Seclusion and restraint use in Ontario schools: Connecting disabled individuals' experiences of maltreatment to systemic ableism in education

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Abstract

This thesis research explores disabled individuals' lived experiences of seclusion, restraint, and other kinds of mistreatment that have occurred at schools in Ontario. This study also critically examines the role that systemic ableism plays in these experiences of violence and poor treatment, which is a feature that is largely absent from current literature on the use of seclusion and restraint practices in schools. Using an epistemological and methodological approach rooted in critical disability studies, this research relied upon primary data derived from one qualitative interview that I conducted, along with secondary data from three organizational reports and two news articles. Utilizing thematic analysis, three major themes emerged from the data. The first described the lived experiences of ableist violence and maltreatment within the Ontario education system, with sub-themes detailing situations involving seclusion and restraint, destabilization, and strained relationships stemming from a lack of support. The second thematic finding highlighted the damaging impact to the wellbeing of disabled individuals resulting from degrading and ableist mistreatment in school, with notable sub-themes of the threatening emotional and physical toll on the individual and harsh self-perception. The final major finding indicated desired areas for change to counter ableist violence and improve the treatment of disabled students in Ontario schools, with sub-themes specifying the need for more specialized training for all school staff, a compassionate attitude, and improved supports to keep students in school. The discussion of these findings using critical disability perspectives on ableism illustrates the systemic issue at the core of disabled individuals lived experiences of mistreatment in Ontario schools. The implications that this study has on social work practice and educational policy is discussed, as well as areas for future research.

Keywords: seclusion, restraint, Ontario schools, disabled individuals, lived experience, education, critical disability studies, ableism

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Introduction

The topic of this thesis research centers on the contemporary mistreatment of disabled individuals within elementary and high school settings in Ontario. In this research, I utilize a broad understanding of disability that encompasses a range of experiences and conditions, as disability is a fluid social identity that is contextually dependent, and is not contingent upon a medical diagnosis (Meekosha & Shuttleworth, 2009; Hall, 2019). In the context of this thesis, disability does not only pertain to individuals with physical impairments (Boxall, 2018) but is also inclusive of those with intellectual or developmental disabilities and people that experience mental health challenges, for example. While the mistreatment of disabled individuals within school environments manifests in numerous ways, it is particularly evident through practices of seclusion and restraint, as this research aims to make clear. The Disability Justice Network of Ontario (DJNO) describes seclusion as the occurrence of a student being involuntarily confined to a room or area alone without the ability to leave, whereas restraint entails the use of physical force by another to limit freedom of movement (Correia et al., 2024).

Historically, the use of measures like these to control and subdue disabled people dates back to the period of mass institutionalization that began in the late 18th century across the U.S. and Britain, with the development of psychiatric asylums to confine and treat those deemed “insane” (Colaizzi, 2005). The primary philosophy underpinning the institutionalization movement at the time was that “insanity” presented a danger to society due to a loss of reason, and that through “moral” treatment, one could regain reason and self-control (Colaizzi, 2005). These forms of treatment relied heavily upon restraint through mechanical and chemical means, like straightjackets or opiates to sedate patients, and the later use of padded seclusion rooms as more “humane” alternative to mechanical restraints (Colaizzi, 2005). By the 19th century, institutionalization included not only individuals with mental illnesses, but those with intellectual disabilities as well, evidenced in Ontario with the opening of the crudely named “Orillia Asylum for Idiots” in 1876 (Rossiter & Clarkson, 2013). Bolstered by developing diagnostic criteria and psychological testing that classified people as “feebleminded” or “ill-balanced”, these institutions were seen as necessary for providing an education to intellectually disabled people away from mainstream schools, where concerns grew of feeblemindedness causing deviancy in youths (Rossiter & Clarkson, 2013). This philosophy behind institutionalization would later influence the eugenics movement in the early 20th century, which aimed to improve the genetic make-up of society by restricting disabled individuals’ ability to reproduce, thus addressing widespread fears that feeblemindedness would take over the population and hinder progress (Rossiter & Clarkson, 2013). This historical context is important to consider, as much of the beliefs behind eugenics and institutionalization, in addition to the methods of controlling disabled people in these facilities, continue to persist today. For instance, recent studies and collected data have shown that disabled children are being disproportionately secluded or restrained in public schools (U.S. Department of Education Office of Civil Rights, 2024; Bartlett & Ellis, 2020; Barnard-Brak et al., 2014), as will be detailed further in the subsequent literature review.

The contemporary use of seclusion and restraint within school environments are key features of this research, which aims to bridge individual lived experiences to systemic issues, namely ableism. Generally, ableism is the valuing of the able body as the standard for ‘normal’ human existence, often through attitudes and practices that indicate a disregard for disability (Campbell, 2008a). This thesis will endeavour to make clear the influence of ableism within education through the examination of disabled individuals’ experiences of violence and maltreatment within the Ontario public school system.

Rationale and researcher positionality

In order to illuminate the meaningful connection that I have to this research topic and why I decided to pursue it for a thesis study, I will first situate myself as a researcher and describe how my involvement in disability community spaces brought me to this work.

Disability has been interwoven into my life experience for as long as I can remember, although it was only within the past few years that I received a formal disability diagnosis. Growing up as the younger sibling of a brother with multiple support needs, I have had an acute awareness of the prejudice and discriminatory attitudes that disabled people face on a daily basis – no matter the environment. Although advocating for equitable treatment of people with disabilities was a constant undertaking within my household as my parents sought out avenues of support for my brother, I discovered a powerful kind of disability advocacy that is carried out by disabled people themselves when I came to McMaster University and learned about Maccess (McMaster Students Union, n.d.). This is a peer support space by and for students that experience disability in any form, and resists the typical expectation embedded into many university services that requires a diagnosis (Minich, 2016) in order to satisfy a perception that one is disabled “enough” to receive support or be included in a disability-centered space. Through Maccess, I was able to explore my emerging self-identity as a disabled, neurodivergent individual and built strong bonds with others in the disabled community, before going on to co-lead the Disability Action Group within the School of Social Work at McMaster. Alongside my good friend and co-facilitator, I provided peer support to fellow social work students that identified with disability and also engaged in advocacy work around the unique challenges that disabled students face in navigating higher education. It was empowering to engage in dialogue with others that merged what I had learned throughout my social work education about systems of oppression with the lived experience, both mine and others, of accessibility-related issues and ableism faced in university. A year later, I stepped away from my studies at McMaster in an effort to tend to my mental health, which had taken a serious dive since starting the Master of Social Work program.

However, I longed to be connected to the disability community in my time away from academia, so I began volunteering with the Disability Justice Network of Ontario (DJNO) on an ongoing project about unjust punishment in schools that disabled students, particularly those that are racialized, regularly encounter. The ‘Dreaming Safer Schools Education Project’ (DJNO, 2023) became the influential backbone to this thesis research, and I felt particularly moved when hearing about experiences of seclusion and restraint in schools that had been documented by the project coordinators. Although I had never been subjected to such degrading treatment myself, my brother had been on numerous occasions when he was in school, and I had witnessed the distress that it caused both him and my parents every time. I wanted to explore more deeply this issue of the mistreatment of disabled individuals in schools through practices like seclusion and restraint, but in a way that would both center the lived experiences of disabled individuals and would contribute further to the community project that I am working on with DJNO outside of my academic studies. I was also interested in examining how systemic issues, specifically ableism, plays a role in these experiences of violence and maltreatment. This is how I came to decide upon the topic of research for this thesis.

Research goals

This thesis research aims to answer the question: “how are practices of seclusion, restraint, and other forms of mistreatment that are experienced by disabled individuals in Ontario schools connected to systemic ableism within these settings?”. Through an epistemological and methodological approach rooted in critical disability studies, this study will utilize information collected from one qualitative interview as well as secondary data from organizational and news reports in order to:

- Highlight the lived experiences of disabled individuals that have been subjected to violence and maltreatment in schools, primarily through practices like seclusion and restraint.
- Examine how systemic ableism is at the core of these experiences.

Literature Review

In the 2023-2024 academic year, special education funding allocated from the province was used to support nearly 360,000 students – or about 17% of all students attending Ontario public schools from kindergarten to Grade 12 (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2025). This official number is likely a modest estimation, as People for Education (2024) report that nearly every public school in Ontario has students that are provided with special education support. With so many disabled individuals routinely receiving an education through the public system, a credit to deinstitutionalization that began in the 1960s (Rossiter & Clarkson, 2013) it is important to consider the ways they are currently mistreated throughout their school journey. As history has shown, abuse and maltreatment has been commonplace in settings that are designed to support disabled people (Colaizzi, 2005; Rossiter & Clarkson, 2013). To bring greater attention to this pattern of cruel treatment that is still continuing in educational spaces today, a primary focus of this thesis is on seclusion and restraint as forms of violent, and ableist, mistreatment that students with disabilities are experiencing while in elementary and high school. This literature review will not only summarize the content and findings from contemporary research on seclusion and restraint practices in various settings, but will also highlight many critiques from academics and community advocates alike – particularly regarding seclusion and restraint use (SRU) with disabled students in schools. I will begin by reviewing the current human rights, governmental, educational district policy associated with the use of seclusion and restraint in school settings, which includes current expectations for best practices on its use. I will then provide an overview of various situations found in the literature that often involve or lead to seclusion and restraint, while including key perspectives from disabled individuals who have been subjected to SRU, as well as perspectives from parents and staff or support personnel. Lastly, some strategies found in the literature on reducing the use of seclusion and restraint in schools will be discussed. The purpose of this literature review is to identify policies, procedures, and common attitudes that play a role in the use of seclusion and restraint in schools, in order to better contextualize the ways in which systemic ableism can function within in these settings to oppress disabled individuals.

Current Policy Landscape on the Use of Seclusion and Restraint in Schools

Human Rights Policy

The prevalence of SRU in schools presents a challenge to upholding human rights, which Canada claims to be committed to as a member of the United Nations (UN). Because disabled children are disproportionately secluded or restrained in schools (Bartlett & Ellis, 2020; Barnard-Brak et al., 2014), both the *United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities* (CRPD) and the *United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child* (CRC) are useful human rights policy frameworks to consider. While the CRPD does not directly mention seclusion or restraint, Article 24 of this agreement outlines the right to an inclusive education for disabled individuals (UN, 2006) – a right which is directly violated in situations involving SRU, particularly when a disabled student is physically removed from their classroom and placed in seclusion (Bartlett & Ellis, 2020). The CRC pays some attention to the potential harms of in-school disciplinary measures, with Article 28 stating that the use of force to punish a student is unacceptable (UN, 1989). As will be evidenced throughout this thesis, seclusion and restraint does entail the use of force and is often used punitively with disabled individuals (Montreuil et al., 2020; Correia et al., 2024), which therefore does not lend itself to the protection of children with disabilities or their basic right to an education under the CRC (Bartlett & Ellis, 2020; Scheuermann et al., 2016). Although I have highlighted only a few brief aspects from the CRPD and the CRC, these two UN human rights frameworks help to illustrate how the continued use of seclusion and restraint practices in schools is ableist and discriminatory towards disabled individuals – which is the core underpinning of my research question. Emphasizing the many rights violations associated with SRU in school settings is also in line with the efforts of disability advocacy organizations, community members, and parents of disabled students that are calling for systematic change to these harmful practices (Bartlett & Ellis, 2020).

Government Policy

In Canada, there are no federal guidelines on the use of seclusion and restraint practices in schools due to the fact that our public education systems are provincially regulated (Bartlett & Ellis, 2020). The result has been largely inconsistent, or entirely absent, policy regarding the use of seclusion and restraint in schools across the provinces (Bartlett & Ellis, 2020). In Ontario, the *Education Act* (1990) is the primary policy document that regulates conduct within our provincial public education system, to which there is no mention of seclusion or restraint practices carried out within schools. To remedy this, an Ontario Minister of Provincial Parliament (MPP), Michael Coteau, brought forward Private Member's Bill 160 (2019) to request that the *Education Act* be amended to include language on seclusion and physical restraint. This bill also called for clear guidelines to be established on the permissibility of SRU in schools, alongside mandatory reporting to both the Ministry of Education and to parents when seclusion and restraint is used with a student (Coteau, 2019). At the current time of writing, the amendments to the *Education Act* proposed in Bill 160 (2019) have not been accepted by the Provincial Legislative Assembly in Ontario. This has serious implications on the pervasiveness of seclusion and restraint being used in Ontario schools, particularly involving disabled students, as my research study intends to highlight.

While there is currently no legal mandate from the Ontario government restricting SRU in schools, some other provinces have recently developed policies on this. In their review of provincial education policy documents, Bartlett and Ellis (2021a) found that only British Columbia, Alberta, Newfoundland and Labrador, Nova Scotia, and Prince Edward Island had regulations concerning the use of physical restraint and seclusion, with the latter sometimes referred to as ‘time out’. Many of these provincial policies lacked clarity in whether they were an enforceable mandate that school districts and staff must follow in accordance with the education ministry of that province, or if they were simply recommended guidelines on the ‘appropriate’ use of seclusion and restraint that school districts had the option of following (Bartlett & Ellis, 2021a). These authors argue that seclusion and restraint should be permitted only in emergency situations where there is an immediate threat to physical safety, however it was found that many existing provincial regulations also sanctioned SRU for maintaining order within the school environment or for preventing damage to school property – both of which are arguably not crisis situations that threaten the physical safety of a person (Bartlett & Ellis, 2021a).

Implementing seclusion and restraint practices only in cases of imminent harm aligns with much of the ‘best practices’ outlined in federal policy recommendations on SRU coming from the United States (U.S. Department of Education, 2012), which is where a majority of academic studies and policy research involving SRU are situated (Bartlett & Ellis, 2021b). However, U.S. educational policy also lacks mandatory federal legislation that requires education offices in each state to follow specific rules on SRU in school settings (Cramer et al., 2024). Despite this, there still exists some federal guidance from the U.S. Department of Education (2012), as they created a resource document containing fifteen principles that states and local educational jurisdictions can consult to develop their own policy frameworks on SRU as an emergency measure and not for routine use with students. Bartlett and Ellis (2020) suggest that these federal policy guidelines from the U.S. should be used as an example to develop a federal mandate for provinces in Canada that lack any formal legislation on SRU in schools, such as Ontario. This can promote greater accountability both from provincial ministries of education, and from school districts where seclusion and restraint practices are utilized and go unregulated or are done so inconsistently (Bartlett & Ellis, 2020).

Educational District Policy

In addition to the absent or inconsistent policy regarding SRU in schools across provincial governments, this issue has also been apparent among local school districts – particularly when it comes to the reporting of when seclusion and restraint methods are used in schools. Of the six provinces in Canada that do have some kind of provincial mandate on the appropriate documentation of seclusion and restraint, it was found that there are large gaps in which school divisions must report to in situations involving SRU in school settings, and within what timeframe (Bartlett & Ellis, 2021b). There is often no mandatory requirement for schools to provide same day written notification to the parents of a student that has been subjected to seclusion or restraint at school, or for there to be a debrief between parents and school staff regarding the incident (Bartlett & Ellis, 2021b).

It is also commonplace for any data on SRU that might be collected by local school districts to remain unpublicized, contributing to a collective lack of transparency about how frequently SRU is occurring in schools across Canada (Bartlett & Ellis, 2021b). This is a very different standard from the United States where data on seclusion and restraint in schools has been collected annually by the U.S. Department of Education Office for Civil Rights since 2009 (Barnard-Brak et al., 2014). This publicly available data has allowed for critical information to be shared on how many disabled students are being subjected to SRU in schools. For example, in the 2020-2021 academic year, disabled students made up 81% of all students subjected to physical restraint, and 75% of all those subjected to seclusion in U.S. public schools (U.S. Department of Education Office of Civil Rights, 2024). Collecting and publicizing data like this are key pieces to what are considered ‘best practices’ for documenting SRU in schools, along with providing written notice to parents within a 24-hour period and engaging in a debrief with them following the incident (U.S. Department of Education, 2012; Bartlett & Ellis, 2021b).

Overall, the influence of policy, or lack thereof, is a key factor to consider when discussing how practices of seclusion and restraint are permitted for use against disabled individuals in schools, which is why human rights, governmental, and educational district policy were included in this literature review.

Situations Involving Seclusion and Restraint & Relevant Perspectives

In reviewing the literature on seclusion and restraint, it was apparent that these practices are used in many contexts outside of just the school environment. There has been an abundance of research on SRU in healthcare settings like psychiatric wards and mental health day programs (Kontio et al., 2012; Montreuil et al., 2020), as well as community treatment centres (Mérineau-Côté & Morin, 2014), residential care settings (Lebel et al., 2010), and juvenile detention centres (Mitchell & Varley, 1990). Although the primary focus for my research question is on school settings, throughout the literature I found key commonalities in situations across these various contexts that often led to or allowed for the use of seclusion and restraint. As I discuss these situations, I will also weave in perspectives from children and adults with disabilities that have been subjected to SRU, as well as the views of parents and staff members as these will add greater context both to the impacts of SRU and demonstrate the influence of ableism in these situations. It is also important to note that many of the situations detailing seclusion and restraint in the literature strongly focused on behaviours that warranted SRU, which is a pathologizing perspective rooted in the medical model of disability that problematizes the individual as the issue and not their environment (McRae, 2018). While I am weary about this central concentration on behaviour within the literature, the reality is that these interpretations are firmly entrenched in generalized understandings of disability and thus manifests within interactions with disabled people.

Non-emergency situations

Numerous studies documented the prevalence of seclusion and restraint practices being used in situations where there was no imminent threat to the physical safety of a person – which contradicts many of the guidelines for ‘best practices’ of SRU discussed earlier (Scheuermann et al., 2016; Bartlett & Ellis, 2021b; Trader et al., 2017). Many of the situations that resorted to SRU were based on the observed behaviour of individuals, such as behaviours that were rooted in frustration and were perceived as aggressive by staff (Montreuil et al., 2020, Verret et al., 2019). This was particularly apparent with disabled individuals that had a known history of ‘acting out’ and were more likely to be seen as a threat to the safety of others (Correia et al., 2024), even though their actions did not always present any immediate danger. For instance, one parent of a disabled student noted that their child, who could “get angry to the point of blacking out” was restrained at school for throwing a pencil case on the ground in front of them, and not at anyone in particular (Correia et al., 2024, p. 20). This example connects with other situations that indicate SRU being implemented as a pre-emptive measure in ‘managing’ the known behaviour of disabled individuals. A support person in one study said that they felt safer engaging with their client when they were placed in mechanical restraints, as this prevented the individual from engaging in any potentially aggressive behaviour (Mérineau-Côté & Morin, 2014). Similarly, an ethnographic study conducted within a child mental health day hospital in Quebec observed frequent SRU by staff, with one child being restrained and placed in a small 2-meter by 1-meter seclusion room for beginning to yell after staff members told him to play a game silently (Montreuil et al., 2020). Staff shared that this was done to stop the individual from disrupting the other children in the facility, and discussed frequently implementing SRU with children before any behaviour escalated as they did not like to risk any situation where a child will hurt themself or another (Montreuil et al., 2020). These instances highlight the occurrence of SRU based on behaviour that presented no imminent harm to the individual or others around them and was often used pre-emptively, which has historical ties to practices in early psychiatric institutions that implemented control methods as a preventative measure rather than a responsive one to patient's behaviour (Colaizzi, 2005). These examples also demonstrate a willingness to use seclusion and restraint measures in situations involving non-compliance with verbal requests from staff or support personnel.

The impact of SRU for this or any reason can be incredibly harmful, and even deadly. This was the case with a disabled student in Trenton, Ontario, who died last year after being secluded in a room alone – despite his parents giving the school specific instructions to not do this (Applewaithe, 2024). Other consequences of SRU from the perspective of disabled individuals subjected to these practices include not feeling listened to or understood by staff members, as well as feeling scared, angry, or depressed (Correia et al., 2024; Montreuil et al., 2020; Mérineau-Côté & Morin, 2014). The vast majority also viewed seclusion and restraint to be a kind of punishment for 'bad' behaviour, or sometimes for unknown reasons, and shared that it was often a painful experience (Montreuil et al., 2020; Verret et al., 2019). Many parents of children that experienced SRU in schools noted physical injury to their child as a common outcome, as well as emotional trauma that had devastating impacts on their child, such as a fear of abduction, and in one case even led to a suicide attempt (Bartlett & Ellis, 2020).

Seclusion and restraint in individualized education & behaviour plans

My review of the literature on situations involving SRU found that there were also many concerns about these practices being included in Individualized Education Plans (IEPs) and behaviour support plans. IEPs are primarily used within schools to support the needs of disabled students, usually through specific services or accommodations that support a student in meeting learning expectations (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2022). Behaviour plans are similarly used in schools respond to challenging student behaviours and provide positive reinforcement of alternative behaviour (Ontario Ministry of Labour, Immigration, Training and Skills Development, 2018). Given the fact that IEPs and behaviour plans are intended to benefit the student above all, it is troublesome that practices of seclusion and restraint appear in these plans. Both researchers and community advocacy groups like the Alliance to Prevent Restraint, Aversive Interventions, and Seclusion (APRAIS) have cautioned against the inclusion of SRU within IEPs, as this can be used to justify its routine use with certain students in non-emergency situations (APRAIS, 2010, in Bartlett & Ellis, 2020). This rationale was evident in one study surveying teachers experiences in performing restraint, where some participants mentioned that they had restrained students only when these measures were included in their IEP (Cramer et al., 2024). There are also concerns about coercion in the development of IEPs and behaviour plans that can pressure parents into consenting to the inclusion of SRU measures with their child in order for them to be accepted as a student or to gain access to support services (APRAIS, 2010, in Bartlett & Ellis, 2020; Montreuil et al., 2020; Saloviita et al., 2016). Some provincial policies even permit any reporting on SRU involving a student to cease if it is included in their IEP, meaning that parents are forced to accept the fact that they may not be informed of these incidents when they occur or are told much later on (Bartlett & Ellis, 2020; 2021b). This absence in documenting SRU when it is included in an IEP signifies a sanctioned continuation of these practices that disproportionately involve disabled students, with little oversight or accountability (Bartlett & Ellis, 2021b).

Police involvement and the influence of carceral attitudes

While existing literature noted that most cases of SRU with disabled individuals were carried out by staff members, such as educators or support personnel, some situations pointed to the involvement of police officers in SRU – or staff that likened themselves to this role (Cramer et al., 2024; Montreuil et al., 2020). Renowned scholar-activist Angela Davis (2016) has highlighted the overlap between education and incarceration systems, particularly with the uptick of private security companies in the U.S. being hired by local school districts to patrol and surveil students – most notably in alternative schools for disabled individuals. Here in Canada, the presence of police officers stationed in schools through school resource officer (SRO) programs have been tirelessly opposed by many student and community advocacy groups like Policing-Free Schools Canada (Vásquez Jiménez, 2023). The existence of these police-in-school programs have serious implications when it comes to seclusion and restraint practices involving disabled students, as it is well-documented that interactions with police in schools are often violent, if not lethal (Kinney, 2020). In one situation covered by *CBC News* (2020), police were called by administrators into a school in Mississauga, Ontario, where they restrained a 6-year-old Black student using handcuffs around the wrists and ankles after the restraint holds that her behavioural teaching assistant had placed her in had failed to improve the crisis that she was experiencing. The centrality of the police's role in restraining disabled students is evident within previous research on SRU as well, where a teacher in one study said that it was only the local school resource officer that would restrain students with disabilities, and not school staff (Cramer et al., 2024). Even without an SRO program in place, some local school districts like the Hamilton-Wentworth District School Board (HWDSB) have a policy that requires police to be contacted when a student cannot be effectively restrained (HWDSB, n.d.). These examples demonstrate a certain level of reliance on police that many schools have in controlling the behaviour of disabled students through seclusion and restraint use.

Even when police are not physically present, other situations in the literature involving SRU indicated the proliferation of carceral attitudes among staff members that carried out these practices in support settings. Some staff members equated themselves to police in their dependence on SRU to maintain order in a neutral or emotionally detached way (Montreuil et al., 2020). Highlighting carceral mentalities in staff members, along with the involvement of police in restraining disabled individuals, are important concerns to discuss as they can both set a dangerous precedent in situations where seclusion and restraint methods are implemented in schools. As seen throughout the historical institutionalization of disabled individuals, where many died as a result of being brutally restrained or secluded (Colaizzi, 2005), the danger of these measures as a tool of control in modern times has equally life-threatening consequences for disabled students. Even more so when there is police presence, either physically or mentally, in situations involving seclusion or restraint.

Strategies for Reducing Seclusion and Restraint Use

De-escalation and behavioural approaches

By far the most frequently showcased approach found in literature on seclusion and restraint practices in schools involved behavioural methods of de-escalation and intervention that could limit SRU with disabled individuals or prevent its use altogether. One study that was based in a Montreal primary school for specialized education implemented de-escalation approaches in their behaviour support intervention protocol, which detailed two stages of de-escalation before staff could resort to SRU with a student (Verret et al., 2019). The first stage involved the student engaging in self-regulation of their own behaviour using various techniques and seeking help from a teacher when feeling dysregulated, and the second stage included staff educators encouraging the student to engage in self-regulating activities based on observations of their behaviour (Verret et al., 2019). These behaviour-based methods of de-escalation exist in a similar vein to other models like Schoolwide Positive Behaviour Intervention and Supports (SW-PBIS), which was widely regarded in the literature as an effective alternative to reduce or prevent SRU in schools (Wu et al., 2024; Bartlett & Ellis, 2020). SW-PBIS is considered an ‘evidence-based’ framework for creating a positive and equitable learning environment that prioritizes rewarding ‘acceptable’ behaviours over reprimanding others (Center on PBIS, n.d; Wu et al., 2024). SW-PBIS is arranged in three tiers that respond to the behavioural support needs of students, and progresses from a universal approach where educators set and reinforce behavioural expectations for all students in a classroom, to more targeted support within a small group, and followed by intensive, individualized support (Center on PBIS, n.d.; Wu et al., 2024).

While academic literature on SRU widely encourages incorporating the de-escalation and preventative approaches mentioned, I am cautious about supporting these strategies. The primary focus of these methods on behaviour management is a point of contention for disabled community members and advocacy organizations like Autistics for Autistics (A4A), which widely consider interventions rooted in behaviourism and behaviour modification through reward or punishment to be incredibly harmful, and rejects the frequent ‘evidence-based’ claims that these models advertise (2021). I found it concerning that the overwhelming majority of academic literature on SRU failed to consider the perspectives of disability advocates and their valid criticisms of behaviour-focused approaches when recommending approaches for reducing SRU in schools.

Collaborative approaches

An emphasis on collaboration with both disabled individuals and their parents is another strategy that was commonly found in the literature on SRU. The study by Montreuil et al. (2020) on SRU in a child mental health facility emphasized the importance of a collaborative approach that builds trust between a care provider and service-user, which encourages a mutual understanding of what is considered meaningful to the individual being supported. Other forms of collaboration that can decrease or prevent SRU include actions that prioritize communication between schools and families – such as regular meetings between school staff and parents to share ideas on the appropriate means of intervention, or to debrief after a situation involving SRU has occurred (Wu et al., 2024). Strong school-family collaboration can also help to balance the dynamic of power that is inherent in this relationship, which is especially present with families that primarily communicate in a non-English language (Wu et al., 2024; Correia et al., 2024). Collaborative approaches that allow for the authentic sharing of perspectives on dignified support for disabled individuals in educational settings is a valuable consideration in querying strategies to reducing SRU and plays a significant role in how I am going about conducting research on this topic.

Literature Gaps

In my review of existing literature on this topic, I noticed that most academic works did not take a strong stance on the complete and total abolishment of seclusion and restraint practices in schools. Some pointed to the calls from community advocates and human rights organizations for legislative bans on seclusion and restraint (Bartlett & Ellis, 2020), which have had varying degrees of success – if they have been proposed at all. In the United States, the *Keeping All Students Safe Act* detailed the banning of seclusion practices in all public schools along with certain forms of restraint like mechanical, chemical, or physical restraint that impedes breathing (Congressional Research Service, 2023). However, although this Act was introduced in 2023, it still has not been passed in the U.S. Congress to become law (Congressional Research Service, 2023). Similar barriers to the implementation of legislative restrictions on SRU have appeared in Canada. A ministerial ban on seclusion rooms was implemented in Alberta in 2019 but was repealed shortly after due to concerns that this ban would impact the ability of a school to ensure the safety of all students in crisis situations (French, 2019; Bartlett & Ellis, 2020). This decision emphasizes a disregard for the safety of disabled students who continue to be subjected to violent practices of seclusion and restraint in schools, and also demonstrates a lack of will to support total legislative bans on these practices – a reality reflected in both political spheres and in academic literature on the topic.

While support for a complete ban on seclusion and restraint practices was largely absent in much of the literature, so too was any discussion of general abolitionist thought as a pathway to achieving social justice for disabled students. This is an especially significant gap, as I have previously noted the role that police and carceral attitudes have played in situations involving SRU that are detailed in the literature. The abolitionist movement challenges the idea that police are required for maintaining public safety and call for the dismantling of police systems – replacing it with community practices of care, connection, and mutual aid (Pasternak et al., 2022). Abolitionist perspectives could provide some valuable insights on the elimination of seclusion and restraint with disabled students in schools, but unfortunately none of the literature on SRU considered this framework.

Overall, in reviewing the literature I found that there was a general lack of robust research on practices of seclusion and restraint in Canadian schools, which can be partially credited to the fact that there are no universal tracking measures in place to record the occurrence of these incidents and therefore, no publicly available data on the frequency of its use across educational settings nation-wide (Bartlett & Ellis, 2021a). Of the studies on this topic that did exist within a Canadian context, only a small portion were situated within Ontario (Correia et al., 2024; Pegg, 2025). Additionally, while some studies did incorporate the views of disabled individuals, much of the literature on SRU focused on the perspectives of staff or support personnel that had engaged in these practices, along with the perspectives of the parents of disabled students that had been subjected to SRU. The study that I am conducting aims to fill these gaps, by situating the study within an Ontario-based context and centering the lived experiences of disabled individuals that have been secluded or restrained while at school.

Furthermore, although some of the literature examined practices of seclusion and restraint as discriminatory in nature (Bartlett & Ellis, 2020; Correia et al., 2024), none provided an explicit analysis of ableism as a systematic root to these practices. This is another gap in the literature and knowledge on this topic that my research question aims to address, as I seek to uncover the ways that systemic ableism is connected to the mistreatment of disabled individuals in Ontario schools, particularly through the use of seclusion and restraint.

Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework I am using to guide my research is critical disability studies (CDS), sometimes referred to as critical disability theory. This section will provide a brief summary of core tenets, values and perspectives within CDS, along with a description of how this theoretical framework supports my research question that aims to reveal a connection between systemic ableism and disabled individuals' lived experiences of mistreatment, like being secluded and restrained, within Ontario schools.

Foundations of Critical Disability Studies

Critical disability studies is an evolving, interdisciplinary academic field, developing from the foundational perspectives of disability studies that first appeared in tandem with the disability rights movements of the 1970s (Meekosha & Shuttleworth, 2009). From an ontological perspective, which is the very nature or essence of something existing in the social world (Mason, 2018), disability studies initially aimed to challenge the dominant way that disability was framed in public discourse and academic settings – where disability was typically viewed as a medical issue needing to be solved (Garland-Thomson, 2018). Ontologically, disability is viewed as an inherently negative trait in modern society because it upsets the idea of a perfected, secure human existence (Campbell, 2008a). Under these circumstances, being able-bodied becomes something to continually strive for in life, often through "the incessant consuming of objects of health, beauty, strength and capability" (Campbell, 2008a, para. 9). This desire for ontological security extends to the entire body-mind, which specifies how the mind and body overlap and affect each other (Price, 2015), in an attempt to live out what is considered a normal, non-disabled life within mainstream social contexts, beyond the aberrant and unthinkable existence that is considered to mark one involving disability (Campbell, 2008a).

The medical model of disability

The medical model takes an individualized approach to disability, whereby an individual body-mind with non-normative traits is regarded as an object of study that must be managed, treated, or cured of their disability in order to fit into society (Linton, 2005; McRae, 2018). This deficit-based view is contingent upon an essentialist perspective where a ‘normal’ individual human body is expected to possess certain attributes or characteristics, without which one cannot be considered a functioning member of society (Feely, 2016). Essentialist ideals about the human body and mind have widely contributed to the exclusion and even elimination of certain characteristics that fall outside expectations of the ‘normal’ human, as evidenced in eugenic measures like statistical standards of IQ or prenatal screening and selective abortion practices (Feely, 2016; Meekosha & Shuttleworth, 2009). This harmful medicalized view of disability as something that either needed to be corrected or concealed was challenged within the foundational academic discipline of disability studies, the goal of which was to naturalize and increase the participation of disabled individuals as valid members of society (Linton, 2005). In this process, the social model of disability emerged as an alternative way to understand disability.

The social model of disability

The social model separates impairment from disability by recognizing disability as being socially constructed through barriers encountered by people with impairments, or functional limitations, which serves to restrict their participation in society (Boxall, 2018). Instead of disability being an individual deficit, the responsibility is placed on the collective social, political, and economic barriers and attitudes that produce disability and contribute to the exclusion, discrimination and oppression of people with impairments (Boxall, 2018; Hughes, 2007). Under the social model of disability, social justice can be achieved through shifting commonplace perspectives away from pathologizing assumptions about bodies, ability, and mobility and towards policies and practices that increase access, accommodations, and support through public welfare systems (McRae, 2018).

The development of the social model of disability is not without critique, and this is where the emerging field of critical disability studies (CDS) distinctly splits from the foundational disability studies discipline. While the social model emphasizes the social construction of disability, it can fail to recognize the nuanced experiences of impairment in the everyday lives of disabled individuals that extend beyond encountering socially imposed restrictions (Boxall, 2018). The social model of disability also has a tendency to prioritize physical impairments over mental health or intellectual disabilities, leading to the under-representation of certain experiences of disability within the context of the social model (Boxall, 2018). This was a valuable insight to keep in mind when designing my research study, as I wanted to ensure my work was rooted in the inclusion of all experiences of disability, and not a narrow view that ignored certain perspectives from individuals that had been violently mistreated in school.

CDS and critical social theory

While a critical disability framework draws from a number of academic disciplines, a core epistemological influence is critical social theory. This paradigm has origins within critical theory developed by academics of the Frankfurt School in the 1930s (Meekosha & Shuttleworth, 2009). Critical theory viewed society as being limited in developing any form of critical consciousness or autonomy due to the bureaucratic, capitalist systems it functions under (Meekosha & Shuttleworth, 2009). In contemporary understandings, critical social theory has expanded to include the study of society in relation to other issues of our time but remains rooted in some key principles – which have been adopted in the formation of critical disability studies. The first of these values is the rejection of a scientific understanding of society that is relegated to facts without addressing any shifting sociocultural context (Meekosha & Shuttleworth, 2009). Critical social theory is also concerned with autonomy and social participation, and the various ideologies, processes and power dynamics that impose restrictions in these areas (Meekosha & Shuttleworth, 2009). Critical self-reflexivity is another centrepiece within critical social theory and operates as a constant reminder that all social relations, theories, and understandings of self are situated within a specific historical moment that is subject to change over time (Meekosha & Shuttleworth, 2009). In applying these core principles from critical social theory to the study of disability, CDS remains rooted in the emancipation of disabled people while under the presumption that experiences of disability will continue to diversify and be reconceptualized depending on the sociopolitical landscapes they are located within (Meekosha & Shuttleworth, 2009; McRae, 2018). Core values from CDS and critical social theory, like autonomy and the pursuit of collective liberation, have strongly influenced the goals of this thesis research, particularly through the platforming of disabled individuals’ desires for social change regarding treatment within the Ontario education system.

CDS and interdisciplinary ties

Expanding beyond its foundational roots in disability studies and critical social theory, CDS frequently incorporates other theoretical frameworks and disciplines such as feminist studies, critical race theory, queer theory, and postcolonial theory, in order to demonstrate a more intersectional approach to how disability is experienced in everyday life. Intersectionality was a term coined by Black feminist scholar, Kimberle Crenshaw, to describe how multiple structures of power – such as racism and sexism – interact to produce a complex, layered form of oppression (Crenshaw, 1989; Meekosha & Shuttleworth, 2009; Hall, 2019). Implementing intersectional analyses within CDS has allowed for more nuanced understandings of the ways that various social identities inform and impact differing experiences of disability (Meekosha & Shuttleworth, 2009). Intersectionality continues to be a valuable framework within CDS for examining how variable, interlocking forms of oppression marginalize disabled individuals and communities. However, it is also important to note that many intersectional analyses also ignore or are at the expense of disability, such as analyses that rely on a narrow biomedical focus of disability or paint disability as a negative consequence to other forms of oppression (Voronka, 2019), which can work to re-entrench the marginalization of disabled people (Meekosha & Shuttleworth, 2009). This thesis aims to resist such a position, by prioritizing a non-medicalized view of disability as the central social identity that informs my critical analysis of violence and mistreatment in schools.

Applying critical disability perspectives to this study

Numerous aspects indicated that CDS was an appropriate framework to guide my thesis research on disabled individuals' experiences of seclusion, restraint, and other kinds of maltreatment in schools. Integrating concepts from the social model of disability allows for an understanding that seclusion and restraint practices function as socially constructed barriers within the school system to prevent disabled students from receiving an education that is free from violence and harm – a freedom that is regularly afforded to many students perceived as able-bodied and neurotypical. This highlights the key foundational assumption within CDS that "disabled people are undervalued and discriminated against" (Meekosha & Shuttleworth, 2009, p. 65). In using this core understanding to frame the treatment of disabled students in schools as frequently discriminatory in nature, CDS can support my central research question that aims to investigate how disabled individuals' experiences of violence and mistreatment, particularly through seclusion and restraint practices, are connected to the production of ableism within the Ontario school system. In general, ableism encompasses any attitudes, processes, beliefs, or practices that value able-bodiedness as the standard for normalcy (Campbell, 2008a). Within conceptualizations of ableism, disability is devalued to such a degree that it becomes "a diminished state of being human" (Campbell, 2001, p. 44), which more readily allows for prejudice and systematic discrimination based on ability as it is perceived and produced within structures of power (Campbell, 2009; Hall, 2019). This systematic devaluing of those viewed outside the 'normal' standard of being can help to illustrate how disabled students may be treated by those in authority positions within school environments.

Some critical disability theorists who engage with the concept of ableism in their work have applied a Foucauldian analysis of power to examine how ableism manifests within institutionalized power relations, which is helpful in contextualizing my research topic. For instance, Fiona Kumari Campbell (2015) draws on Foucault's writing on 'unthought' to emphasize how pervasive networks of ableist mentalities "depends upon the capacity of that network to 'shut away', to exteriorize, and *unthink* disability and its resemblance to the essential (ableist) human self" (p. 109). This shutting away of disability and disabled body-minds to an area of "unthought" (Campbell, 2015, p. 109) is relevant to my research, particularly in the use of seclusion practices within schools – which is one way this concept physically manifests.

Due to the fact that analyzing and exposing ableism is a primary focus within critical disability theory (Hall, 2019), this framework provides me with a concrete epistemological base for conducting this research as I seek to examine how ableism operates through violent practices and poor treatment experienced by disabled individuals in Ontario schools. All in all, using a theoretical and epistemological framework rooted in critical disability studies has been beneficial for engaging with the central research question guiding this study, which asks "how are disabled individuals' experiences of seclusion, restraint, and other forms of mistreatment in Ontario schools connected to systemic ableism within these settings?"

Methodology and Research Methods

To conduct this study, I utilized qualitative research methods informed by a critical disability studies (CDS) methodology, as CDS can apply to more than just a theoretical or epistemological framework when engaging in disability-related research. When framed by a CDS methodology, qualitative research methods are especially advantageous for exploring the experiences of people with disabilities as they navigate and are impacted by structural ableism in daily life (Berger & Lorenz, 2016). In this section, I will describe how CDS is constructed as a methodology and how this was integrated into the qualitative research methods used for this study.

Critical Disability Studies Methodology

When paired with qualitative methods, a methodological approached rooted in CDS can facilitate research that is collaborative and empowering for people with disabilities and helps make visible their unique life experiences (Berger & Lorenz, 2016). By focusing on collaboration, a CDS methodology can purposely reshape and balance power relations present between the researcher and those being researched (Price, 2012). This is particularly relevant given the fact that institutional research processes traditionally follow a top-down approach, where power is typically held by an outside researcher and those contributing their knowledge have little input on the research outcomes (Price, 2012). To resist this habitual model of doing research, I made platforming disabled voices and perspectives a priority of mine when planning to conduct this study, which aligned well with a methodology that values collaboration with disabled individuals in the creation of knowledge. I incorporated elements of collaboration from the very beginning of this research venture by consulting with members of the disabled community that I was volunteering with on the ‘Dreaming Safer Schools Education Project’ through DJNO (2023). Discussions with these team members not only helped me to focus on an impactful research topic that would benefit our community, but they also assisted in contributing ideas for building the research design, plans for recruitment, and future dissemination of the research. Guidance from a CDS methodology that promotes collaboration supported me in engaging in dialogue with these community members at DJNO to ensure that this research project was relevant and empowering for disabled individuals that had experienced violent mistreatment in school.

However, there are also values beyond collaboration and empowerment that a CDS research methodology is concerned with. Price (2012) recognizes four central themes that are essential to qualitative research that utilizes CDS as methodology: identification, representation, access, and activism. With the theme of identification, Price (2012) suggests that researchers make clear their relation to disability, not in terms of diagnosis but in a way that shows transparency about how one is allied with disability-related issues and challenges any ‘neutral’ positioning of a researcher. As Heilig and Sandell Hardesty (2024) note, expecting researchers to remain objective, especially when engaging with emotionally difficult topics of research, is dehumanizing and ignores the fact that many scholars in disability-related research have personal stories and identities that are interwoven into their work. Making clear how a researcher connects to the topic of study is how CDS methodology counters the detached “mechanization of qualitative research” (Heilig and Sandell Hardesty, 2024, p.3).

Identifying my positionality and connection to the disabled community within the introduction of this thesis is how I worked to resist an objective stance in this research.

Another integral aspect of a critical disability methodology has to do with representation, such as ensuring participants with disabilities are represented accurately in the written publication of the research that they are a part of (Price, 2012). However, matters of representation in qualitative research also apply to the researcher, whose presence influences the entirety of the research process as decisions are shaped by their worldview (Mantzoukas, 2004). Thus, critical reflection and explanation by the researcher about their decision-making processes becomes of central importance (Mantzoukas, 2004). Through this attention to reflexive representation, I will highlight some key decisions made in the design and implementation of this study through the lens of the last two themes that Price (2012) describes as essential to CDS methodology: access and activism.

The study design and CDS methodology

Accessibility is a central consideration when building a research design guided by CDS methodology, particularly because seeking out knowledge from individuals with disabilities requires research processes to be adaptable to meet the specific needs a person might require for participation in the study (Price, 2012). I found that anticipating the access needs that someone might have to be challenging before initiating the recruitment phase, and I had to reckon with the fact that this study would inevitably not be accessible to every disabled person – especially if there was a difference in modes of communication between myself and the participant. However, there were a few provisions that I wove into my research design to indicate the flexibility of this study to meet the needs of potential participants. For one, I made clear that the inclusion of a support person in the interview process alongside the participant was a welcome option in this study. Speaking about experiences of mistreatment in school, particularly involving seclusion or restraint, requires a degree of vulnerability and I wanted to ensure that participants knew they could bring in someone for additional support. This could be a parent or another trusted care person that provides reassurance or assists with other needs while the participant shares their experience, or perhaps provides support with email communication before or after the interview. The inclusion of this optional measure demonstrates a team approach with support personnel that Price (2012) describes as an avenue for improving access to qualitative research studies that seeks to involve individuals with disabilities. Other measures that I included in this study that aimed to improve accessibility for potential participants were described in the recruitment material, including that closed captioning would be available to use during the virtual interview. I also included definitions for certain words like ‘seclusion’ and ‘restraint’, as I did not want to assume that everyone understood the meaning of these words used in the context of this study. This is often an issue in academic research that uses complicated terminology (Acton, 2023), and balancing the need for accessible language in the promotion of my study was a difficult but important task.

In aiming to improve wider access to this study, I also included a statement in my recruitment material about the term ‘disability’. This decision was influenced by reflections from critical disability scholars that have highlighted how understandings of disability as solely pertaining to the physical body are pervasive (Boxall, 2018). Additionally, because possessing documentation of disability is so often required as ‘proof’ in many of our social institutions (Minich, 2016; Kafer, 2016), I was aware of the possibility that those who saw my study recruitment material and had experienced forms of mistreatment like seclusion or restraint, may not identify with disability due to their own lack of formal documentation or diagnosis. To address this, I made clear in my recruitment material that this study is intentionally situated within a broad understanding of disability that encompasses a wide range of experiences or conditions and does not rely upon an official diagnosis. While I provided a description of some common experiences aligned with disability, many critical disability scholars agree that there is no singular understanding of who ‘counts’ as disabled since disability is a fluid identity that is constantly transforming based on individual or collective context (Meekosha & Shuttleworth, 2009; Hall, 2019; Garland-Thomson, 2018). By providing this broad description in my recruitment material, I attended to the key principle of increasing access that is rooted within a CDS methodology.

Activism is another central focus of a critical disability research methodology, as the purpose of research that uses this approach is to further social justice for all those with stigmatized body-minds (Price, 2012; Minich, 2016). When coupled with a CDS methodology, qualitative research can embody activism through its emancipatory potential towards the liberation of disabled individuals and communities (Berger & Lorenz, 2016). Research that embodies an emancipatory quality through its drive for social change connects to a valuable principle within CDS epistemology – the transformation of theory into praxis, or social action (Meekosha & Shuttleworth, 2009). Price & Kerschbaum (2016) point to the centrality of praxis in disability-focused research designs, stating that “to call CDS a methodology is to re-claim the inseparability of disability activism plus theory" (p. 23). However, prioritizing social justice also requires researchers to be reflexive and explicit about who they are accountable to in the collection of data and sharing of research, as this can address any skepticism that activist communities might have regarding academic research projects (Price, 2012). In the context of my study, being connected to a community organization like DJNO that engages in disability-focused advocacy helped to bridge this divide between activist spaces and academia. It also allowed me to engage in research for my thesis that could continue to be built upon with DJNO, even after I finished my graduate studies. In this way, this study on disabled individuals lived experiences of ableist maltreatment in school demonstrates a prolonged commitment to activism, supported by a critical disability studies methodology.

Methods

To conduct this study, I began with using an online qualitative interviewing method with the intention of gathering perspectives from disabled individuals on their experiences of seclusion and restraint while attending a school in Ontario. Qualitative interviews generally can be beneficial for understanding experiences of specific events, and online interviews can be a particularly useful method for collecting data as this can open up participation to those from a wider geographical area without needing to travel (Mason, 2018). Drawing from the key principles of CDS methodology mentioned earlier, this technique was advantageous for increasing participant access to the study no matter where in Ontario they lived. The decision to initially go about collecting data directly from disabled individuals using in-depth interviewing was also informed by a foundational understanding within CDS that disabled people know what is best for them and their community – encapsulated by the phrase from within the disability rights movement, “Nothing About Us Without Us” (Charlton, 1998). As a member of the disability community myself, it is an important priority of mine that disabled people have greater control of the narrative and are adequately represented within research involving the lived experiences of disability-related oppression (Charlton, 1998). Seeking out the perspectives of disabled individuals through a qualitative interviewing method also reflects the core values of increasing autonomy and social participation for disabled people, which are paramount to CDS (Meekosha & Shuttleworth, 2009).

Methodological challenges and redirections

The original recruitment method that I had planned for this study involved posting a recruitment poster to social media with the assistance of DJNO, who offered to post it to their social media channels. Unfortunately, this recruitment method did not unfold as seamlessly as I had hoped. Within 24 hours of my recruitment flyer being posted to DJNO’s Facebook, Instagram, and X social media pages, my inbox was flooded with over 1,200 phishing emails from individuals looking to eagerly participate in the study and access the electronic $30 gift card that I was offering as an incentive. Many of these email addresses used the structure of a first name and last name, followed by some numbers, which is a common red flag for email scams (Bobbette, 2025). Many of the emails I received also used a standardized text response, which other qualitative researchers have similarly encountered and suspect to be AI-generated – something that poses as an increasingly common issue as studies are carried out online (Sharma et al., 2024). Imposter participation became a very real possibility for my study, and it became impossible for me to decipher who might have legitimate interest and experiences applicable to this study and who was feigning interest in order to access the incentive. Upon discussing this situation with the McMaster Ethics Research Board (MREB), it was suggested that I no longer recruit participants via social media and instead circulate information about the study through organizations that provide support to individuals with disabilities, so that they can share it internally to their clients. It was also recommended that I move my recruitment information from an email template to an online form, such as the McMaster Lime Survey platform. This way, my student email address would no longer be advertised on the study poster. I also made a change to the way the gift card incentive was advertised for participating in the study; I stated in the screening survey that the gift card would be provided in physical form and only sent to those with Ontario mailing addresses. Although not foolproof, these measures would hopefully deter any attempts at fraudulent participation, that I was now incredibly weary of. I made amendments to my ethics protocol to include these changes to my recruitment procedures and also amended some aspects of the eligibility criteria for this study. Originally, I had required eligible participants to be young adults aged 18-26 years, identify as disabled or with a disability, attended elementary or high school in Ontario, and had experience with being secluded or restrained while in school. When making amendments to my ethics form, I changed the age limitation so the study could be open to anyone over 18 years and also added a new requirement that they had to be a current resident of Ontario – as this aligned with the revised way that I would be providing the incentive. After making these amendments to my ethics protocol, and receiving approval from the McMaster Research Ethics Board, this is how I proceeded with my second attempt at recruiting study participants.

Unfortunately, I continued to face challenges with this new phase of recruitment. Despite reaching out to numerous organizations via email, only a few responded agreeing to share the study information with their client lists, and still no interested individuals reached out. I then asked my second reader, Ann Fudge Schormans, for assistance with recruitment. She had personal contacts at different disability support organizations and forwarded my study information to them via email, which is how one individual learned about this study. This person filled out the screening survey to confirm they met the eligibility criteria, and then I contacted them at the email they provided in the survey. I offered to meet via Zoom to introduce myself, answer any questions they had, and go over the Letter of Information for the study (see Appendix A). At the end of this introductory meeting, we scheduled a time to conduct an online interview a few days later. When meeting for the interview on Zoom, I reviewed some of the main points from the Letter of Information again – as revisiting these details can help ensure that the participant is fully informed about what they are consenting to (Mason, 2018). I also confirmed all of the key points related to their voluntary participation in the study (see Appendix B), before obtaining their verbal consent, documenting it in a consent log, and proceeding with the interview. I then turned on the recording feature on Zoom and began with asking the participant the first question from the interview guide (see Appendix C), which I had developed using a critical disability approach, informed by the existing literature on seclusion and restraint. As this interview was semi-structured, I did not rely solely on the questions but also focused on keeping a conversational flow to the interview, while asking probing questions to elicit more information or gain clarity about what was being shared. In being reflexive about avoiding assumptions as a researcher

(Mason, 2018), I prioritized paraphrasing and repeating the responses of the participant back to them to confirm that I was interpreting their experiences correctly. At the end of the interview, I reiterated the next steps involving the interview data: the video recording from Zoom would be deleted immediately, and the audio recording would be deleted after I had finished editing the interview transcript to remove any identifying information. The de-identified transcript would be stored on my encrypted laptop, with copies stored on an encrypted external hard drive in my locked home office and on my McMaster OneDrive account as a password-protected file. I also reminded the participant that they could request that I remove any information from the interview transcript up until July 1st, when I would be turning in a full draft of the findings to my supervisor. I felt this reminder was important as I wanted the participant to know that they had control over the inclusion or exclusion of their data during the analysis process. This decision was informed by critical disability perspectives that support promoting the autonomy of individuals with disabilities, along with ensuring accurate representation of participants valued in CDS methodology (Meekosha & Shuttleworth, 2009; Price, 2012). However, the participant was adamant that they wanted everything discussed in the interview to stay in the transcript. I then shared a community resources and counselling document with the participant (see Appendix D), as this provided options for accessing emotional support after the interview, should they need it. I also discussed next steps for sending the gift card, which was sent within in the next few days via letter mail to the Ontario mailing address that the participant provided in an earlier email exchange.

In the end, this was the only participant that I was able to recruit for this study using the revised recruitment methods I had constructed to avoid fraudulent participation. Because of these significant challenges, amplified by the time restriction I was under to complete this thesis, I was not able to engage in a more rigorous sampling method involving multiple individuals as originally intended. Instead, I turned to the experiences shared in organizational reports and news articles about disabled individuals being secluded and restrained in Ontario schools to further support the findings that emerged from the single interview I conducted. This was a kind of secondary analysis approach that allowed me to verify the thematic findings (Heaton, 2008) that had emerged from my initial research data, collected from the interview. These five reports included three organizational reports: one for DJNO titled *Surveying the Educational Experiences of Black and Racialized Students in Ontario* by Correia et al. (2024), another for Community Living Ontario written by Pegg (2025) called *Crisis in the Classroom: Exclusion, Seclusion, and Restraint of Students with Disabilities in Ontario Schools*, and one more by Autism Advocacy Ontario (2019) titled *2019 Special Education Needs Survey: Children in Crisis*. The final two reports are from news articles through *Toronto Life* (Hune-Brown, 2016) and *Global News* (Lieberman, 2019) that interviewed the families of disabled students that had experienced seclusion or restraint at Ontario public schools. These five reports functioned as additional data sources, alongside the participant interview, to become my purposive sampling units – which are typically selected in qualitative research based on theoretical relevance to a research question (Mason, 2018). These data sources will be used in the subsequent analysis processes.

Data Analysis

For the data analysis process for this study, I decided to utilize a thematic analysis approach to develop a core set of themes from the interview data, that were then used in a subsequent analysis of organizational and news reports. Thematic analysis is useful for qualitative studies, as it can allow for flexible interpretations of data based on identified patterns, which can be used to answer research questions (Castleberry & Nolen, 2018). I began with compiling the raw data into usable data in preparation for analysis, which Castleberry and Nolen (2018) note is ideally done through manual transcription in order to become familiar with the data. I used the auto-generated transcript of the interview from Zoom and manually edited it line by line to remove incorrect words and ensure the transcript accurately reflected what was said. I also deleted any identifying information from the transcript to protect the confidentiality of the participant, including their name, the names of the schools they attended, and specific years of attendance mentioned during the interview. While organizing the verbatim transcription, I was simultaneously engaging in a literal reading of the data where I was reminded of the content of the discussion and structure of the interview itself (Mason, 2018). During this initial reading, I began to disassemble the data through open coding, or the identification of concepts that are similarly or differently connected, by highlighting key parts of discussion within the transcript and concepts that repeatedly appeared (Castleberry & Nolen, 2018; Ryan & Bernard, 2003). I then performed a secondary reading of the transcript and engaged in a more in-depth, interpretive reading of the data (Mason, 2018) where I focused on primarily coding information in relation to how the participant interpreted and understood their experiences within the Ontario education system. This interpretive approach to coding the data was informed by a critical disability studies methodology, where centering perspectives of those with disabilities and representing them within research is a key priority (Price, 2012). Once I had derived relevant codes from the data, I began reassembling the codes and arranging them into themes by identifying patterns among the codes and manually drawing out these connections using thematic maps (Castleberry & Nolen, 2018). Mapping out the themes in this way allowed me to see where themes could be divided into major themes and categories of sub-themes, and also to confirm that my interpretations of the coded thematic data accurately represented the overall picture presented through the raw interview data (Castleberry & Nolen, 2018). In making reflexive conclusions about whether my themes interpreted from the interview data adequately responded to my overall research question (Castleberry & Nolen, 2018), I realized that I would need more data to support the themes that emerged from the one interview I had conducted.

To further build upon the original thematic analysis of my interview data, I turned to three published reports by disability advocacy organizations as well as two news reports that were all concerned with incidents involving the seclusion and/or restraint of disabled students in Ontario schools. I used an *a priori* approach, which is based on prior understanding of a phenomenon (Ryan & Bernard, 2003), to code these five reports based on the previous coding scheme that had emerged during the analysis of my initial interview data. Using the themes that I had previously developed out of the coded interview data, I strategically analyzed the reports to look for information that would support those themes in order to further amplify disabled individuals' perspectives on experiences of violent mistreatment within the Ontario school system. Although two of these reports included the voices of students who had lived experience of being secluded or restrained, the majority primarily relied on the perspectives of parents of students with disabilities to speak to the harsh realities that accompany attending school in Ontario. While it was not my original intention to include the perspectives of parents in my analysis, it was important to remain flexible in my method for conducting this study as this is a central principle in using CDS methodology (Price, 2012).

It was also important for me to reflect on the reasons why the voices of parents may be more prominent in organizational and news reports on seclusion and restraint. Individuals with disabilities may be unwilling to come forward to speak about these experiences for a variety of reasons, such as shame or fear related to these often traumatic and highly violent incidents (Montreuil et al., 2020). There also may be communication challenges that can prevent their experiences from being known – even by trusted loved ones (Saloviita et al., 2016). This is where the perspectives of parents can act as a valuable contribution in illustrating the prevalence of the violently ableist practices of seclusion and restraint occurring within the Ontario education system, and the impact this has had on disabled students subjected to this kind of treatment.

To conduct this additional analysis using textual information from reports on seclusion and restraint, I used the cutting and sorting technique of thematic data analysis whereby quotes or excerpts are identified as having similar qualities and placed into named piles (Ryan & Bernard, 2003). As I read through the organizational and news reports that I had selected for this additional analysis, I copied and pasted key quotations and reported information of similar relevance into separate Word documents.

These documents functioned as my data “piles” (Ryan & Bernard, 2003), that were then named according to my pre-determined major themes and sub-themes derived from the interview transcript data and original analysis process. Once the compiled data from the reports were organized into these different documents, I highlighted 1-2 passages in each “pile” that most clearly demonstrated alignment with the theme. This review process was important for ensuring quality and cohesion of data that helped compose the theme (Castleberry & Nolen, 2018). I will describe the combined outcomes from both my original thematic analysis of the participant interview, as well as the additional *a priori* secondary thematic analysis of organizational and news reports, in the findings section of this thesis that details three major themes and various subthemes within each.

Findings

The findings for this study are comprised of three major themes drawn from the one qualitative interview that I conducted with a single participant, further supported by the analysis of three organizational reports and two news stories on the occurrence of seclusion and restraint within Ontario schools. The organizations that had published these reports were three Ontario-based disability advocacy and support organizations: Community Living Ontario (CLO), the Disability Justice Network of Ontario (DJNO), and Autism Advocacy Ontario (AAO). I also consulted two news articles, one from *Toronto Life* and one from *Global News*. In developing themes through the analysis of the primary participant interview data, there were three major themes that emerged with various sub-themes within each one. The first overarching theme concerned the lived experiences of ableist violence and maltreatment within the Ontario education system, with sub-themes of violent and harmful encounters involving seclusion and restraint, destabilization, and strained relationships stemming from lack of support. The next major theme that emerged was the damaging impact on the wellbeing of disabled individuals resulting from degrading and ableist mistreatment in school, with sub-themes detailing the threatening physical and emotional toll on the individual, as well as harsh self-perception. The final core theme concerns desired areas for change to counter ableist violence and improve the treatment of disabled students in Ontario schools. The sub-themes under this includes the need for specialized training for all educators, the need for a compassionate attitude and approach, and improving supports to keep students in school.

It is important to note that I did not collect demographic information from the participant I had interviewed, beyond what was confirmed through the screening process. The information that I had confirmed was that they identified as disabled or with disability in some way and were an adult over the age of 18 years. Only some of the reports that I used as additional data sources included demographic data, which indicated a wide range of identities of the students or parents and caregivers represented in the reports. For instance, [the majority of survey respondents for the Community Living Ontario report, who were all parents or caregivers of students with disabilities, identified as white (Pegg, 2025). The majority of student data in this report, as identified by the parent or caregiver respondents, was about males in junior grades ranging from kindergarten to grade six, and were identified as autistic (Pegg, 2025). With the demographic data from the report for DJNO however, the majority of student respondents identified as Black, female, and most identified with ADHD and anxiety (Correia et al., 2024). Specific demographic data was not included in the Autism Advocacy Ontario report (2019), and the news articles did not share much demographic information beyond the reports being about male students with disabilities that appear to be white-presenting in pictures included in the news articles (Lieberman, 2019; Hune-Brown, 2016).

Theme 1: Lived experiences of ableist violence and maltreatment within the Ontario education system

Harmful or violent encounters involving seclusion and restraint

All of the data sources that were analyzed detailed instances of seclusion and restraint that was harmful or violent for the student involved. During the interview I conducted, this was one of the first experiences that the participant brought up after I had started our conversation by asking them a general question about how they had liked their overall school experience. The participant immediately went into describing how, aside from their grade eight year where they attended a school where they felt respected, supported and well-liked, their time in school was primarily unenjoyable. The participant shared that “high school was an absolute disaster”, and then recalled a situation where they were restrained by a child and youth worker (CYW):

> “There was a CYW, I think I was… acting up, acting silly, like, playing around on the chair, and he just grabbed me, restrained me, and was… fighting me for no reason and stuff…”

This was not the only time that the participant had experienced being restrained during their time in school, either. The participant had had various encounters with school personnel that resulted in them being restrained throughout both elementary and high school, ~~including~~ by principals, vice principals, and even the head janitor in one case. They also experienced seclusion on numerous occasions throughout their school career, but described this happening in high school in particular:

> “I was put in a seclusion room a few times, in the special ed rooms, in that school there they had small rooms, and I was put in seclusion rooms a few times… like I'd say, about, like, a few times each year of those… two years that I was in that [high] school.”

In consulting the reports being used as additional data sources for this study, many encounters that disabled students had with school staff similarly resulted in violent uses of restraint. One parent in the report for Community Living Ontario (Pegg, 2025) shared that, “in grade 1, my child was dragged across the school by educational assistants and came home with bruises in the shape of handprints on his arms” (p. 2). A similarly violent experience was described by Cary and Rachelle Vlaad, who were interviewed for *Global News* after their disabled son, Ryan, was harmed by teachers who had restrained him at an elementary school in Lindsay, Ontario (Lieberman, 2019). Cary recalled seeing his son “in a little brown chair strapped in” when he went to pick him up from school (Lieberman, 2019, para. 4), and later that night his wife asked their son what had happened:

> “‘What happened to your arm?’ she said she asked Ryan. And he looked at it and he said, ‘Teachers hurt me.’ So I [Ryan’s mother] said, ‘How Ryan?’ and he told me teachers hurt him and he showed me by grabbing his arm” (paras. 9-10).

The use of seclusion rooms has also been documented as a harmful experience that many students with disabilities have encountered within Ontario schools, and was previously highlighted by the participant I had interviewed. One parent in Mississauga went to the media after her son, Christian, who has ADHD and autism, was repeatedly put in seclusion rooms over many years at different elementary schools he attended. An article in *Toronto Life* (Hune-Brown, 2016) where Christian and his mother were interviewed detailed one experience of seclusion. In one part of the interview with Christian, the author of the article (Hune-Brown, 2016) writes:

> “[Christian] says teachers would sit on a chair in front of the door to prevent him from leaving, and they covered the small window of the room with construction paper, blocking out the light. [Christian shared] ‘if I kept acting up in the room,

> they'd add on more time.' [Hune-Brown writes] if he had time left over at the end of the day, he was told he'd need to return to the room the next day" (para. 5).

From what was shared about Christian's story, and that of other disabled individuals including my interview participant, it is evident that these lived experiences of seclusion and restraint were clearly harmful or violent for the student involved. Being treated in this way is also a reflection of ableism that exists within the Ontario education system. This is a connection that I will expand upon further within the discussion section of this thesis. However, my conversation with the interview participant also highlighted how there were other factors beyond being secluded or restrained that contributed to disabled students' lived experiences of ableist violence and mistreatment in school. This led to the formation of the next sub-theme.

Destabilization

A common sub-theme that emerged during the interview was of destabilization, due to how frequently the participant was moved around the school system. They described going to "six different elementary schools and three different high schools", and "hated" them all except for one they attended in eighth grade. In elementary school especially, the participant shared how they regularly "went school to school, to do a fresh start". They explained the difficulties of this destabilizing journey throughout elementary school, saying:

> "Until I found that new school that opened up in Grade 8, like, prior to that, like, any of… those schools there, no one really did anything to… really de-escalate

> or help, and I got suspended all the time over my… entire elementary school career. I must have been suspended over 20 times.”

This frequent movement to different schools continued into their high school years, where they were “thrown out” of their high school in Grade 11 after a “confrontation”:

> “My dad had to pick me up, and they said I'm not allowed to go back to that school. And… they shipped me off, to this really bad school in [redacted]. Which was, like, the worst school… ever.”

The participant’s time at this new high school was also short-lived, as they “only stayed there for 2 months, [because] the kids there were really bad”. The participant’s relationship with their peers in school will be discussed in further detail in the next sub-theme, as this was also a significant aspect of the lived experiences of disabled students within an ableist school system. However, it is important to highlight that being shuffled around to various schools is not an experience unique to the participant that I had interviewed. Other reports and news articles detailing the experiences of disabled students have also noted this, like the *Toronto Life* article (Hune-Brown, 2016) that covered Christian Thorndyke’s story. The author of the article writes:

> “For the next two years, he was bumped from school to school across the public system in Brampton and Mississauga. Thorndyke claims he was asked to leave each institution for unmanageable behaviour” (para. 9).

Consistent periods of students with disabilities being in and out of school was also reported by Community Living Ontario (Pegg, 2025), which further represents this theme of destabilization being a common aspect of the educational experience for disabled individuals across Ontario. Pegg (2025) writes that that survey responses in this report indicated that:

> “Nearly one in five students represented in the survey missed more than one full day of school per week. An additional 51% missed two or three days of school every month” (p. 21).

Given the fact that so many disabled students have experienced being moved around to different schools or are not in school on a consistent, daily basis, it is no wonder that 27% of students with disabilities in Community Living’s survey data were reported to “rarely or never enjoy attending school” (Pegg, 2025, p. 25). This sub-theme of destabilization, found using this report and other data sources, including the qualitative interview I conducted, further demonstrates a larger theme signifying the harmful lived experiences of ableist mistreatment that disabled individuals are encountering within the Ontario education system.

Strained relationships stemming from a lack of support

The final sub-theme that emerged from the participant interview and indicated their lived experience with ableist violence and maltreatment in school extended from relationships with educators or other students being strained or tense, often because the individual did not feel well-supported. This came up in conversation with the interview participant often, with one strained relationship being with a staff member from the local school board “that check[s] on the special ed students”:

> “There was this… one young girl that used to come in and see me from the board, that was, uh, absolutely horrible and not supportive at all, didn't agree with

> anything I said. Didn't try to help me, nothing. And she was always contradicting and contrary to anything I said that was going on…”

The participant noticeably felt that this school board employee did not adequately support them during their time in school and failed to be agreeable in their communication, which contributed to a strained dynamic. The participant also discussed other relational challenges with both school staff and their fellow peers throughout their early years in school:

> “I got bullied early on… and I got older, I started… fighting back, getting into fights. And as far as the staff at those other elementary schools, they didn't treat me good, weren't supportive.”

Here, the participant illustrates that not only did they experience poor treatment from unsupportive school staff, but that they had strained relationships with their peers also, evidenced by the bullying and fighting they experienced.

The report for DJNO (Correia et al., 2024) also documented similar instances of disabled students having strained relationships with their peers in school and receiving little support from educators on this. The report included the experience of one student that described being “provoked” into conflict with other students, and receiving no sympathy from teachers regarding the situation (Correia et al., 2024, p. 16). Another student in the report recalled being told they were “disruptive” by a teacher, despite only “trying to get help and felt frustrated” (Correia et al., 2024, p. 15). These examples shared by disabled students in this report emphasize how tense connections did not only exist in relation to their peers, but also with educational staff in schools, because of inadequate support provided to the students. An ableist mentality can be a contributing factor in this lack of support, which is an idea that will be explored further in the discussion section of this thesis.

In summary, these experiences of strained relationships due to a lack of support, alongside the destabilization of being in and out of school, and the violent or harmful interactions that involved seclusion and restraint, signifies the existence of a broader theme seen in the data of ableist violence and maltreatment being the frequent lived experience of disabled students in Ontario schools.

Theme 2: Damaging impact on the wellbeing of disabled individuals resulting from degrading and ableist mistreatment in school

Threatening physical and emotional toll on the individual

A common theme that was apparent in both the qualitative interview I had conducted and the reports I turned to for additional data, was that many of the degrading ways that individuals with disabilities were treated in school had a damaging impact on them, both physically and emotionally. When recalling a particularly difficult year of high school, the participant I interviewed discussed how the way they were treated in school, often violently, had affected them:

> “And, like, that basically screwed up my state of mind, that whole Grade 11 year. And… I'm still recovering till this day… I was… in the hospital, like, tried to commit suicide, I took an overdose of pills, I… cut my arm with a knife, like… Honestly it screwed me up.”

This account reflects how demeaning treatment in school, like the experiences shared under Theme 1, took a severe toll on both the physical and emotional state of the participant in such a way that was not only life-threatening but also left them with extended trauma that they are continuing to recover from. Later in the conversation, the participant discussed another incident in school that resulted in their confinement to a seclusion room, which had an immediately damaging effect on their physical and emotional health:

> “And one time [in seclusion], like… I was, like, really nervous. I was… picking at my face and stuff, and my face was all bloody, and bleeding and stuff.”

This description that the interview participant provided of being nervous and engaging in self-injury as a result of being placed in a seclusion room has been similarly experienced by other disabled students that are subjected to this kind of degrading mistreatment in Ontario schools. The news report by *Toronto Life* (Hune-Brown, 2016) documented the emotional and physical toll that seclusion had on Christian Thorndyke as well, with the author stating that “one day, the stress and humiliation became overwhelming. Christian broke down. He wrote on the walls and began choking himself with his hands” (para. 8). Comparable to Christian’s experience, feelings of humiliation resulting from degrading and ableist practices like seclusion were described by other students in the report for DJNO (Correia et al., 2024), with one student sharing that “it can be embarrassing and traumatic to go through [seclusion]” (p. 18). This student also noted other serious impacts to their physical and emotional wellbeing, detailing how they “had claustrophobia and couldn't breathe” while in seclusion (Correia et al., 2024, p. 18). These examples from the *Toronto Life* article and DJNO report illustrate the detrimental, and potentially life-threatening, impact that degrading experiences of maltreatment like being secluded or restrained have had on the emotional and physical health of disabled individuals in schools. The results of this violent mistreatment were further emphasized by parents of students with disabilities surveyed in the Community Living report (Pegg, 2025), where one parent noted that their child was “deeply traumatized by restraint and seclusion” (p. 16), and another sharing that their child “feels unworthy, unwanted and disposable” as a result of how poorly they were treated in school (p. 26).

These experiences shared by my interview participant, and by disabled students and their parents in the supporting reports, illustrate the severe toll on the physical and emotional health of individuals with disabilities due to violently ableist practices like seclusion and restraint. This finding helps demonstrate an overall theme of the damaging impact on the wellbeing of disabled individuals that experience such degrading and ableist mistreatment in school.

Harsh self-perception

Many experiences of mistreatment in school that students with disabilities have lived through have not only caused deep physical and emotional harm but also seems to affect their view of themselves in ways that are more harsh or critical. I noticed this during my conversation with the interview participant, as they often used self-deprecating language when describing how various experiences of degrading maltreatment, like being restrained or put into a seclusion room in school, continues to impact them. The participant shared that:

> “I still… think about it almost every day, [redacted] years later. And I believe it has impacted me to this day, psychologically. It's messed me up. Screwed me up…”

This kind of pathologizing language that the participant used to describe themselves as psychologically unsound due how they were treated in school was apparent at another point in the interview, when the participant was discussing a particularly tense conflict with their high school vice principal. The situation escalated and ended up with the participant being secluded in the main office:

> “They put me in a different seclusion room in the office where I was… throwing stuff. I threw the phone, and I threw the garbage can at [the vice principal], and yeah, that – they made me crazy”.

I will revisit these harsh self-perceptions and make connections to how ableism can become internalized by individuals with disabilities later in the discussion section of this thesis. However, in looking to the supporting secondary sources, this kind of severe self-talk as a resulting impact of degrading mistreatment in school was also shared by students included in the report for DJNO. The report documented the experience of one student who “felt they didn’t belong or were a ‘nuisance’ because they ‘slowed the class down’” (Correia et al., 2024, p. 16). In another instance, the report notes that “a student affirmed they ‘felt regarded as [someone] no one wanted to deal with and a burden’” (Correia et al., 2024, p. 17). This sentiment of having to be “dealt with” was shared by the participant that I had interviewed as well. These views demonstrate the influence of medical model narratives and the ideology of ableism, which are connections that I will unpack further in the discussion section.

Overall, these critical opinions of the self act as a significant sub-theme that emerged from the participant interview and the additional organizational and news reports. Taken with the earlier sub-theme describing the threatening toll on physical and emotional health of the individual, this finding of harsh self-perceptions connects to an overarching theme that reveals the damaging impact to individuals with disabilities as a result of the degrading and ableist experiences of mistreatment that occur within the Ontario education system.

Theme 3: Desired areas for change to counter ableist violence and improve the treatment of disabled students in Ontario schools

More specialized training for all educational staff

A final major theme that I found within the data has to do with the kinds of change that individuals with disabilities, along with their parents, would like to see in the Ontario education system so that they are treated equitably. The need for more specific training for all educators was the most frequently highlighted area of desired change that emerged. During the interview I conducted, the participant made clear the way the school system in this province needs to evolve:

> “And then definitely principals, anyone in administration, even those people that go school-to-school from the board. I think they all need much more advanced training for special needs people with developmental disabilities. And if you're gonna work in that field, I think they need more mandatory training.”

Here, the participant describes how specific educational staff like administrators need specialized training for working with disabled students, highlighting the lack of trained personnel as not just a classroom issue, but as a systemic one that applies to the entire education sector. The participant also emphasized how this kind of training should be mandatory, which has been echoed by parents of students with disabilities. In a report by Autism Advocacy Ontario (2019), one parent shared that “crisis intervention should be [the] last resort; de-escalation training and preventative training MUST be mandatory and policies must mandate that they be used prior to crisis intervention” (p. 11). This parent stressed the importance of required training for educational staff to prevent a student from going into crisis, which is a much-needed change that could resist the use of ableist practices like seclusion and restraint that are often exercised as a crisis response and instead works to improve how disabled students are treated in schools. It is also notable how this parent brought up the need for mandatory policies to be implemented regarding crisis intervention and prevention, as this was also a suggestion reflected in existing literature (Bartlett & Ellis, 2020; 2021a) and has implications for educational policy change. These are musings that I will expand upon in greater detail in later discussion.

Furthermore, testimony from many other parents included in the Community Living Ontario report (Pegg, 2025) have noted that educators continue to struggle in the area of crisis response with students, with one parent sharing that:

> “School staff have no training on how to work with children/youth who have suffered trauma and it shows when they try to impose discipline on a child in the midst of a mental health episode where the child is in fight or flight mode” (p. 16).

It is significant that this parent brought up the need for educational staff to be better trained at supporting children with trauma, as others have also expressed a need for a greater trauma-informed focus when it comes to supporting and engaging with disabled students. One parent in the Autism Advocacy Ontario report (2019) said:

> “Educators need to be informed/educated on trauma, and different disabilities. Educators need to be educated that there is no such thing as a "Bad Kid" and that behavior is communication. A teacher’s main priority should be about building a connection with each child, definitely the ones that need it the most, and less about grades” (p. 14).

The emphasis on building a connection with each student in a classroom over judging a student based on their behaviour is a valuable piece of insight that I took from this parent’s suggestion for improving the educational experience of students with disabilities. This is an area for desired change that I will reflect upon more deeply in my discussion section, as it connects to collaborative strategies highlighted previously in the literature review.

While the need for specialized training for working with and supporting students with disabilities was found to be a clear area for change to counter ableist mistreatment within the Ontario education system, the importance of attending to this need was well-articulated by one parent in the Community Living Ontario report (Pegg, 2025), where they said:

> “There is not enough training amongst the staff for them to understand how to help/teach a person with autism. My child has a right to an education as much as a neurotypical child does.” (p. 3)

As both the participant that I interviewed, along with numerous parents of disabled students have noted, training all educators in how to appropriately and respectfully support students with disabilities is an area of improvement that is sorely needed. This kind of change is imperative in order to challenge ableist practices and norms that are woven into the Ontario school system at present.

Need for a compassionate attitude and approach

Throughout the interview I conducted and the additional reports being used to support the findings, there was continual mention of the attitude and approach of educators not being compatible with supporting disabled students – as the earlier sub-theme of ‘strained relationships due to lack of support’ suggests. A shift in attitude towards one that is more compassionate is a finding that emerged from this study as a necessary area of change that applies to all educators, but especially those that regularly support or interact with disabled students in schools as this is where ableist mistreatment is likely to occur. In discussing what kind of progress they would like to see within the Ontario school system, the demeanour of educational staff was significant for my interview participant:

> “…and more screening for them too, of those people [educators] that work in that field [with disabled students], like they need to be more calm, more nurturing. And not someone who's abrupt and yelling…”

The participant not only emphasizes the importance of a calm attitude and approach to support but also suggests that a screening process could be put in place for ensuring educators who teach and support individuals with disabilities align with these qualities. Prioritizing a compassionate approach is critical for challenging ableist mindsets of staff within the Ontario education system, which was apparent during the interview when the participant described the attitudes of certain educational staff they interacted with as frequently “standoffish” and “snobbish”.

The need for educators to have a more compassionate disposition is also something that must be exhibited more consistently within schools. In the report by Community Living Ontario (Pegg, 2025), one parent shared that their son’s “previous teachers were mostly wonderful and caring”, but that “this past year’s [teacher] clearly disliked [their] son and had no empathy or understanding of autism” (p. 26). The varying ability for school staff to communicate a sense of understanding to students with disabilities is evidently an area that needs further improvement. Failing to offer a compassionate approach can heighten moments of tension that disabled students experience within school settings, as one parent in the report for DJNO (Correia et al., 2024) describes:

> “If his teachers were to have sat down and talked to him as a human being, and been more understanding, I believe none of this would have happened. He needs understanding and trauma informed care, not people who are quick to dismiss him, make him angry purposely, and then suspend him due to his ‘disruptive’ behaviour” (p. 26).

Evidently, this parent speaks to the need for a more compassionate and understanding approach from teaching staff in order to avoid conflict with the student, and the potential for suspension. This excerpt also connects back to the first major thematic finding identified in this study that illustrates the lived experience of ableist violence and maltreatment of disabled students in schools. Destabilization, classified as an earlier sub-theme, inevitably comes with the suspension from school that the parent describes.

Additionally, the lack of understanding and patience of the teachers detailed in the excerpt speaks to the sub-theme of students with disabilities having strained relationships stemming from a lack of support. Through an intentional change in attitude for all educators towards one of compassion, understanding, and “calm” – as my interview participant emphasized – the treatment of disabled students in the Ontario education system can begin to improve and address the ableist undertones that exist in many of the interactions detailed within these findings.

Improving support to keep students in school

The final sub-theme that demonstrates a desired area for change within Ontario schools has to do with improving the level and appropriateness of support disabled students receive in school so that they can remain enrolled. Growth in this area can counter systemic ableism within the education system that contributes to insufficient support and instead promote the dignified treatment of students with disabilities. The participant that I interviewed stressed the importance of receiving appropriate support from educational staff:

> “If the right approach is used… I think that it would, uh, benefit future generations and like, cause a lot less problems and stuff. Less rate of people dropping out and not wanting to go to school and stuff…”

The participant emphasizes how improving the approach that educators take to supporting disabled students will have a positive impact on keeping future students in school, without them dreading having to attend. This can counter the destabilization that so many students with disabilities have experienced, as identified in a prior sub-theme.

The interview participant spoke to this aspect when reflecting back on their journey through school:

> “I would have preferred to stay in my local high school where… that teacher was that I really liked and stuff, and took care of me.”

The desire to remain at their local school where they had an established bond with their teacher indicates that more support to keep disabled students within their school of choice is a critically important change that needs to occur within the Ontario education system. One parent in the Autism Advocacy Ontario (2019) report echoed this desire:

> “We are currently paying for private school putting a huge strain on us financially because of our child’s needs. We wish the same accommodations could be made at our local public school” (p. 8).

The fact that the parent in this excerpt had to remove their child from their local school and endure financial hardship just to receive adequate support illustrates how dire of an issue subpar support is for disabled students within the Ontario school system. This has severe implications on the continuation of ableist violence and mistreatment that disabled individuals experience in schools.

Although some parents included in the secondary data sources have eventually been able to attain an increased level of in-school support, it usually comes after long periods of continually advocating for their child. The *Toronto Life* article (Hune-Brown, 2016) that covered the violent in-school mistreatment experienced by Christian Thorndyke spoke to this degree of parental advocacy, with the author detailing that:

> “A few weeks after the story broke, the Peel board found a placement for Christian in an autism-specific classroom of just six students, where trained teachers and educational assistants helped him through the year with minimal problems. But [Christian’s mother] says it shouldn’t have taken a media-fuelled uproar to get proper care for her son” (para. 10).

Although Christian was ultimately able to receive a greater amount of support from educational staff so that he could be kept in school, this was only due to his mother’s continuous advocacy and decision to involve the media – which put pressure on the school board to provide these supports. This highlights how change of this magnitude is possible within the Ontario education system; it is just a matter of willingness to apply these improvements.

Overall, while I have found three major themes that emerged from the interview data and supporting reports used to conduct this study, there are likely many more to be explored as issues regarding the treatment of disabled students in Ontario schools are extensive. In the next section, I will discuss how these themes respond to my research question and connect to concepts covered in the literature review. I will also examine the implications of these findings and areas for future research.

Discussion

This thesis research was designed with a central question in mind, which looked to understand how seclusion, restraint and other kinds of mistreatment experienced by disabled individuals in Ontario schools are connected to systemic ableism within these settings. Throughout this discussion, I will explain how the three major themes detailed throughout the findings section respond to the research question. Using a critical disability approach to frame this discussion, I will also connect these findings to previously reviewed literature. Finally, I will share some reflections on the limitations of this study, as well as the implications that this research has on social work and educational policy. Considerations for future research will also be presented.

Analysis of the findings through critical disability perspectives on ableism

The first overarching theme discussed in the findings was titled, ‘lived experiences of ableist violence and maltreatment within the Ontario education system’. The language choice here to describe ableism as violence is an intentional one, and stems from disability activist and writer Lydia X. Z. Brown’s description of ableism. On their blog, *Autistic Hoya*, Brown defines ableism as the “systematic, institutional devaluing of bodies and minds deemed deviant, abnormal, defective, subhuman, less than” before going on to state that “ableism is violence” (2012). Using this understanding of ableism in the context of my first major theme is important, as it can help illuminate the connection between disabled individuals’ lived experiences of violence and mistreatment within school and systemic ableism at its core. For one, the experiences of my interview participant that were detailed under the first sub-theme of ‘harmful or violent encounters involving seclusion and restraint’ spoke to a very overt kind of violence, carried out by various educators and support staff within the different schools they attended. These brutal experiences of being restrained or placed in seclusion rooms were inline with those that were discussed previously in the literature review, including in non-school settings like mental health hospitals (Montreuil et al., 2020) or community treatment facilities (Mérineau-Côté & Morin, 2014). These violent interactions that my interview participant spoke to in the findings indicate that educators and school staff frequently rely on a kind of institutional devaluing of disabled body-minds inherent to ableism (Brown, 2012). This mentality allows those in positions of power to engage in what previous research on seclusion and restraint have described as measures of control (Montreuil et al., 2020) or coercion (Saloviita et al., 2016). These measures attempt to shape the behaviour of individuals with disabilities to match the baseline expectations of what is considered ‘normal’ for the sake of the comfort of the able-bodied, neurotypical majority (Loja et al., 2013). As shown throughout history, the urge to control those who do not fit the idealized norm is an echo of the underlying thought behind the institutionalization and eugenics movements in past centuries, which sought to hide away or even eradicate those with disabilities in order to “protect” middle-class society from the dangers of “feeblemindedness” and inherited disability (Rossiter & Clarkson, 2013).Using a critical disability lens, failure to conform to these socially constructed standards of normalcy under the demands of ableism (Campbell, 2008a) has traumatic consequences for disabled individuals, as evidenced by the numerous times that my interview participant detailed being removed from their regular learning environment and placed in seclusion rooms at the various schools they attended.

Ableism can create an environment that is hostile for those with disabilities who may behave in ways outside of what is considered socially acceptable (Rauscher & McClintock, 1996, cited in Storey, 2007), even when that behaviour poses no immediate physical threat to anyone. This was noted in the literature review as a major area of concern that existing research found with practices of seclusion and restraint in schools being carried out in non-emergency situations (Scheuermann et al., 2016; Bartlett & Ellis, 2021b; Trader et al., 2017), and is substantiated by my interview participant's experience of being restrained by a child and youth worker in high school for "playing around on [a] chair". Under the hostile conditions created by systemic ableism, this seemingly harmless action became one that must be forcefully subdued.

Furthermore, applying critical disability understandings of ableism can illustrate why the sub-theme that detailed 'strained relationships stemming from a lack of support' was a significant finding that emerged from both my conversation with the interview participant, and the organizational and news reports used as secondary data. This sub-theme highlighted how students with disabilities have experienced ableist mistreatment due to inadequate support from school staff, which made for tense relations with both educators and other peers. For instance, the participant that I interviewed described their interactions with one specialized educator that would visit from the school board as "not supportive at all" due to the teacher "always contradicting" what the participant talked to them about. Similar experiences were also reflected in existing research mentioned in the literature review, such as one study conducted on the use of seclusion and restraint within a Quebec mental health day hospital (Montreuil et al., 2020). Children with disabilities that attended this facility felt as if they were not listened to, leading to tension and distrust within their relationship with the staff members (Montreuil et al., 2020). From both my interview participant’s experience of being unheard, a sentiment echoed by the children in the study by Montreuil and others (2020), it is clear that the way they were treated is a product of ableism – as this is a system of practices that work to construct disabled individuals as “largely invisible ‘others’” (Chouinard, 1997, cited in Campbell 2008a). When disabled individuals in learning environments are not listened to by those in positions of authority, this indicates that the perspectives of disabled individuals are not considered important and their needs become invisible. This is how ableism functions to influence the continual mistreatment of disabled students within the Ontario education system, resulting in strained relationships due to inadequate support.

Subsequent findings also showed that students with disabilities across Ontario are not only having to endure traumatizing experiences of seclusion, restraint, and other kinds of mistreatment in school, but that these degrading experiences are having devastating impacts on the overall wellbeing of disabled individuals. This was the next central finding of this study. Existing research on seclusion and restraint that was detailed in the literature review showed that the first sub-theme under this major finding, described as the ‘threatening physical and emotional toll on the individual’, aligned with what has been experienced by individuals with disabilities in other provinces as well. For instance, one of the most distressing outcomes of the ableist violence that my interview participant experienced was their engagement in self-harm and attempted suicide due to how poorly they were being treated, particularly in high school where they frequently experienced being restrained by school staff or being placed in seclusion rooms. The resulting suicide attempt and self-harm were similar troubling consequences that were also noted by parents of disabled students in Bartlett and Ellis' (2020) study on the use of seclusion and restraint in Manitoba schools. These sentiments from previous literature suggest that the potentially life-threatening impact of these violently ableist experiences of seclusion and restraint are not unique to schools only in Ontario, but that this is a widespread issue across other provinces as well.

As the title of my second major theme suggests, these violent experiences of seclusion and restraint are degrading in nature for the disabled students involved. Testimony from students included in the report for DJNO (Correia et al., 2024) and the *Toronto Life* article (Hune-Brown, 2016) that described experiences of being secluded or restrained spoke to the resulting humiliation and embarrassment that threatened their physical and emotional wellbeing. This finding, although disturbing, is not entirely surprising as perspectives on ableism from a critical disability approach emphasize that "humiliation is a core outcome and effect of ableist practices" (Campbell, 2020, p. 207). As demonstrated by the examples above, feelings of humiliation are just one of the many damaging impacts that had a threatening toll on the physical and emotional state of students with disabilities as a result of experiencing degrading, violent, and ableist maltreatment in school.

The next sub-theme of 'harsh self-perception' under the second major thematic finding of 'the damaging impact on the wellbeing of disabled individuals', can further illustrate the intrinsic connection between systemic ableism and disabled students' experiences of seclusion, restraint, and other kinds of harmful treatment. The stern wording that both my interview participant and other students in the additional reports used to characterize themselves when detailing their experiences of mistreatment in school made clear the way that ableism can become internalized in the aftermath of these traumatic events. At certain moments in the conversation with my interview participant, they described themselves as being psychologically “messed up”, “screwed up”, and “crazy” as a result of violent situations in school that involved being secluded and restrained. These critical self-perceptions were echoed by students in the report for DJNO as well (Correia et al., 2024), where students described feeling like a “nuisance” in their class (p. 16), or like a “burden” to be dealt with (p. 17). From a critical disability perspective, this kind of language reflects how individuals with disabilities can begin to internalize pathologizing deficit-based narratives about disability that are characteristic of the medical model (Boxall, 2018), and are further influenced by an ideology of ableism that identifies those with disabilities as existing outside an ideal body-mind or “corporeal standard” that is positioned as the ‘norm’ (Campbell, 2001; 2008a). This standard, perfected existence is promoted as essential for being a productive member of society (Feely, 2016; Campbell, 2008a). These beliefs have historical roots that aided in the 19th century development of institutions designed to ‘train’ people with intellectual disabilities to make productive contributions to society, typically through manual unpaid labour, in an effort to alleviate the social burden that was attributed to those labelled as ‘feebleminded’ (Rossiter & Clarkson, 2013). When the students from the DJNO report (Correia et al., 2024) described themselves as a “nuisance” (p. 16) or a “burden” (p. 17) due to how they were treated in their school, this indicates to me a sense of perceived failure to embody essential ‘norms’ required to be a functioning member of their educational environment. Altogether, these examples illustrate how ableism is intertwined with harsh perceptions of the self that were interpreted from the data.

It is also important to make clear the systemic nature at the root of the perceived internalized ableism observed throughout the ‘harsh self-perception’ sub-theme, as these antagonistic views do not just randomly develop. Campbell (2008b) explores the concept of internalized ableism by drawing connections from the teachings of critical race scholars that emphasize how internalized racism does not occur from a one-time event, but after a continuous period of being worn down by the trauma of experiencing racism (Burstow, 2003, cited in Campbell, 2008b). Drawing on this idea helps explain that when students with disabilities routinely experience oppression within the school system, whether that be through the ableist violence of seclusion and restraint or other forms of disability-based discrimination, it is understandable when that oppression becomes internalized – often involuntarily and unconsciously – and expressed as a kind of self-loathing (Rosenwasser, 2000, cited in Campbell, 2008b). The prior examples of the interview participant describing themselves as being “messed up” and “crazy” point to a view of the self that has internalized the ableism being experienced, perhaps unknowingly, after what was shared as years of recurring trauma from seclusion and restraint that is indicative of ableist violence within the Ontario school system.

In summary, it is useful to apply critical disability perspectives on ableism to the first two major findings of this research: the lived experiences of ableist violence and maltreatment within the Ontario education system, and the damaging impact on the wellbeing of disabled individuals as a result of degrading and ableist mistreatment in school. The purpose of incorporating an analysis of ableism detailed thus far is to contribute a nuanced perspective and greater depth of understanding about the systemic issue that is at the core of these distressing experiences of seclusion, restraint, and other kinds of mistreatment that individuals with disabilities frequently endure within school systems in Ontario. The third and final major thematic finding will be discussed in the following subsection, as it connects most significantly to many of the important implications of this research. These include the pathways to social change within the Ontario education sector that are recommended directly by disabled individuals who have lived experience of the ableist violence that occurs there – something that was predominantly absent in existing literature on seclusion and restraint use.

Implications of this research

The third major finding of this study highlights the desired areas for change to counter ableist violence and improve the treatment of disabled students in Ontario schools, which has numerous implications for educational policy and social work practice. Showcasing these areas for change within the education system from the perspective of disabled individuals is important as it speaks to the ethos of ‘nothing about us without us’, which is foundational to increasing agency of disabled people in the midst of social change that aims to resist ableism (Charlton, 1998; Meekosha & Shuttleworth, 2009).

A notable area for change that could significantly improve the way students with disabilities are treated in Ontario schools, was described in the sub-theme of ‘more specialized training for all educational staff’. Although not explicitly stated in the findings, social workers would also be included in the make-up of school staff that would benefit from supplementary training, as social workers employed with educational jurisdictions are likely to provide some level of support to students with disabilities. The participant that I interviewed did not elaborate on what this kind of specific training might entail, beyond that it should be mandatory for any school personnel that support disabled students – with an emphasis on students with developmental disabilities. However, using existing research covered in the literature review paired with the supporting reports used as secondary data for these thematic findings can highlight approaches that would be most beneficial for specialized training that intentionally aims to improve educational support for disabled students. For instance, a parent in one of the organizational reports identified the need for educators to prioritize “building a connection with each child” (Autism Advocacy Ontario, 2019, p. 14), which aligns with prior research on collaborative approaches discussed in the literature review. This kind of approach emphasizes fostering a sense of trust and understanding between the provider and receiver of support so that there can be mutual agreement on how to best meet their support needs (Montreuil et al., 2020). Other existing literature noted that open communication between educational staff and the families of students with disabilities is critical to a collaborative approach and the development of appropriate strategies of support (Wu et al., 2024). Building a connection with both a student and their family is a way that educators can also enact abolitionist values of community care and connection (Pasternak et al., 2022) and prevent the school’s reliance on police for managing student crises. Furthermore, mandating specific training that encourages staff to build a sense of understanding with disabled students also reflects the justice goals of the social model of disability that suggests moving away from the pathologization of bodies, and towards practices that increase access and support (McRae, 2018).

Specialized training for educational staff could also function as a preventative measure to mitigate crisis, which one parent in the findings emphasized should be written into policy as a mandatory practice in schools (Autism Advocacy Ontario, 2019). This desire for mandatory crisis prevention policy in education connects to prior research discussed in the literature review that revealed the significant absence of mandatory provincial regulations regarding seclusion and restraint use in schools (Bartlett & Ellis, 2020; 2021a). Evidently, there is an impetus for educational policy to mandate additional training for school staff that prioritizes developing a connection with disabled students and providing dignified kinds of support that can prevent crisis situations, and the violent measures that often follow in response.

In addition, there is an opportunity to challenge ableist practices and attitudes within the Ontario education system by incorporating explicit teachings about ableism into the specialized training that was suggested by disabled individuals and their parents as a key area for change within schools. Having clear conversations about ableism is essential for improving how disabled individuals are treated in schools, as ableism has become so naturalized that most people are unconscious of it and the sociopolitical consequences that it has on the lives of individuals with disabilities (Berger & Lorenz, 2016). When school personnel – including school social workers – are explicitly taught about ableism and understand its systemic influence, the invisibility of it is removed. This is a crucial step to social change within the Ontario education system and one that social work can play a key role in, as advocating for social justice is a principal value within the profession – as is respecting the dignity of a person (Canadian Association of Social Workers, 2024). Improving the quality of support for disabled students so that ableist practices of seclusion, restraint, and other forms of mistreatment do not continue is a matter of both promoting social justice for disabled individuals and respecting their inherent worth as people. In prioritizing these values, it is critical that social work practices incorporate an awareness about ableism so as to not continue perpetuating it, particularly for social workers practicing in schools.

Lastly, a significant finding of this research indicated that the adoption of a compassionate attitude by educational staff is an area of change that both disabled individuals and their parents would like to see within the Ontario education system as a pathway to improving the treatment of students with disabilities in schools. A disposition that is calm and nurturing, as my interview participant identified as desirable qualities in all educational staff that support disabled students, aligns well with the core values of social work – including demonstrating compassion as an act of valuing human relationships and the wellbeing of all people (Canadian Association of Social Workers, 2024). Most importantly, school personnel that make this intentional attitude shift can counter ableism within the education system that seeks to reduce disability to a “diminished state of being human” (Campbell, 2001, p. 44). However, it is also important to consider the possibility of compassion fatigue, which is a well-known issue in social work and other supportive roles (Kapoulitsas & Corcoran, 2015). The work environment strongly influences emotional capacity to maintain a sense of compassion that is integral to these types of professions (Kapoulitsas & Corcoran, 2015), of which I would include any educational staff – but especially those that directly support disabled students. With parents and disability advocacy organizations raising the alarm about classroom environments becoming increasingly more stressful for disabled students in recent years due to provincial budget cuts to critical special education supports, such as educational assistants required for one-on-one support (Jones, 2025), compassion fatigue becomes a real possibility for overburdened school staff. These drastic legislative decisions from the provincial government will make it more challenging for a compassionate attitude and approach to be followed by all school personnel as staffing levels decrease, and it is students with disabilities that will feel the brunt of these decisions as their support needs largely continue to go unmet. This has serious implications on the continued mistreatment of disabled individuals, often experienced violently through seclusion and restraint, within the Ontario education system.

However, this research has the opportunity to challenge these violent ableist practices in schools through knowledge translation and dissemination, which Baines (2007) states is essential for building knowledge within stakeholder communities that will benefit from the research being conducted – particularly when that research advances social justice for marginalized people. This allows for what Freire (1973) coined as “conscientization”, which is an act of collective reflection by an oppressed group to identify and raise awareness about the root causes of their oppression. The dissemination of this research to the disabled community has always been an intentional goal of this study, and my involvement in community advocacy efforts like the Dreaming Safer Schools Education Project with DJNO (2023) has been evidence of this. I will be taking what I have learned from this research and applying it to the community work that I am continuing to engage in with this organization, including the development of an informational resource toolkit that will help disabled students to advocate for themselves if they encounter mistreatment and violence in school. This research also provides clear impetus for the improvement of dedicated, individualized supports in school for disabled students, and aids in backing the calls from parental advocates and organizations like the Ontario Autism Coalition that are urging the provincial government to provide more funding for special education resources and staff, like dedicated EAs for each student (Jones, 2025). Additionally, this thesis research provides evidence that can support legislative decisions to ban seclusion and restraint practices in Ontario public schools. Policy rulings of this nature could evolve from already-existing legislature like Ontario's Bill-160 (Coteau, 2019) that introduced the need for criteria around the authorization of seclusion and restraint use in schools. Going one step further to completely outlaw these practices would create a safer educational environment for all students with disabilities in this province.

Limitations and areas for future research

This research study faced various limitations, some of which I have covered previously in the 'Methodology and Research Methods' section when discussing my challenges with recruitment. Due to the restricted timeline within which I had to complete this thesis, the sample size for this study is small – relying on primary data from one participant that I was able to interview and five organizational and news reports as secondary data. This means that the findings for this study are not generalizable to the experiences of all disabled individuals that attend school, as a wider sample size may have indicated more variability in the occurrence of seclusion, restraint, or other kinds of mistreatment.

It is also important to acknowledge that this research is not objective, and my inherent subjectivities as a researcher that is also disabled, neurodivergent, and has an emotional connection to the research topic have no doubt had an influence on the findings of this study. Heilig and Sandell Hardesty (2024) note the impossibility of achieving objective research when a researcher is a part of the community they are studying, but that this positionality can also allow for greater authenticity within the research itself. In striving to follow the tenets of a critical disability methodology (Price, 2012), I chose to highlight research findings that would best represent disabled individuals lived experiences of ableist violence within schools. However, my representation of the findings could not be confirmed for accuracy through further consultation with the interview participant, due to the limited time constraints of the MSW program to complete this thesis. In receiving approval from the participant at the end of the interview to keep everything we discussed in the transcript for this study, I aimed to provide as authentic of a representation as possible of their experience with seclusion, restraint, and other forms of mistreatment in school through my subjective interpretation of the data. These interpretations are influenced by my positionality as a disabled researcher that endeavoured to engage meaningfully with this research study.

Additionally, disability was the central social identity of focus for this study, and thus, an intersectional analysis that considers how various social locations might shape disabled individuals’ experiences of ableist violence and maltreatment in schools could not be achieved. Further research would benefit from incorporating the lived experiences of disabled individuals that belong to other marginalized identities, such as people with disabilities that are also racialized, are part of the queer or trans community, or are of a religious minority. The report for DJNO (Correia et al., 2024) that I consulted as a source of secondary data for this study did incorporate perspectives from those with social locations of this nature, primarily of disabled individuals that are racialized, however further research would benefit from this kind of intersectional framing as well. This is especially important in light of the fact that there is already limited research on maltreatment in schools that centers the perspectives of disabled individuals directly, but especially when the political climate regarding education in Ontario is becoming increasingly more tense. The imminent passing of Bill-33, the *Supporting Children and Students Act* (Calandra, 2025), aims to require public schools in Ontario to have a school resource officer (SRO) program, which will ensure a continual police presence in student learning environments. As discussed in the literature review, previous research has noted the influence between police presence and carceral attitudes on the use of seclusion and restraint with disabled individuals in schools and other settings (Cramer et al., 2024; Montreuil et al., 2020), however these were only incidental findings. Although this connection did not emerge in the findings of this specific study, future research could explore this type of correlation more fulsomely. Especially considering the introduction of Bill-33 and the impact this provincial legislation will have on disabled students' experiences of ableist violence in Ontario schools, particularly for racialized individuals with disabilities.

Conclusion

In summary, this thesis aimed to highlight the experiences of seclusion, restraint, and other forms of maltreatment that individuals with disabilities routinely encounter within the Ontario education system. This research also endeavoured to draw connections between these lived experiences of violence and systemic ableism. Through knowledge about seclusion and restraint practices obtained from existing literature, and a critical disability studies approach in both epistemological understanding and methodology, this study utilized thematic analysis to generate findings from primary and secondary sources of data. These findings highlighted disabled individuals' lived experiences of ableist violence and mistreatment in schools, and the damaging impact that these degrading experiences have had on their wellbeing. Additionally, numerous avenues for progressive change that can challenge ableist violence within the Ontario education system emerged from the findings to suggest improvements for bettering the treatment of disabled students. These included the need for specialized training for all school staff, the incorporation of a more compassionate attitude from educators, and generally improving the amount of support provided so that disabled individuals can remain at school. Further analysis using critical disability understandings of ableism helped illuminate the importance of these findings, and the implications on educational policy development and social work practice, in particular. As provincial legislation regarding the Ontario education system becomes more volatile, it is my hope that social workers will play more of a central role in challenging systemic ableism and advocating for safer learning environments for disabled individuals in schools. This is not only an ethical requirement under the

Canadian Association of Social Workers *Code of Ethics* (2024) that aligns with the principle of respecting the worth of all people but also speaks to the fundamental idea of fairness in education. The fundamental importance of receiving a dignified education for disabled students is effectively summed up by one parent in the Community Living Ontario report (Pegg, 2025) who said, “my child has a right to an education as much as a neurotypical child does” (p. 3). Addressing ableist violence in the Ontario education system is paramount for ensuring individuals with disabilities continue to receive a quality education that is free from traumatic experiences of mistreatment.

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Appendix A

LETTER OF INFORMATION / CONSENT

Systemic ableism in Ontario schools: how seclusion and restraint practices reinforce the persecution of disabled body-minds

Student Investigator:	**Faculty Supervisor:**
Name: Dea Rylott	Name: Dr. Ameil Joseph
Department of Social Work	Department of Social Work
McMaster University	McMaster University
Hamilton, Ontario, Canada	Hamilton, Ontario, Canada
	(905) 525-9140 ext. 23792
E-mail: rylottd@mcmaster.ca	E-mail: ameilj@mcmaster.ca

Purpose of the Study:

You are invited to take part in this study on the experiences of disabled individuals with seclusion and restraint practices in Ontario schools.

I am hoping to learn from individuals who have experienced these practices about how they were impacted as a student, as well as what changes they would like to see implemented. I also want to uncover how these practices are linked to ongoing attitudes and policies that contribute to the targeted discrimination of disabled people, particularly within educational settings.

I am doing this research for a thesis in the Master of Social Work program, under the supervision of Dr. Ameil Joseph.

This is a line of research that is informed by an educational community project being conducted by the Disability Justice Network of Ontario (DJNO). Your anonymized data from this study may be used to inform future related studies and/or community projects that I am involved in, with your permission.

For the purposes of this research, identifying with and/or as disabled may fall under a broad category and encompass a wide range of experiences and/or conditions including (but not limited to): physical or developmental disability, chronic illness or health conditions, madness, mental health concerns, mental illness, neurodivergence, learning disability, d/Deaf or hard of hearing, blind or low-vision, sensory disabilities, individuals navigating inaccessibility or accessing accommodations, and other experiences/identities that are part of the larger Disability Justice movement. You do not need to have a formal diagnosis to identify as/with disability.

What will happen during the study?

After determining your eligibility for this study via email, you will participate in a one-on-one interview with me. You can also choose to include a support person in the interview. The support person would need to provide verbal agreement to an Oath of Confidentiality at the start of the scheduled interview. This interview will last for approximately 45-60 minutes. The interview will be conducted virtually, using the online video conferencing platform, Zoom. Participants will not be required to have their camera on during the interview. Closed captioning will be available via Zoom, to improve accessibility. The interview will be audio and video recorded for the purpose of transcription and analysis later in the study, and I would also like to take some notes on my computer during the interview, with your permission.

After going through the verbal consent process at the beginning of the interview, I will ask you some questions such as:

- How would you describe your overall experience as a student, when you were in school?
- Can you describe your experience of being secluded and/or restrained at school?
- What changes would you like to see in the treatment of disabled students or students with disabilities in school?

All information given is voluntary, and you may withdraw from participating at any time. You can also skip any question that you do not want to answer. There will also be the option to take a break during the interview, if needed.

Are there any risks to doing this study?

You should be aware that there are risks when taking part in this study such as potential psychological risks that can arise due to feelings of discomfort or distress when recalling the situations involving seclusion and restraint that you had experienced. You may find it stressful to speak openly about your experience, as the topic of this research is sensitive and can be seen as controversial to discuss in some spaces, due to discrimination and/or prejudice that has resulted in the silencing of disabled perspectives. To minimize any psychological risks, I will email you the list of questions that I will be asking you during the interview ahead of the scheduled date of our meeting, so that you know what to expect. You can also pause the interview to take a break at any moment. You can also skip any question that you do not want to answer, and you are not required to share any information that you wish to keep private. I will also provide you with a list of community resources should you need further support as a result of participating in this study.

There is also a potential social risk that you may be identified by speaking about your experiences with seclusion and/or restraint in Ontario schools. To minimize this risk, I will refer to you as a confidential participant with an assigned number (e.g. Participant 1) in the published results of the study and I will exclude any identifying information, such as the names, dates, locations, or specific descriptions of others involved.

Because interviews for this study are being conducted online via Zoom, there is a potential risk to privacy should a data breach occur with the platform (such as unauthorized access to the Zoom session). To mitigate this risk, the Zoom meeting room will require a password to enter, and I will also have a virtual waiting room enabled so that I can see who is trying to access the Zoom session. Both the meeting link and password will be sent to you via private email.

Zoom has a privacy policy in place to prevent any breach of data. You can find Zoom’s Privacy Policy here: https://www.zoom.com/en/trust/privacy/privacy-statement/

To ensure your data is adequately protected, I will be storing the data collected during these interviews and the recording of the interview on the encrypted drive of my personal computer, with copies saved to an external hard drive (as an extra secure data storage measure) that is password encrypted and kept within my locked home office.

You do not need to answer questions that you do not want to answer or that make you feel uncomfortable. I describe below the steps I am taking to protect your privacy.

Are there any benefits to doing this study?

The research will likely not benefit you directly. I hope to learn from you and other disabled individuals who have experienced seclusion and restraint in school about how these incidents impacted them, and what changes they would like to see in the Ontario schools. This could help future students navigate the Ontario education system, and benefit the disabled community as a whole to have the voices and stories from community members included in an under-researched field of study. By sharing your experience with me, your story can contribute new knowledge and perspectives on improving the Ontario school system to better suit the needs of disabled students.

Because this research is influenced by the disability advocacy group, Disability Justice Network of Ontario (DJNO), there is also the potential for this research to be included in future advocacy efforts by this organization to push for changes to educational policy and legislature in Ontario.

Incentive/Payment or Reimbursement

To compensate you for your time and effort in participating in this study, you will receive a $30.00 Mastercard gift card sent in the mail to you at an Ontario mailing address that you provide. This is a requirement that has been put in place to prevent fraudulent participation in this study.

Confidentiality

Every effort will be made to protect your confidentiality and privacy. I will not use your name or any information that would allow you to be identified. No one but me will know whether you were in the study unless you choose to tell them. However, we are often identifiable through the stories we tell. Please keep this in mind in deciding what to tell me.

Interviews will take place using the videoconferencing platform called Zoom, which is an externally hosted cloud-based service. A link to their privacy policy is available here: https://www.zoom.com/en/trust/privacy/privacy-statement/. The recording feature on Zoom will be used during the interview, which requires video and audio recording. Please note that whilst this service is approved for collecting data in this study by the McMaster Research Ethics Board, there is a small risk that data collected on external servers can fall out of my control should a privacy breach occur. To minimize this risk, you will not be required to have your camera on during the interview, to further protect your privacy. The video and audio-recording of this interview will be downloaded directly to the encrypted drive on my personal computer instead of the Zoom cloud. The video recording will be deleted as soon as the interview concludes, and a copy of the audio-recording will be uploaded to an encrypted external hard drive, as an extra secure data storage measure. If you have any concerns with this, I would be happy to make alternative arrangements for you to participate in the interview, perhaps via telephone.

I will also be using the transcription feature on Zoom, to keep a record of what was shared during the interview. I will be editing the transcript myself to ensure accuracy. Any identifying information (such as names of people, descriptions or places) mentioned during the interview will be removed from the transcript. To ensure your information is kept confidential, the transcript of the interview will be kept on the password-protected encrypted drive of my personal computer, with a copy uploaded to an encrypted external hard drive, both of which only I will have access to within my locked home office. I will also upload an encrypted copy of the de-identified transcript to my McMaster OneDrive account as another additional data storage measure. At this point, the transcript may also be shared with my Supervisor for assistance with analysis. You are welcome to request a copy of the written transcript of your interview once it is complete, to ensure accuracy or remove any information you would not like included in the study.

Once the transcript is confirmed to be accurate, the audio-recording of the interview will be permanently deleted. However, please note that the transcript of the interview, which will not include any identifying information, will be securely stored for potential use in future studies and/or community projects that I am involved in for up to two (2) years.

Legally Required Disclosure:

I will protect your privacy as outlined above. However, if the law requires it, I will have to reveal certain personal information (e.g. if child abuse is suspected, or if you share that you intend to harm yourself or others).

What if I change my mind about being in the study?

Your participation in this study is completely voluntary. If you decide to be part of the study, you can stop or withdraw from the interview for whatever reason, even after giving consent. This also includes the choice to withdraw part-way through the study up until July 1, 2025, when I expect to be submitting the first draft of my thesis. If you would like to withdraw during the interview, please let me know at any point during the interview. If you would like to withdraw after data collection is complete and the interview is done, please email me at rylottd@mcmaster.ca to let me know that you would like to withdraw from the study.

If you decide to withdraw, there will be no consequences to you. In cases of withdrawal prior to July 1, 2025, any data you have provided will be destroyed unless you indicate otherwise. If you do not want to answer some of the questions you do not have to, but you can still remain in the study.

How do I find out what was learned in this study?

I expect to have this study completed by approximately September 2025. The final report will be published on MacSphere. If you would like to receive a summary of the results personally, please let me know how you would like me to send it to you.

Questions about the Study: If you have questions or need more information about the study itself, please contact me at:

Dea Rylott

rylottd@mcmaster.ca

This study has been reviewed by the McMaster Research Ethics Board and received ethics clearance (#7539). If you have concerns or questions about your rights as a participant or about the way the study is conducted, please contact:

McMaster Research Ethics Office

Telephone: (905) 525-9140 ext. 23142

E-mail: mreb@mcmaster.ca

CONSENT

- I have read the information presented in the information letter about a study being conducted by Dea Rylott, of McMaster University.
- I have had the opportunity to ask questions about my involvement in this study and to receive additional details I requested.

- I understand that if I agree to participate in this study, I may withdraw from the study at any time or up until July 1, 2025.
- I have been given a copy of this form.
- I agree to participate in the study.

Consent Questions:

1. Would you like a summary of the research findings? If yes, where should I send them (email address)?

   ____

2. Would you like to be informed about any possible community events or advocacy initiatives that come from this research? If yes, what is the best way to reach you (email)?

   ____

3. Can you confirm your Ontario mailing address that I can send the incentive to?

   ____

4. Do you agree to the interview being video and audio recorded, for the purposes of transcription and analysis?

____

5. Do you agree to allow direct quotations from this interview (that will not contain any identifiable information, such as your name, age, etc.) to be used in the published findings of this study, as well as future research projects and/or community advocacy efforts?

____

6. Do you agree to allow your anonymized study data to be stored and used for future research and/or community advocacy efforts, as described in the Letter of Information?

   ____

Appendix B

Study Title:

Systemic ableism in Ontario schools: how seclusion and restraint practices reinforce the persecution of disabled body-minds

Oral Consent Script

Introduction:

Hello, I’m Dea Rylott. I am conducting research about disabled individuals' experiences of seclusion and restraint practices in Ontario schools. This interview is part of my Master’s thesis at McMaster University’s School of Social Work in Hamilton, Ontario. I’m working under the supervision of Dr. Ameil Joseph of McMaster’s School of Social Work.

Thank you for your interest in participating in my research.

Before we jump into the interview, have you had time to read the Letter of Information I emailed you?

[*If the LOI was provided in advance and the participant responds that they* ***have*** *read the LOI*]

Great, then I would like to take a moment to review some main points from the Letter of Information before we continue.

LOI Highlights:

First off, please know that every effort will be taken to keep the information you share with me private and confidential. However, there are some risks when taking part in this study such as potential psychological risks that can arise due to feelings of discomfort or distress when speaking openly about your experience. You can take a break from the interview at any moment, and can skip any question that you do not want to answer or would like to keep private. I will also provide you with a list of community resources after the interview, in case you need further support.

There is also a potential social risk that you may be identified by speaking about your experiences. To minimize this risk, I will refer to you as a confidential participant with an assigned number in the study (such as “Participant #1”) and I will exclude any identifying information in the published results, beyond what you consent to sharing.

Because this interview is being conducted on Zoom, there is a potential risk to privacy should a data breach occur with the platform, such as unauthorized access to our Zoom session. To minimize this risk, I have set a password that is needed to join this Zoom meeting and also have a virtual waiting room enabled so that I can see who is trying to access the Zoom session. Zoom has a privacy policy in place to prevent any breach of data, which you can find linked in the Letter of Information. To ensure your data is protected following this interview, I will be storing the data collected (including the audio-recording and auto-transcript saved from Zoom) on the password-encrypted drive of my personal computer, with copies saved to an external hard drive (as an extra secure data storage measure) that is also password encrypted and kept within my locked home office.

I will protect your privacy throughout this study, but be aware that I may be legally required to reveal certain personal information if the law requires it (for example, if you share information about a child being abused, or if you share that you intend to harm yourself or others).

[*If the participant responds that they **did not** read the LOI in advance, then proceed to go through the full LOI in detail and confirm the points listed below.*]

Confirm the following to the participant:

- Your participation in this study is voluntary.
- If you do not want to answer some of the questions you do not have to, but you can still be in the study.
- You can decide to stop at any time, even part-way through the interview for whatever reason.
- You can also pause and take a break during the interview at any time.
- If you decide to stop the interview, I will ask you how you would like me to handle the data collected up to that point, whether returning it to you, destroying it or using the data collected up to that stoppage point.
- You will still receive an incentive for your participation, even if you decide to withdraw from the study.
- You can ask to remove your data from the study up until approximately **July 1, 2025.**

This study has been reviewed and cleared by the McMaster Research Ethics Board (#7539).

Do you have any questions or want me to go over any study details again?

Consent questions:

Do you agree to participate in this study?

If yes,

- Would you like a summary of the research findings? If yes, where should I send them (email address)?
- Would you like to be informed about any possible community events or advocacy initiatives that come from this research? If yes, what is the best way to reach you (email)?
- Can you confirm your Ontario mailing address that I can send the incentive to?
- Do you agree to being video and audio recorded during the interview, for the purposes of transcription and analysis?
- Do you agree to allow direct quotations from this interview (that will not contain any identifiable information, such as your name, age, etc.) to be used in the published findings of this study, as well as future research projects and/or community advocacy efforts?
- Do you agree to allow your anonymized study data (transcript of the interview) to be stored and used for future research and/or community advocacy efforts, as described in the Letter of Information?

If no, “Thank you for your time.”

Appendix C

Interview Guide

Systemic ableism in Ontario schools: how seclusion and restraint practices reinforce the persecution of disabled body-minds

Dea Rylott, (Master of Social Work Student)

School of Social Work – McMaster University

Information about these interview questions: this is what I hope to ask you regarding your experience with seclusion and/or restraint in school. This interview will be conducted one-on-one (so it will just be you and I talking), and I will be asking a series of open-ended questions (which means that answers are more than just “yes” or “no”). Sometimes the exact wording of these questions may change slightly, and I may ask some shorter follow-up questions to gather more information about what you are sharing and/or to ensure I am understanding you accurately. This may include questions like: “Can you tell me more about that?”, to glean more information about your experience, and “Why or why not?”, to learn more about your decision-making process.

1. **How would you describe your overall experience as a student, when you were in school?**
    a. **What made it enjoyable?**
    b. **What made it challenging?**
2. **What was your relationship with school staff like? This could be your classroom teacher, the principal, educational assistants, resource teachers, or any other staff member at the school.**
3. **Can you describe your experience of being secluded and/or restrained at school?**
    a. **How often did this happen?**
    b. **Do you know how long the seclusion/restraint lasted?**
4. **Was there any attempt at de-escalation of the incident before you were secluded and/or restrained?**

    a. **If yes, can you describe what took place to try and de-escalate the situation?**
5. **What alternative response to the situation would you have preferred to have happened?**
6. **Did you tell anybody about the incident involving your seclusion and/or restraint after it occurred? Why?**
7. **How had your experience of seclusion and/or restraint in school impacted you as a student at the time?**
    a. **How has this experience impacted you now, as an adult?**
8. **What changes would you like to see in the treatment of disabled students, or students with disabilities, in school?**
9. **Is there anything else that you would like to share with me, and have not yet?**

END

Appendix D

Systemic ableism in Ontario schools: how seclusion and restraint practices reinforce the persecution of disabled body-minds

Counselling and Community Services Information

- **Should you feel distressed as a result of anything that you have read or done in this study, here is a list of services where you can find someone to talk to if you have something on your mind.**
- **If you aren't ready to use any of these services, you might want to talk to a trusted family member or friend that you would normally go to when you have something on your mind.**

Suicide Crisis Helpline
If you are struggling to cope and are dealing with thoughts of suicide, call or text the number below to connect with the network of crisis lines across Canada. Available 24/7.
Telephone (or text): 988

Canadian Mental Health Association (CMHA)
Provides advocacy and resources that help to prevent mental health problems and illnesses, and support recovery and resilience.
Telephone: 416-977-5580 or 1-800-875-6213 (toll-free in Ontario)
Email: info@ontario.cmha.ca
Website: https://cmha.ca/find-help/find-cmha-in-your-area/

ConnexOntario
Free and confidential health services information for residents of Ontario experiencing problems with addiction, mental health and/or gambling. Available 24/7.
Telephone: 1-866 -531-2600 (or text 247247)
Website: www.connexontario.ca

LGBT Youthline Ontario
Provides free and anonymous peer support for lesbian, gay bisexual, transgender, transsexual, two-spirited, queer and questioning young people under 30. Available Sunday-Friday from 4:30 pm - 9:30 PM (EST).
Telephone: 647-694-4275 (text only)
Email: askus@youthline.ca
Website: https://www.youthline.ca/

ARCH Disability Law Centre
Provides a range of legal services directly to persons with disabilities in Ontario, including basic legal information and summary legal advice on certain disability-related areas of law.
Telephone: 416-482-8255 or 1-866-482-2724 (toll-free)
Email: general@arch.clcj.ca
Website: https://archdisabilitylaw.ca/contact/

Human Rights Legal Support Centre (HRLSC)
Provides free legal assistance to people across Ontario who have experienced discrimination contrary to *Ontario's Human Rights Code*.
Telephone: (416) 597-4900 or 1-866-625-5179 (toll-free)
Website: https://hrlsc.on.ca/