that a student's immediate community wants good things for them. Additionally, Tony's identification of the student he discusses as a "talented musician" and "wonderful writer" with an "innate ability to communicate in song and through his lyrics" inherently possesses a form of saviourism (Cole, 2012), as though only Tony is able to identify this student's potential, and if it were not for the negative influence his community has, he would be able to harness his potential.

Marginalized students unfortunately internalize individual blame and responsibility towards themselves and their families in relation to their oppression. To illustrate an instance of this, the following is an excerpt from Lee, a student at Alt School 1, who, with the

encouragement of his teacher Carl, does this in the form of both self-deprecation and even appreciation for the "honesty" he received from his teacher regarding his circumstances:

> Having somebody care enough to actually be honest with me […] Having a teacher that cares enough to tell you your parents don't give a crap about you or where you're going to head in life and that it doesn't come down to them at all, it's up to you and stuff like that. My very first interview I had with Carl—he said he can usually tell if someone can succeed or not. He had no idea with me. The honesty to actually just talk to me on that human level […] I'd never encountered honesty before I came here and for somebody who questions a lot, that honesty is huge cause for once you can establish some kind of like, objectivity to stuff when people are honest with you about how things are. Maybe not objectivity but credibility I guess, and validation.

The "honesty" Lee receives from Carl is stated as though it is factual and in a way that makes degrading assumptions about Lee's family. Carl distinguishes Lee from his family as one of one of the "good" ones, leaving it up to Lee to unlock his potential that has been subdued by his community. Lee continues:

> When I first came here, I was definitely smart, but I was just depressed and angry and ignorant and […] I had no direction or opportunity and I had a chip on my shoulder […] Now I go home and I'm watching educational videos for fun. Thinking about what I was doing four years ago at the same time of night is kind of scary […] I had no life before I came here. When I say no life, I mean no hope, like I wasn't going anywhere in life. You look at the forty and 50-year-olds in my family and that's where I was heading. It was like dead or in jail type thing, or a drug addict […] A huge lesson I was taught is […] the responsibility is on my part […] I realized I had to stop blaming things on my environment and realize that it was my choice to have control of that stuff […] It's not due to any external factors at all […] It's just a choice […] something I think is the biggest message to Alt School 1 is that it is your choice. If you want to succeed, you can succeed […] It all comes down to you, everything is your responsibility […] I guess at certain ages, you know, you're eight and you have terrible parents and grew up in a terrible environment. You can't really say that's your choice but to an extent, at a certain point, it becomes your choice. And that's a thing Alt School 1 definitely teaches.

Lee is wrought with self-blame and family-blame and indicates himself as the problematic entity from the time he entered Alt School 1 up until he finally took "responsibility" for the outcome of his life. Despite the significant role systemic and structural factors play in marginalized students' lives, Lee's argument that "it's not due to any external factors at all" explicitly fails to take into account the systemic and structural, representing how he has internalized his own marginalization as his fault, as though it was Lee who was troubled and needed to be saved or educated into betterment, and that it is Alt School 1 that eventually enlightened him. Lee reduces this transformation to it being "just" a choice—as though this simple reality was over his head,

and the onus was solely on him to come to terms with it. Additionally, Lee sees Carl's pathologizing as a form of care rather than as the patronization, disdain of his family and community, and saviourism that it so clearly appears to be. Lee's excerpt is the epitome of neoliberal individualism at work in state schooling—a reproduction of the narratives that justify inequity as being related to lack of merit, laziness, and intellectual inferiority.

8.3 Accommodations are a Band-Aid

This section concludes this chapter by highlighting some of the noteworthy actions and accommodations in alternative schools, intending to show that while these actions are good, they are limited by the reality that they are isolated deeds which only alleviate the *symptoms* of systemic and structural oppression, rather than eradicate them. Beth, a teacher from Alt School 3, very honestly recognizes some of these restraints:

> I have a student who is extremely marginalized and every day they are not pregnant or in jail, is a good day and I'm not trying to be melodramatic saying that. They're really on the cusp, making, in their own words, "very poor decisions" and they live in very precarious situations in foster care […] But they keep bringing their butt through the door. And when they do—and yesterday was an example—they are spinning, just spinning, they couldn't cope, they could barely articulate, they're exhausted […] Myself and the trauma counsellors were able to drop everything […] They even said, "I can't even think about doing any work, my head doesn't work, I look at the words on the page, I don't even get it" […] And [the social worker] said, "sit down. Let's get you some food. Have you had any food? What do you want to eat? Let me go make you a sandwich. So now, tell me what's on your mind. Are you cold or are you hot?" They got some new hats and mitts and a winter coat, they were grinning, and by the time they left, their problems were not solved—far from it—but the referral was made to a mental health nurse, the psychologist was already doing an assessment with them […] To be able to give them some structure, a plan. We told the student they were precious, we told the student how valuable they were to us, and I think that's an example of the kinds of things we can do.

Beth does not exactly indicate the actual systemic and structural barriers the student faces, which could be a reflection of a more individualistic understanding of marginalization. Nevertheless, she recognizes that what she and the social worker did to help the student that day did not at all solve the student's problems but was rather a small step in a better direction. Lee and Keisha from Alt School 1, and Zayn from Alt School 2, recount their own experiences with acts of service or integrated components of alternative schools that make them especially accommodating:

> **Lee:** I've had teachers literally pull money out of their pocket and give it to me before […] Just the connotation of a teacher pulling a wallet out of their pocket and giving you money from their own pocket. That's huge […] That's kind of that […] love, that human interaction.
>
> **Keisha:** You can do like yoga at lunch, or on Fridays there's a self-help group […] And the social worker […] is in there so you can talk to her during lunch too if you don't want to leave class and talk. But you can just go in there and she'll bring in activities that are really like, relaxing, like everything that you do here is relaxing. Even having tea. Even today, coming here, I sat down and I was like "I just wanna go home. I'm gonna walk home, like, I can't be here." And then I had a cup of tea and some food and I was like "you know I can stay a little bit longer and I can work through this."
>
> **Zayn:** They can be supportive. They can work with you. If you have to go to work during school, they will work with you on that. If you have to deal with a family matter, they will work with you on that. They will give you more time to do work.

8.4 Conclusion

This chapter showed that undoubtedly, alternative schools can accommodate marginalized students, and certainly seem to be aware of the importance of meeting basic mental health needs and providing accommodations that typically exceed what state schools normally provide. Arguably, however, these dynamics are nonetheless management-oriented in that they only tackle the situations they are dealt as they come. Often, this circumstantial approach is infused with neoliberal, individualistic narratives and beliefs about the nature of students' life trajectories that disregard their social locations, as well as dichotomies between teachers as the righteous, rational saviours, and students as the misguided, deviant adolescents who are much to blame for their own disenfranchisement. The alternative schools discussed seem to provide students with the necessary comfort and support to nurture and improve their mental health struggles; but neither by nature nor in their current state are these schools transformative insofar as they fail to recognize the systemic and structural factors that bring students and their mental health issues to the schools in the first place.

CHAPTER 9
RESISTANCE WORK AND CRITICAL HOPE FOR ANTI-COLONIAL PRAXIS

> The idea that hope alone will transform the world, and action undertaken in that kind of naivete, is an excellent route to hopelessness, pessimism, and fatalism. But the attempt to do without hope, in the struggle to improve the world, as if that struggle could be reduced to calculated acts alone, or a purely scientific approach, is a frivolous illusion. (Freire, 1997, p. 8)

After contextualizing the Canadian settler colonial context wherein Canadian state schooling takes place, Chapter 2 proposed anti-colonial theory and critical hope as analytic frameworks of resistance from which to examine alternative schools. I employ these frameworks because they theoretically inform how I envision praxis towards effective, transgressive education for marginalized youth. One way that George Dei et al. (2000) see anti-colonialism operating through resistance is not by resisting education itself, but rather, pragmatically overturning the voices, cultures, and histories that have been traditionally at the centre of state education. That is, the voices, cultures, and histories of settlers—of white, middle and upper class, heterosexual, able-bodied colonizers, who, through the continual reproduction of their own narratives, have become deeply ingrained as the epitome of who is normal and human, righteous and honourable, and worth learning about in school. This educational project conducted by the nation-state has operated at the continued expense and violent erasure of those who are not written into, and are in fact excluded from, the settler colonial narrative, despite their very real, and often painful existences within the nation-state. Anti-colonialism ideates an education that centres the voices, cultures, and histories of those who are racialized, poor and working class, LGBTQ+, and disabled, while holding accountable those implicated in the settler narrative that has been historically privileged (Dei, 2006; Kempf, 2009). Another popular trope in resistance work is that marginalized groups outright reject their privileged, beneficiary counterparts (Dei & Asgharzadeh, 2001). This is also not true. Anti-colonialism sees resistance as work that not only belongs to the colonized, marginalized subjects, but also the colonizers, in recognizing that those with social and economic power also have the autonomy and ability to challenge the dominant means that have elevated their status time after time (Dei & Asgharzadeh, 2001). This is important to remember in state schooling contexts where the demographics of students and teachers are inevitably uneven.

Resistance work in this context is employed to describe the manifestation of Dei (2006), Dei & Asgharzadeh (2001), Kempf (2009), and Duncan-Andrade's (2009) ideas at work—to describe the labour of implementing the anti-colonial approach, and the ongoing hope that is necessary to sustain the performance of this labour. The meaning behind the term "resistance"—that is, the opposition and refusal to comply and obey—implies no end, no finality, and not necessarily meeting a goal, even if there is one, because this work is often unsuccessful and unfortunately requires the resilience of marginalized people to sustain inhuman conditions that those from more dominant, privileged groups are not expected to sustain. Resistance relates to an ongoing process—an ongoing existence that opposes and refuses to comply and obey. In the same way that settler colonialism continues to operate as an ongoing process, so does the labour to challenge it.

With anti-colonial theory, I fuse critical hope (Duncan-Andrade, 2009), for it exploits practical strategies of resistance in contexts that often feel hopeless—namely, when these contexts feel as impenetrable as concrete, bringing me to restate critical hope's first principle—material hope—where the metaphor of roses growing through concrete originates. Not only are the roses who grow through concrete the marginalized youth who resist socially toxic environments (Garbarino, 1995); the roses are also teachers who acknowledge how their own teaching can harness transformational power, as well as utilize the resources and networks they have available to assist marginalized students in their own resistance work. Critical hope's second principle—Socratic hope—is the shared pain caused by inequity, and in turn, the channeling of pain as a tool to seek equitable means (Duncan-Andrade, 2009). The third principle—audacious hope—calls for relentless perseverance in spite of the daunting inequity that we often see in environments like state schools (Duncan-Andrade, 2009). This chapter employs critical hope by highlighting the cases where teachers understand marginalization as a systemic and structural phenomenon, and/or employ noteworthy critical pedagogical and curricular reform.

9.1 Teachers' Systemic and Structural Understandings of Marginalization

Chapter 8, as well as several instances in prior chapters, showed in various ways how neoliberal notions of the individual are central to many teachers' and students' understandings of oppression. Beyond its blatant rejection of the systemic and structural roots of marginalized

students' lives, neoliberal rationalities in alternative schools prevent the schools themselves from transgressing the same structures that create the need for alternative schools in the first place. There are, however, a few teachers—a few roses growing through the concrete—who employ noteworthy understandings of marginalization as a systemic and structural phenomenon, wherein they critically recognize that alternative schools will never transcend the nation-state on their own. I repeat here, first, the words of Dei and Asgharzadeh (2001):

> The anti-colonial framework compels one not to ignore the interdependence and interrelatedness of sites like race, gender, class, sexuality, age, (dis)ability, and all other categories that serve as potential areas for oppression. Along with casting our gaze on race and racialization processes, the anti-colonial approach encourages us to interrogate the interlocking nature of systems of power and domination, of how dominance is reproduced and maintained, and how the disempowered are subjugated and kept under constant control. (p. 317)

Victoria, a racialized teacher from Alt School 3, and Charlie, a queer teacher from Alt School 4, share the belief that schools and classrooms do not operate separately from the outside world; rather they are deeply intertwined with, and reflective of, the social contexts they reside in. Victoria argues that the prospect of alternative schools having transformational impacts on marginalized students' lives is only possible when the broader societal inequities that infiltrate schools are addressed:

> I think we need to go beyond schools and recognize issues of class and racism. There are broader issues that we need to tackle, and they cannot only be addressed in the school environment. They have to be addressed at the level of policy, at the level of government, at the level of our broader system of capitalism that pushes students into neighborhoods that are poor and working class, that limit their opportunities and forces them to take up different things that makes them wind up in these types of schools. So, it's no coincidence that students who are at these types of schools are predominantly racialized students and poor students. And yes, I think our education system and schooling has failed these students, but I don't think it's only that. Like, schooling is part of the broader society and social formation, and until issues of white supremacy and capitalism and racism and colonization are addressed on a higher level and in broader society, we won't be able to have that level of transformation solely in schools.

Victoria's explanation starkly contrasts many of the participants' perspectives highlighted in Chapter 8 that reduced marginalization to coming from bad families or "broken homes" and framed circumstantial accommodations as superficial responses to symptoms of marginalization,

rather than the causes. Victoria proposes that the transformational power of alternative schools can only be harnessed when complemented with resisting racism, classism, heterosexism, and ableism outside of the classroom. Victoria's understanding is unfortunately unique, revealing another barrier to teacher's practices effectively intervening against a settler colonial education system. Charlie explains her "two-fold" understanding of the relationship between schools and school systems:

> I would say that working to support marginalized students, I think it's a two-fold piece. So, I think it is the curriculum that you're working with in the classroom, but then more importantly, that curriculum isn't accessible to them until the system itself is broken down. So, I think it's really about working to understand not just their experiences but the experiences that their parents have had trying to navigate the system. It's such an important piece in trying to help bring those students back to being the students at the center of education.

Similar to Victoria, Charlie necessarily illuminates that reformed practices are only relevant or effective when they are accessible, requiring radical restructuring of the systemic and structural barriers that have historically prevented marginalized students from achieving equitable education outcomes. Anti-colonialism centres the voices and perspectives of colonized subjects, employing their lived experiences as its epistemology. Charlie sees one method of breaking down systemic and structural barriers, and in turn, centring the voices of marginalized students with respect to an anti-colonial approach, as learning about students' and parents' experiences of navigating the state education system, and removing these barriers accordingly.

9.2 Critical Pedagogical and Curricular Reform

When teachers have a holistic understanding of the power relations that create systemically and structurally oppressive environments, both within and outside of schooling, only then are they able to employ critical pedagogical and curricular reform. It is no coincidence that Victoria, a racialized teacher, and Charlie, a queer teacher, are included in this, as they are both members of marginalized communities themselves. According to many participants, alternative pedagogy and curricula are effective when students can implicate themselves in what they are learning. Yasmina, a teacher at Alt School 1, says:

> Generally, I find what makes these spaces really successful is that students can often see themselves in what they're learning. Lessons and programming are designed to reflect the learner that is engaging and choosing to be here rather than making some impossible, vague leap between […] theory and real-world application. Things are really grounded in

> the experiences of students […] this whole school is pretty amazing for the way students can see themselves in the subjects and the practices of things they never thought they could. I've never seen that at a school before.

It could be misinterpreted that in order for students to "see themselves in what they're learning," they have to be the subject of the problem they are learning about. As discussed earlier, anti-colonialism rejects this notion by calling for the involvement of those in power to be allies in the resistance of colonized, marginalized subjects. In her book *Teaching to Transgress: Education as the Practice of Freedom*, bell hooks (1994) discusses this phenomenon in the classroom:

> White students learning to think more critically about questions of race and racism may go home for the holidays and suddenly see their parents in a different light. They may recognize nonprogressive thinking, racism, and so on, and it may hurt them that new ways of knowing may create estrangement where there was none. (hooks, p. 43)

Charlie is a queer educator who used to teach in in an LGBTQ+ high school. Now that she works at Alt School 4, a school that caters to generalized populations of marginalized students, she has learned to employ queer pedagogy to both self-identified LGBTQ+ and non-identifying students:

> I went from [LGBTQ+ high school] delivering queer pedagogy to kids who self-identified as being queer to suddenly providing that pedagogy here for all students, both self-identified and not self-identified. It […] was about…how do I flip this curriculum that I'm providing to create something that builds allies, that builds understanding from students […] because they're sincerely interested in the times that we're living in but might not understand because they don't have personal experiences themselves? […] I remember that first year coming in, it was a lot of self-reflection for myself. Because […] it would be like, a "we" conversation, a "we" dynamic. "Us. This is our experience, our history." I was having to even reframe how I centered myself as a queer educator in my classroom […] I found my classes have really changed into building allies and understanding power and privilege in a much greater sphere, past queer identity, past gender identity, and building in race and class and ability and so on and so forth, so that more students see themselves reflected in that curriculum as well.

As discussed in Chapter 3, identity-based alternative schools in Toronto and elsewhere are effective *because* of their specific critique of colonial order, which one can enter from multiple oppressed locations, in their pedagogy and curricula (Berg, 2017; Howard & James, 2019; Solomon, 2017). One of the ways in which Charlie's resistance work at Alt School 4 manifested, was in her very intentional and conscious efforts to transfer the queer pedagogy and curricula she utilized previously to Alt School 4, using this transition as an opportunity to "push [her] further" and employ the curriculum as a tool to build allyship among students. Building allies was not so much a requirement in her previous school, since, as Charlie pointed out, it was already a "we"

conversation. Charlie applied her queer pedagogy and curricula from her previous school to generate broader discussions of oppression, power, and privilege, and implicate various kinds of students with different identities in these discussions at Alt School 4. Victoria, a racialized teacher from Alt School 3, discusses her transgressive classroom strategies and agrees with Charlie and Yasmina about the importance of students seeing themselves in what they are learning:

> I see education as one site for social and political transformation, and the classroom is kind of a microcosm for broader social relations […] The relations that I try and engender in my classroom with students is what I kind of want to see in broader society, and that's more of like, an egalitarian relationship […] They call me by my first name, and I try to insist on that unless they're really uncomfortable. I think that there are limits to the ways in which teachers can subvert the power dynamics in classrooms, but I do my best to do that. Students call me on my cell phone if they need. I'm available for most hours of the day so that's not typical in traditional schools. I think that it's really important in this type of environment […] for teachers to share some of the experiences of the students […] to reflect the student population and to come from similar types of communities, face similar struggles, and have kind of come out of that. I think that's really important in building trust with the students and also understanding the types of systemic barriers that they face in their lives.

Victoria's resistance work is grounded in her belief that if the classroom is reflective of the broader societal relations that she opposes, then that also means the practices she employs in her classroom should reflect the broader societal relations she would *like to see.* By being on a first name basis with students, as well as making herself available outside of formal school hours, Victoria becomes an ally in her efforts to subvert traditional power dynamics. Victoria, as a racialized teacher, also points to the value in teachers coming from similar backgrounds as students, for it not only builds trust and allyship, but they share a common understanding of their lived experiences. At the same time, George, a student at Alt School 4, discusses how even teachers who do not identify with the oppression they are teaching about, can still effectively teach about it. Anti-colonialism is not about who does resistance, but *how* resistance is done:

> One of my favourite teachers here, Mark […] in his English classes he often talks about difficult issues that maybe aren't brought up as much in normal schools because maybe the teachers don't know how to go about it, maybe they don't know if they're being disrespectful, they don't know whether or not they should be talking about it but he talks about gay and lesbian relationships. He talks about people who are trans and self-identify as trans and queer and all these different kinds of things. He talks about it in a respectful manner that is informative and also respectful and also educational and academic. So, it's not just a social justice thing, it's also a learning thing with learning about these people.

> He's not an expert, he's not gay himself. He has a wife and children, but he talks about these things.

It is likely that Charlie's influence as a queer educator in Alt School 4 encourages teachers like Mark to also take on this work. Charlie, too, discusses her additional efforts to expand her pedagogical and curricular orientations to decolonization work, something that, as a non-Indigenous educator, she is challenged with:

> I feel like my capacity […] has really been growing, as I'm seeing a big dynamic shift in our demographic, as we have a higher percentage of self-identified Indigenous students. And then, how do I work to support those individuals based on their identities and bringing the supports that they need as well […] So, I'm doing a lot of, well there's been PD [professional development day], or just creating partnerships where I can just have an open dialogue and learn as well […] And understanding what role I can play to decolonize not just the classroom, but to decolonize the system as well […] It means reflecting on my own practices and acknowledging those mistakes and changing and moving forward as well […] It's been a great opportunity.

Again, I refer to the words of bell hooks (1994) in *Teaching to Transgress: Education as the Practice of Freedom*. She writes: "any classroom that employs a holistic model of learning will also be a place where teachers grow, and are empowered by the process. That empowerment cannot happen if we refuse to be vulnerable while encouraging students to take risks" (p. 21). Charlie's accountable self-reflection embodies a constancy and a process that reflect the ongoing nature of resistance work, as well as the vulnerability that is necessary to doing resistance work.

9.3 Conclusion

This chapter used the analytic resistance frameworks of anti-colonialism and critical hope to examine the impacts of the teachers who have systemic and structural understandings of marginalization, and/or employ critical pedagogy and curricular reform in their alternative schools. Through highlighting examples of Charlie, Victoria, Yasmina, and Mark's practices, the themes of allyship, self-reflection, vulnerability, subverting power dynamics, and utilizing the classroom as a reflection of broader social relations revealed themselves as ways to resist settler colonial schooling norms. These practices are one source of inspiration for the questions pertaining to future research and recommendations for change that will be explored in Chapter 10, which encompasses the conclusions of this thesis.

CHAPTER 10
CONCLUSIONS

> The aim of critique is to reveal subterranean structures or aspects of a particular discourse, not necessarily to reveal the truth of or about that discourse. What critique promises is not objectivity, but perspective. (Brown & Halley, 2002, p. 26)

10.1 Summary of Findings

This thesis examined the experiences and perspectives of students and teachers at four alternative secondary schools for marginalized youth in Toronto, Ontario. The research questions guiding this study were:

1. a) How and why do students, teachers, and administrators attend and work in alternative schools for marginalized students, and why do they believe alternative schools are necessary? b) To what extent are the needs of marginalized students in these schools being met? c) Why or why not?
2. What are the day-to-day pedagogical and curricular approaches and relational dynamics that characterize alternative schools with mandates of educating marginalized students?
3. According to students, teachers, and administrators, what are the essential characteristics of an alternative school that endeavours to serve marginalized students?

Beginning with Chapter 5, the findings showed how impersonal dynamics, hierarchies, and arbitrary formalities typically found in state school bureaucracies alienate marginalized students from these schools, causing them to seek out or end up in alternative schools. Chapter 6 highlighted what it is about alternative schools that works for marginalized students—namely, the ways in which alternative schools attempt to deconstruct bureaucracy, employ restorative and reconciliatory approaches to discipline, build community in small student populations, redefine "normalcy" within their communities, and maintain a culture of empathy and care. I also flagged the culture of empathy and care in alternative schools for its reproduction of neoliberal, individualistic ideologies that permeate state schools, resulting in marginalized students blaming themselves for their oppression and taking on the responsibility to change their life trajectories on their own. Chapter 7 overviewed how alternative schools are located within the state education system and its standardized expectations, highlighting the challenges of establishing an alternative identity in a state education system, as well as how alternative school practices are

still largely informed by dominant state schooling norms. This chapter also reviewed how alternative schools for marginalized students are institutionally subdued in the state education system due to insufficient advertising and stigmas that surround the schools and their student populations. Chapter 8 introduced the widespread epidemic of mental health issues in alternative schools, which exist as both a symptom and avenue of students' marginalization. I discussed how the extensive mental health assistance and resources in alternative schools are effective and comforting, but only provide short-term alleviation rather than a sustainable way to address the systemic and structural barriers that lead to or represent students' mental health issues. Most importantly, I argued that unfortunately, both teachers' and students' perceptions of mental health issues represent the neoliberal mechanism through which marginalization is, once again, understood as an individual, rather than systemic or structural phenomenon. As a result, marginalized students, their families, and their communities are pathologized, and students tend to adopt sole responsibility for their systemically and structurally imposed oppressions. In Chapter 9, I re-introduce anti-colonial theory and critical hope to examine the resistance work being performed by a handful of teachers who have systemic and structural understandings of students' marginalization and employ critical and reformative pedagogy and curricula.

These findings leave me as a researcher pondering what the title of this thesis—*The Possibilities and Limitations of Change from Within*—expresses. Is it even possible for alternative schools to create and sustain an alternative presence within the state education system that would require radical pedagogical, curricular, and logistical reform? It seems that alternative schools, more than anything else, are just more flexible schools that do some things differently than mainstream schools, but still unfortunately function under the same neoliberal, individualistic rhetoric that ostracized marginalized students from state schooling in the first place. If these schools are to truly provide a space where marginalized students can thrive, and more importantly, transcend systemic and structural barriers and gain upward mobility, they need to be radically different from traditional state schools, rather than just modified versions. The question is whether we manage the tensions between what alternative schools aspire to be and what state education systems generally are. Specifically, how much autonomy do teachers doing resistance work have in these schools? Can we formulate strategies in resistance work that allow marginalized youth and teachers to navigate the state schooling system in an alternative way? Or, can a radical alternative school only exist outside the state education system altogether? If so,

how could such a system support itself financially without being financially inaccessible? If alternative schools existed outside of the state education system, would it be possible for them to address the causes, rather than just the symptoms of the systemic and structural oppression faced by marginalized students? How can alternative schools serve as spaces of resistance, rather than just temporary relief centres, or worse, sites that reproduce social inequity just wrapped up in nicer packages?

10.2 Recommendations for Change

10.2.1 Confronting the Stigma and Stopping the Cycle Whereby Marginalized Students Fall Through the Cracks

The findings of this study revealed that referring marginalized students to alternative schools is often a reactive last resort, rather than a proactive solution, to the difficulties they face with succeeding in mainstream environments. Many student participants wished they had known about alternative schools earlier than they did, which too often was very late in their high school careers, and after enduring severe alienation and harassment, dropping or failing several courses, or leaving school altogether. Students also noted the widespread stigma surrounding alternative schools, which supports stereotypes that "uncivilized" and "dangerous" students attend them. These stereotypes are not just adopted amongst students; staff within the TDSB internalize them as well. Staff in mainstream schools need to be proactive rather than reactive in identifying students who may need an alternative school, and the reproduction of harmful, pathologizing narratives about alternative schools and their students should be deliberately resisted. I strongly suggest that all staff and teachers in the TDSB undergo a mandatory teacher education component on alternative schools as part of their initiation into the TDSB, given the vast misunderstandings and lack of knowledge about the schools within their own school district. Specifically, for guidance counsellors and other support staff in mainstream schools, I urge that their training includes a specific component that teaches them about identifying marginalized and/or struggling students in their schools, and understanding students' potential need for alternative environments.

10.2.2 Accessibility and Advertising

Another barrier to marginalized students accessing alternative education is that some alternative schools mandate a minimum starting age of 16. This results in marginalized students

who might desire an alternative placement being forced to endure a mainstream environment for two years before they are even allowed to enroll in an alternative school. Not only is this a long time to be struggling in an unfit environment, but in order to enroll by age 16 students would have to be referred to or know about the alternative school in advance. Consequently, this referral may not be set in motion until the students are actually at an age where alternative schools are a possibility for them, meaning they may (and do) struggle for longer than the minimum two years. As we know, this process is often delayed or does not happen at all. As a result of this slow and often ineffective ad hoc approach to alternative school referrals, most students in alternative schools complete high school in their late teens and early twenties. Allowing students to suffer for so long before finding an alternative school, as well as lengthening their high school careers so extensively once in an alternative school, potentially contributes to setting them back further in a system that they are already disadvantaged in. The difference if all alternative schools allowed enrollment from age 14 would likely be significant.

10.2.3 Requiring Systemic and Structural Understandings of Marginalization, Intentional Placements, and Teacher Representation

While some students noted that they like alternative schools because they can relate to the teachers, other participants said that teachers in alternative schools do not necessarily reflect the student populations. Teachers who are not socially located in the same ways as their students may be part of what contributes to the individualizing rhetoric, stemming simply from a lack of personal experience with systemic and structural oppression. Victoria, a racialized teacher at Alt School 3, comments on the lack of proportional teacher representation at the school:

> A large portion of our students are racialized, so I don't think that it's *"we must only have people of color as teachers."* However, I think that there should be an effort in terms of hiring practices to have teachers working in these types of schools that reflect the students. And of course, like, it's not just about race and class. A teacher who's white and has a more progressive orientation, understands what equity means, understands the system and the systemic barriers that students are facing, can do an equally good job as another teacher. But I do think that there's something to be said about representation in the schools that serve marginalized youth.

Victoria argues that hiring practices should include marginalized teachers more explicitly. At the same time, she does not dismiss any teacher's ability to have an understanding of students' marginalization and the systemic and structural barriers they face. Jocelyn, a student from Alt School 4 highlights this possibility by expressing her appreciation for teachers at Alt School 4

who understand the magnitude of marginalized students' issues, while simultaneously highlighting that those teachers do not reflect the student population:

> The teachers here actually understand that just because they've never experienced an issue doesn't mean it's any less of a problem for people.

It is crucial that more teachers in alternative schools for marginalized youth understand where their students are coming from on a systemic and structural level. If the Ministry and the Board were to mandate the presence of more marginalized teachers, and/or teachers with critical pedagogical and curricular approaches in alternative schools via intentional rather than randomized hiring practices, this would help combat and reconstruct the current widespread individualistic misunderstandings of oppression. Placing teachers in alternative schools should not be a thoughtless process. Likewise, working in an alternative school should be a deliberate choice on the teacher's part. This is not to say that teachers who are randomly placed in alternative schools cannot subsequently adapt, or gain a passion for the work and the pedagogy, but given the magnitude of resistance work, it would be more effective if those doing the work were intrinsically motivated.

For teachers who do not have the same lived experiences as marginalized students but seek to better understand their identities in relation to the systemic and structural oppression they experience, and the intersection of this oppression with state schooling, I strongly vouch for a mandate that these teachers take an Additional Qualification course in equity, with popular education orientations, to effectively provide teacher education on theories of oppression like critical race theory, social reproduction theory, intersectional theory, and labelling theory—theories that challenge settler colonialism, white supremacy, heteropatriarchy, multiculturalism, anti-Blackness, and neoliberalism, mirroring Chapter 2 of this thesis. Obtaining a systemic and structural understanding of marginalization is a primary and compulsory step to understanding the students in alternative schools. Only once a meaningful understanding of the inequitable structures and systems that dictate the lived experiences of marginalized students is obtained, can the necessary (and nevertheless, onerous) steps of radical pedagogy, curricula, and school dynamics be pursued. Interventions that occur outside of, and do not rely on the state education system are also necessary. Teachers across the Board organizing more of their own discussion groups outside the professional development workshops and learning communities mandated by the Board, as well as deeper community interventions with alternative school students and their

parents could be beneficial to better understand what is really going on in the communities most implicated within alternative schools for marginalized students.

10.3 Limitations of Study and Questions for Future Research

Naturally, there were several limitations to this study. For a number of reasons, I was only able to investigate a limited number of schools within Toronto's large district of alternative schools. These schools were not representative, nor were they intended to be. Additional studies will need to be done in order to understand Toronto's alternative schools more broadly.

In the schools that I examined, it is also crucial to remember that while I presented the perspectives of the students and teachers who I was able to interview at these schools, there were several other students and teachers at these same schools whose voices were not represented, either due to unavailability, unwillingness, unawareness, or even exclusion. Specifically, I had little control over who I spoke to; the schools I visited organized and arranged who I met with for the most part. The advertising of my study in these schools leading up to the actual days that I ran the interviews and focus groups was up to the schools to execute, and differed from school to school, and between the staff members who took the lead in disseminating the necessary information about my study to recruit participants. It is also necessary to consider the logics teachers used in their advertising methods of my study, and in turn, how they selected participants. That is, certain students and teachers may have been encouraged to participate more than others, knowing those teachers and students might have been more complimentary than others. Future studies might warrant students and parents being recruited outside of their respective schools, as well as participant observation or critical ethnographic research methods.

My study is also limited by the fact that not all marginalized students are in alternative schools; many still attend mainstream schools, and others have left school altogether. Future studies warrant exploring the experiences of marginalized students currently attending Toronto's mainstream schools, as well as students who are being pushed out of or have left school, whether these schools are mainstream or alternative. How can we make alternative schools more accessible to marginalized students? Specifically, how can alternative schools be better advertised in order to catch marginalized students earlier in their high school careers, while still keeping numbers small? In accepting the reality that the stigma surrounding alternative schools will inevitably exist in mainstream societal discourses and media, is it possible, at the very least,

to eliminate the stigma within boards like the TDSB? What could be done in mainstream schools to make alternative schools unnecessary in the first place? A future study might compare alternative schools and mainstream schools and see what could be applied about alternatives to mainstreams. How could a quantitative survey on student and parent satisfaction rates, both in alternative and mainstream schools, help to supplement the findings of this study? A follow-up study of the same student participants five to ten years from now could provide a retrospective and reflexive perspective on their experiences. Therefore, recruiting student alumni (and their parents) from any alternative schools in Toronto could bring similarly unique observations forward—that is, the combination of post-high school life experiences and knowledge gained, with the actual experiences had in the alternative schools.

10.4 Parting Thoughts

I hate to admit it, but retrospectively, I approached this study with a bit of mythical hope—a hope that administers the impression of uneven power dynamics being neutralized (Duncan-Andrade, 2009)—because at the end of the day, when I am stripped of the academic armour (Brown, 2012; Restrepo, 2019) that we all wear in the ivory tower, when I momentarily let go of my duty to critique, critique, critique—what motivates me to do this research is the hopeful prospect of effectively radical, grassroots resistance in inequitable educational contexts. I was disappointed, but not surprised to learn how alternative schools are wrought with many of the same oppressive characteristics that I have often exclusively associated with mainstream schools. I learned not to dichotomize mainstream schools and alternative schools so much, since the tyrannical system they reside in is much more powerful than any school is on its own. Subsequently, I learned yet another valuable lesson on the inapplicability, and outright dead-ended nature of mythical hope in examining settler colonialism, neoliberalism, and inequitable educational contexts this time. I say “yet another” and “this time” because I have learned this lesson before, and every time I have moved up a tier in my academic journey as a critical thinker, I become a beginner again, naïve in the same, just slightly more complex ways that I thought I had outgrown. Nevertheless, I also learned about the presence and power of critical hope in alternative schools through the same participants who showed me my hope for alternative schools was mythical. I am incredibly grateful to have heard the stories of my student and teacher participants, for it is only through the people who make up the systems and institutions

we critique, that we can gain such nuanced understandings of those very systems and institutions. Only through doing a qualitative study of this nature did I learn the value and irreplaceability of such detailed narratives—narratives that I now crave to hear and will continue to seek in future research endeavours. Many participants positively reviewed their interview and focus group experiences, for they obtained benefits from discussing their lived experiences in relation to schooling in ways they had not done before. Our interactions seemed to be mutually beneficial, symbolizing an exchange I will always strive for in future studies, too. That is, I aim to continue future studies on the basis that the conversations I facilitate with complete strangers who are willing to be profoundly vulnerable with me, are meaningful, novel, self-reflective, and therapeutic. I believe these conversations are the fuel of transformational and transgressive resistance work.

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Appendices

Appendix A

Self-Identification Form

Please indicate all that you identify with/as. You are *not* required to fill out this form, however, indicating your identity will help me better understand your answers to my questions.

Name:

Age:

Gender:

- Female
- Male
- Gender non-conforming, non-binary, two-spirit
- In the process of transitioning
- Unsure
- Prefer not to answer

Sexuality:

- LGBTQ+
- Heterosexual
- Unsure
- Prefer not to answer

Race and/or Ethnicity:

- Indigenous
    - North American First Nation
    - Inuit
    - Metis
- Black
- Arab
- Chinese
- Filipino

- Japanese
- Korean
- Latin American
- South Asian (East Indian, Pakistani, Sri Lankan, etc.)
- West Asian
- Of Mixed-Origin (please indicate):
- White/White-Passing
- Other (please indicate):

Disability

- Living with a disability (please indicate):

Health and Well-Being:

- Living with mental health issues
- Financially strained
- In an unstable living circumstance

Other: