

**The Effect of the Collaborative Problem Solving Method on a Parent's Experience:  
A Narrative Cross Multi-Case Analysis**

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### **Abstract**

This qualitative research study is a narrative cross multi-case analysis. The purpose of this study is to understand how the practice of the Collaborative Problem Solving method (CPS) has impacted the parenting relational experience and their perception of their child's teachers. The CPS method is a problem-solving strategy that is based on the premise that children and people do well if they have the cognitive skills to do well; and, that their behaviour reflects their cognitive skills. The CPS method provides an alternative perspective on human behaviour enabling the CPS practitioner to consider that challenging behaviour is not the will to be challenging, rather it is the inability, at that moment, not to be challenging. This method also provides a sequence of interpersonal engagement that provides the opportunity to regulate (to calm), to relate (to connect), and to reason (to problem-solve) while promoting the experience of co-regulation that strengthens the relational experience. The research question is "What are parents' experiences with their practice of the CPS method and how has their practice impacted their perception and experience of their child's school teacher?" There are two concepts that guide this study: the differential impact of experience and anti-ableism. The foundation and concepts behind the CPS method are also a philosophical framework that guides this study. This study revealed that parents who practice the CPS method have a strong connection to the philosophy behind the method and discovers that the practice of the CPS method can impact a parent's perception and experience of their children's teacher, however, that process can be disrupted by the parent's experience of trauma should the teacher be involved in the traumatic event.

*Keywords:* Collaborative Problem Solving method, traditional discipline practices, relationships, parent-teacher relationships, challenging behaviour, ableism

## Introduction

The classroom can be a stressful environment for both teachers and students (Collie et al., 2012; Oberle & Schonert-Reichl, 2016), and this is especially true for students who exhibit behaviours that their teachers find challenging to manage and support (Alnaim, 2018; Miller & Meyers, 2015). Add the COVID-19 pandemic to the classroom experience and stress levels increase (Klapproth et al., 2020). Students with disabilities who struggle with challenging behaviours disproportionately receive disciplinary action compared to their non-disabled peers (Alnaim, 2018). The experience of receiving disciplinary action can weaken the student-teacher relationship, exacerbate the student's challenging behaviour, and even compromise their learning experience and development (Dutil, 2020; Haight et al., 2016). There is, however, a relationship that can mediate a stressed student-teacher relationship, and that is the parent-teacher relationship. Research has demonstrated that not only can the partnership of the parent and teacher improve student outcomes, the parent and teacher working together collaboratively can bring improvements to the parent-child relationship as well (Garbacz, 2015; Kuhn, 2017; Sheridan 2012). The focus of this study is the parent-teacher relationship, more specifically, the parent's perceptions and experiences of their child's teacher. The significance of the parent's perceiving an improvement in their perception and understanding of their children's teachers contributes to the parent-teacher relational experience. A positive perspective and appreciation for their child's teacher promotes an optimal responsiveness to the parent's relational experience with the teacher. Included in this exploration of parent's experiences of the teacher are their experiences as they practice the Collaborative Problem Solving (CPS) method. The CPS method is a problem-solving protocol that guides parents and their children through a three-step process that promotes calming, connection, and collaboration. The CPS method is grounded in a

philosophy that promotes an alternative and more compassionate explanation for behaviour, especially behaviours that others find difficult to understand and manage.

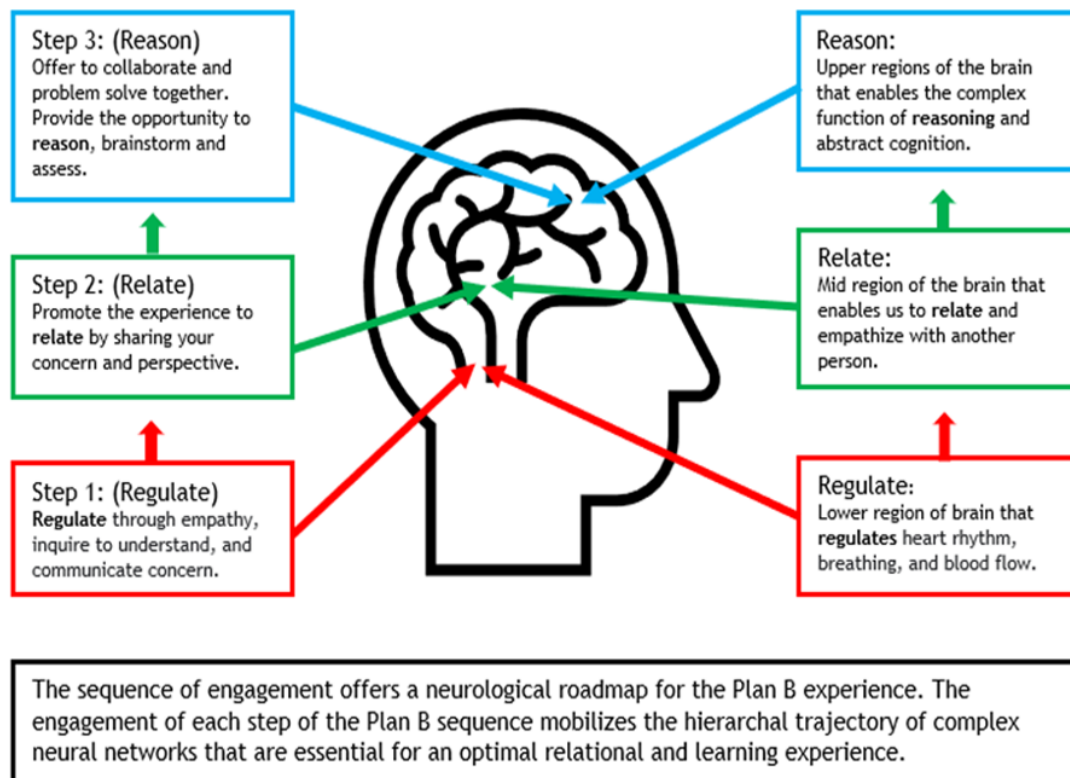
The research question guiding this study is “What are parents' experiences with their practice of the CPS method and how has their practice impacted their perceptions and experiences of their child’s school teachers?” After receiving approval of my thesis proposal and my ethics application from the University of Ottawa Research Ethics Board to proceed with my study, I reviewed the research literature on the effects of traditional discipline practices on the student-teacher relationship and how that impacts the parent-teacher relationship, the importance of the parent-teacher relationship, and the effect of the practice of the CPS method on parents. There are two concepts that guide this study: the differential impact of experience and anti-ableism. The philosophy behind the CPS method also contributes to the framework that guides this study. I established a methodological framework and design that set the parameters for the search for participants, the interviews of the participants, as well as the analysis of the findings from the interviews. A thematic and cross-case analysis are employed to identify connective threads that are linked to the pre-existing literature, thus building our knowledge and insight of the impact and the effectiveness of the CPS method. The following sections will provide a synopsis of the CPS method and its philosophical underpinnings, as well as the context of this study, and my positionality within this study; as the researcher’s positionality is a necessary component for the representation of proficient and critical qualitative research (Frost & Holt, 2013).

### **Synopsis of the Collaborative Problem Solving Method**

The CPS method has been found to be an effective practice for parents to reduce challenging behaviours of their children while supporting, and even strengthening their relationship with them (Ashworth et al., 2012; Greene, 2021; Heath et al., 2020). This is

achieved through the three-step sequence of interpersonal engagement between a dysregulated child struggling with challenging behaviours and the adult (or parent) who is supporting and guiding the dysregulated child through their challenging situation. Challenging behaviour, behaviour that can be disruptive, maladaptive, or possibly harmful, is understood as the representation of lagging skills within the child, skills that include problem-solving, frustration tolerance, and mental flexibility. The CPS method is based on the premise that children do well if they have the relevant skills to do well and be successful, and if they are not doing well, they either do not have these skills or something is blocking access to their skills. In other words, a child's challenging behaviour is their expression and communication of the maladaptive skills that are available to that child (Green, 2021). This understanding of children's behaviour challenges the more traditional view that children behave well only if they want to, and if they are not behaving well, it is the parent's responsibility to motivate them to behave well. The CPS philosophy and the sequence of engagement is not only applicable to situations of problem-solving challenging behaviours with children, but it can also be applied to any number of lived experiences where individuals are engaging and communicating with each other (Perry & Ablon, 2019). The three-step sequence of engagement of Plan B has the potential to activate neurobiological processes that regulate the brain to control heart rate and breathing, enabling the ability to then relate and empathize with another person, which then leads to experiencing the complex function of reasoning and abstract cognition. (see figure 1). This process is a critical element in the mediation of our stress response (Perry, & Ablon, 2019).

Figure 1  
Mapping the Sequence of Behaviour – Plan B



The philosophy behind the CPS method enables the practitioner to recognize that the behaviours of the interlocutor are the representation of the neurocognitive skills available to that person, or child, at that moment and not a reflection of the quality of that person or their personality (Greene, 2021). The practitioner of the CPS method also recognizes that behaviours do not define the person and understands the importance of positive relationships when engaging in interpersonal experiences such as problem-solving (Greene, 2021). The philosophy behind the CPS method offers an alternative and compassionate perspective as to why people behave the way they do.

This method offers three strategies for supporting a child with challenging behaviours. The first, Plan A is a unilateral problem-solving approach and is typically an adult-imposed will for compliance and obedience (Greene, 2021). This plan is not the preferred plan of action for problem-solving, but it can be successful for some children especially when in need of short term solutions, and when the individual possesses the neuro-cognitive skills that

enable them to be flexible and to quickly adapt. The second, Plan B is the collaborative approach to problem-solving. This is the preferred plan and engaging in Plan B provides the child and parent the opportunity to activate and practice the neuro-cognitive skills that are required for effective collaboration and problem-solving. However, if parent and child cannot find a mutual solution, Plan C can be implemented. Plan C enables the adult to set aside the expectation placed on the child to address higher-priority problems, to re-address the problem at a different or more suitable time, or to drop the expectation altogether should it be determined that the expectation was indeed unreasonable after all (Greene, 2021).

Plan B is a proactive plan that is best practiced when all parties involved are in a balanced state of regulation, as the neuro-cognitive functions are easier to access when one is calm and regulated (Perry and Ablon, 2019). The CPS method occurs within the relational interaction between the two individuals (i.e., parent and child) and is a three-step sequence of engagement of regulating, relating, and reasoning (Perry and Ablon, 2019). The first step of regulating is referred to as the Empathy Step, where the parent clarifies the child's concern (Greene, 2021). This Empathy Step is the gathering of information or reconnaissance by asking the child what is happening. The adult is learning what the problem is from the child's point of view and can promote reassurance for the child by responding with reflective listening and clarifying questions (Greene, 2021). It is also during this step where the child is most often able to regulate through the experience of receiving an empathetic ear and support from the parent. When it is mutually understood what the problem is, when the child feels that they are understood and in a state of regulation, the parent can move on to the second step, the Sharing Step. It is here that the parent shares their concerns with the child as to why the child's behaviour is a problem; for example, there could be a health or safety issue, or the child's behaviour may be negatively affecting others. This step provides the opportunity for the child to relate to the parent's concerns. The ability for the child to relate to the parent is

contingent on the child's state of regulation and their ability to maintain their state of regulation. If the child is unable to regulate, perhaps due to the intensity of their dysregulation, the parent may have to continue with the first step, while maintaining the perspective of the philosophical principle that 'children do well if they have the skills to do well.' However, once the child has indicated that they are able to see the problem from someone else's perspective, it is at that point that the parent can invite the child to the final step of reasoning through collaboration. The final step is the Collaboration Step, together the parent and child explore and brainstorm to create possible solutions that address both parent and child's concerns that can be tested and reassessed (Perry and Ablon, 2019).

The process of the three-step sequence of engagement (see figure 2) actively practices and trains the neurocognitive skills, such as problem-solving, mental flexibility, and frustration tolerance that are required for adaptive and regulated behaviours. Through empathy, sharing, and mutual collaboration the dysregulated child is provided a positive relational experience within a context that is non-judgemental and non-threatening while validating the troubling experiences which are being expressed through the child's challenging behaviour (Greene, 2021; Pino-Pasternak et al., 2018). The experience of validation and appreciation, especially during moments of emotional vulnerability, promotes the trust that is required for developing secure and positive relationships (Greene, 2021). In addition to building relational trust, the adult is role modelling the cognitive skills that are a more adaptive and effective response to problem-solving.

Figure 2  
Plan B – Sequence of Engagement



Step 1: EMPATHIZE (regulate)

Ask what is wrong. Clarify the child's concern with your own words, indicating that you understand how they might be feeling. Gather as much information as you can. Feeling heard and understood can help calm the brain and body enabling the child to progress to the next step.



STEP 2: SHARE (relate)

Share your concern, explain why their behaviour is problematic. Sharing your concerns and perspective offers the child the opportunity to empathize for themselves and to see the problem from a different point of view.



Step 3: COLLABORATE (reason)

Invite the child to brainstorm ideas, assess them, and choose one to test and try. Support the child's effort by providing them the time to formulate and express their own potential solutions. It may be necessary to repeat step 1 and 2, especially if the problem is triggering.

Illustration by Damien Bethell

As stated, the Collaborative Problem Solving method identifies three types of responses to a challenging situation or behaviour(s). Plan B is identified as the optimal response. However, there may be situations when parents feel compelled to implement a Plan A strategy. The real-world context sometimes provides natural consequences (such as the risk of being hit by a car if you run out onto a busy road) or societal expectations that are non-negotiable (such as the need for your child to go to school, in part, so that you can go to work), forcing parents to make choices that do not support the collaborative process. This real-world context could present barriers to the parent as they navigate the complexities of familiarizing and mastering the sequence of engagement (SOE). The SOE also requires the guiding adult to be in a regulated state, and to maintain their regulated state. Parenting children with challenging behaviours can be very stressful making it difficult, at times, to be

in the required regulated state of mind. Included in the appendix is a list of definitions commonly used in the philosophy and practice of the CPS method (see appendix A).

Another point worth mentioning is the context in which most of the research on the CPS method is carried out. As this method is relatively new, the drivers of the research on the method are those involved with creating and developing the method: Dr. Ross W. Greene who is the originator of the CPS method and the founding Director of the Lives in the Balance organization, and Dr. Stuart Ablon, who is the Director of Think:Kids, a program in the department of Psychiatry at Massachusetts General Hospital. This is important to be aware of as both developers of the method have a vested interest in its success, which may leave either of them vulnerable to such influences as publication bias (the failure to publish research with null or negative findings) (Cook & Therrien, 2017). Both organizations promote the collaborative and problem-solving method with the same philosophical position that 'kids do well if they have the skills to do well' and both share the same sequence of engagement of regulate, relate, reason, but the two programs operate under different titles. Dr. Greene originally titled the method the Collaborative Problem Solving method and began working with Dr. Ablon in the early years of the CPS method's development. Dr. Greene and Dr. Ablon parted ways in 2008 and in 2013. Dr. Greene changed the title of his method to Collaborative and Proactive Solutions (Casetext, 2012). Dr. Ablon continues to refer to the method as the Collaborative Problem Solving method, and this current study will refer to the method as the Collaborative Problem Solving method.

## **Context**

There are two main components underpinning the context within this research study: the first is grounded in the experiences of parents of school age children, who reside in the Ottawa-Gatineau region of Eastern Ontario and Western Quebec; and the second component

is situated within the culture of punitive discipline practices that the public schools in the provinces of Ontario and Quebec often adhere to, and that are perpetuated and sustained by their provincial ministry's policies on disciplinary and punitive action.

The parents' experience as practitioners of the CPS method and the impact their practice has on their perspective and experiences of their children's teachers provides the first important context. The teachers do not have to be trained, or even know of the CPS method. The purpose of this study is to identify if and how the practice of the CPS method impacts the parents' subjective perspective and experiences of their child's teacher; given that the improvement, or the enrichment of the subjective perspective and experience is a critical goal of the CPS method and strategy (Heath et al., 2020). Although the parent may not have the opportunity to experience the sequence of engagement (the sequence of the Empathy Step, the Sharing Step, and the Collaboration Step) of the CPS method with their children's teachers, the adoption of the philosophical principles of the practice may provide the parent with the opportunity to experience an improvement or enrichment in their own subjective experience of that teacher.

The second component of this study's context is the public schools' standard procedure of punitive responses to students' behaviours when disruptive or intolerable. The punitive responses that are embodied in traditional discipline practices are furthermore entrenched as policy set by the provincial ministries of both Ontario and Quebec regarding the disciplinary practices to which the schools are obliged to adhere. In both Ontario and Quebec, the disciplinary action of suspension and expulsion continues to be implicitly endorsed by their policies with regards to behaviours that are deemed intolerable (Alnaim, 2018; Légis Québec, 2020). Research demonstrates that the practice of punitive discipline is more harmful than helpful (Kirby, 2017), yet these harmful practices continue to exist as the guiding practices in public schools within Ontario and Quebec.

### **My Positionality**

Often in qualitative research it is beneficial to add a section on the researcher's positionality which identifies and acknowledges their world views and beliefs and how these assumptions become intertwined within their research (Holmes, 2020). This reflexive introspection provides transparency into the researcher's ontological and epistemological beliefs that brings to light "where the researcher is coming from" (Holmes, 2020). This next section of researcher positionality presents a process of critical self-reflection that helps to make clear the position that I, the researcher, have within this research endeavour.

I am a parent of two sons, the older is in university, the younger is in high school and is on the autism spectrum. I have been practising the CPS method for approximately three years. I discovered the CPS method through a local children's mental health centre where our family received support for the experiences of extremely challenging behaviours and engagements with my younger son. Included with these challenges, my son was also experiencing persistent and ongoing bullying at school. Although the behavioural challenges associated with his autism were at times all encompassing, the added stress he was experiencing from the bullying at school proved to be too much for our family to manage without professional help. It was for this reason that our family sought help and found the support we needed. Through the assistance of a local mental health centre for children, we became a family client that was taught the CPS method. We participated in a twelve-week program that involved visits from a social worker who was trained in the method and who guided me, my son, and his father through the process of implementing the CPS philosophy and method into our family problem-solving strategies. The method worked well for our family, which includes the participation of my oldest son. As well as receiving guidance from me, he participated in learning the key concepts of the method such as "behaviour is

communication” and “kids do well if they have the skills to do well” (Greene, 2021), and the sequence of engagement.

The experience of systemic ableism is a familiar experience for our family, especially since our second son began attending public school. He struggled with establishing positive relationships at school. Although he has managed to form some meaningful relationships with some of his peers and a few of his teachers, the vast majority of these relationships were negative and stressful. In the spirit of researcher positionality, it is important to recognize and identify the impact that systemic ableism has had on me and my family. I, too, am the representation of my own family and its cultural wealth. The wealth of my family culture is not only shaped by difficult times, but it is also shaped by our lived experiences of fellowship and community from our neighbours, community members and those teachers and school staff that do recognize the contributions that my son and his family bring to the school and our community. It is both the difficult and the wonderful experiences of my parenting journey that motivates me to want to contribute to the evolution of inclusion within our public schools.

### **Literature Review**

This literature review examines the research on the importance of the various relationship dyads between student, teacher, and parent, as well as the impact that traditional discipline practices (TDP) have on these dyadic relationships. It also describes the benefits of problem-solving and the barriers to a meaningful problem-solving experience. Lastly, it reviews research on the benefits that the practice of the CPS method has on the parenting experience as well as specific school-to-home programs that are geared to support parent and teachers problem-solving efforts collaboratively.

### **Traditional Discipline Practice in the Classroom**

Traditional discipline practices (TDP) are the practices that most public school systems implement to reduce or prevent challenging behaviours. They are based on the operant conditioning model of reward and punishment. Behaviours considered to be appropriate are encouraged with rewards (depending on the context that could be praise, grades, tokens, or even the addition or continuation of a certain privilege, such as being placed first in line). Conversely, behaviours considered to be inappropriate and intolerable are discouraged with punishments such as exclusionary practices like time out, detention, suspension, and even expulsion. These challenging behaviours are often the behaviours that are commonly believed to be manipulative, attention seeking, wilful disobedience, or intentionally disruptive actions used by a student with the attempt to gain control of the situation (Greene, 2021). However, research has shown that punitive and exclusionary practices are more problematic than helpful and can exacerbate the student's challenging behaviours (Del Vecchio et al. 2020; Larsen & Jordan, 2020), put the student at further risk of experiencing re-traumatization, and/or increased exclusion and isolation (Dutil, 2020; Haight et al., 2016; Kirby, 2017).

The student's learning needs are not the only needs that are at risk when learning in a traditional paradigm of discipline practices, the student's mental health is a risk as well. Teachers who do not have the specific trauma-informed training and education to support their students are at greater risk for further traumatizing their students with the use of TDP (Dutil, 2020). Teachers are expected to follow school policy which includes disciplinary policy. However, when students lack trust in their teachers due to TDP, they are at greater risk of a compromised and substandard learning experience (Dutil, 2020). This can also be true for those students who "slip under the radar." This is demonstrated in Kirby's (2020) study of the primary students' experience of the 'on-task' classroom (where students are

expected to sit silently and compliant on a carpeted floor for a significant proportion of their school day) which found that ‘good listening’ does not equate to effective or meaningful learning. In fact, it is impossible to know what is happening in the mind of the silent and compliant child who has likely confused ‘good listening’ with ‘listening to be good’ (Kirby, 2020).

Research has also shown that there is a disproportionality of the experience of punitive discipline by students with exceptionalities in the student population and that experience can be harmful to their mental health (Dutil, 2020), but there is an even greater discrepancy of the experience of discipline for Black students and racialized students with disabilities (Camacho & Krezmien, 2020). The race-based data collected by the Ontario Human Rights Commission, the Safe School Action Team and various agencies in the United States reveal that students with disabilities received the second highest rate of extreme discipline next to Black students or students of colour (Hussain, 2015; McIntosh, 2018). Consequently, parents of Black student’s report having limited confidence in the schools and teachers to provide for and protect their children (Bell, 2020).

This lack of trust by the parents whose children are on the receiving end of TDP by their schools presents a significant barrier to the establishment of a positive and effective parent-teacher relationship (Haight et al., 2016). A teacher’s focus on challenging behaviours with little regard to the function behind them is disruptive to the relational and the self-regulation process; two processes that are critical for working together and problem-solving collaboratively (Haight et al., 2016). The impact that the practice of TDPs in the classroom has on the parent-teacher relationship may not be explicit, but research suggests that many parents, especially parents of children with challenging behaviours, have strained relationships with the teachers and schools that have enforced traditional discipline practices on their child (Azad et al., 2018; Bell, 2020; Haight et al., 2014; Philip, 2013). Azad et al.

(2018) acknowledge that some parents are all too familiar with receiving reports on their child's challenging behaviours far more often than receiving reports about their child's strengths. Another study suggests that the extent of the challenging behaviours and situations are often not reported to the parent until the school is implementing the harshest degrees of discipline (Philip, 2013). Research also suggests that parents, especially single parents, have the added stress of potential job loss as exclusionary disciplinary action, such as suspension and expulsion, can impact that parent's ability to attend work (Bell, 2020). This same report describes the experiences of parents who felt marginalized by the school's personnel as they navigate and try to make sense of the discipline process (Bell, 2020). This experience of marginalization by parents is supported in the Azad et al. (2018) article that reported parents interpreting teachers' resistance and inaction to parents' recommendations and input as a lack of confidence in their competency and knowledge as the experts of their own children. Haight et al.'s (2016) qualitative study on the experience of out-of-school suspension of four secondary school students demonstrates how TDP can exacerbate the students' challenging behaviours as well as weaken the trust that the students' families have in their child's teacher and school administration. This study also highlights the importance for the teachers to honour the support mechanisms (such as IEP's) set in place to facilitate an optimal teaching and learning experience for the teachers and students (Haight et al., 2016).

The next section explores the importance of relationships to the students' learning experience and well-being. The relationship is one of the primary conduits for teachers to provide their students a meaningful learning experience, it also has the potential to bridge and partner the teachers with the students' families.

### **The Importance of Relationships**

Much like the parent's experiences of how a school's practice of TDP can disrupt their relationship with the school and teachers, their experience of a negative relationship between their child and their teacher can also be disruptive (Azad et al., 2018; Westerberg et al. 2020). Westerberg et al. (2020) examined the impact of the student-teacher relationships in a preschool setting on the home environment and parenting stress. Their research demonstrates that parents experienced more stress when their child had a negative relationship with their teacher (Westerberg et al., 2020). In keeping with the early learning context, parents are often given daily updates and feedback on their child's progress. Teachers who have a more positive relationship with the early learning students are more likely to report more positive feedback on those students; whereas parents experienced an increase in parent stress when the student-teacher relationship was more conflictual with the more negative reports of their child (Westerberg et al., 2020). A teacher's perception of their students can impact the parent-teacher relationship (Martin et al., 2018). Martin et al.'s (2018) qualitative study explores the experiences of teachers who have made the decision that expulsion is the only reasonable solution to the challenging behaviours of some of their students (Martin et al. 2018). A common pattern is identified with the participating teachers that began with the teacher's attempt to work in partnership with the parents (Martin et al. 2018). However, if the teacher and parent were unable to find mutual ground on how to address the challenging behaviours, the most common trajectory of action for the teacher resulted in the expulsion of the student and the belief that the challenging behaviour was a result of ineffective parenting (Martin et al. 2018). The teacher's experience of their inability to work with the parent was also perceived and interpreted as the result of the parent being uncooperative (Martin et al. 2018).

A negative student-teacher relationship not only can be problematic for the parent-teacher relationship, but it can also be problematic for the peer relationships between the students as well. Campaert et al. 's (2017) research suggests that the student-teacher relationship plays an important role in the experience of bullying in the classroom. The teacher's behaviours of non-intervention to the act of bullying or of victimization reinforces the occurrence of bullying (Campaert et al., 2017). Students observing their teacher while making sense of the teacher's reaction to bullying and victimization promotes a moral template (based on that teacher's behavioural response) that could potentially impact the development of the student's own moral engagement, as a teacher's non-intervention increases the level of bullying in a classroom. Thornberg et al.'s (2019) study provided similar findings of classroom factors that impact the prevalence of bullying and moral disengagement. Their research revealed that the classrooms' collective efficacy to combat bullying is negatively associated with the perpetration of bullying, and individual moral disengagement is correlated with the bullying of others (Thornberg et al., 2019). In other words, teachers' inaction to the bullying within their classroom, and the classroom's collective disengagement of moral response provides an optimal climate for bullying to exist and perpetuate. The student-teacher relationship is an important relational experience for the student as it has a ripple effect with the potential to impact the teachers' relationships with the parents as well as the students' relational experience with their peers (Campaert et al., 2017; Martin et al. 2018, 2017; Thornberg et al., 2019; Westerberg et al. 2020).

Krane and Klevan (2019) examine the complex interrelationship between the parent, the student, and the adult conceptualizing it as a tripartite relationship, a relationship that is based on interaction, collaboration, and negotiation. The three partners within the tripartite relationship all share the intention of promoting the optimal well-being and success of the student, especially those who are at risk of dropping out or have mental health problems

(Krane & Klevan, 2019). The outcome of this study shows that parents value and appreciate the importance of student-teacher relationships, in particular for students who are considered high-risk. These parents reported their dissatisfaction with the lack of notice and informing the parents of their child's troubles at school (Krane & Klevan, 2019). These findings are reflected in research on parents' perspectives on parent-teacher interactions which identifies parents' wishes for a more active or even proactive involvement in the teachers' and schools' strategies to support their children through their challenging behaviours instead of being notified when the situation has deteriorated to a critical status (Azad et al., 2018; Krane & Klevan, 2019).

Improved parent-teacher relationships and communication have been shown to improve student outcomes in school (Garbacz et al., 2015; Kraft & Rogers, 2015; Kuhn et al., 2017; Sheridan et al., 2012). The research of Kraft and Rogers (2015) demonstrates how a simple one sentence message from the teacher to the parent once a week can positively impact the outcomes of a student's success in school. Teachers provided constructive thoughts that enabled parents to effectively support their children's learning (Kraft & Rogers, 2015). This study demonstrates that providing a simple action by the teacher resulted in a decrease in student failure, impacting the attendance and the drop-out rate (Kraft & Rogers, 2015). Similar to this current study, the Kraft and Rogers (2015) study explores and demonstrates how the perception and action of one person in a relational context can have a positive impact on the interlocutor in that relational context; the relational context is, after all, an important component of the context in which the parent and teacher come together to problem-solve and collaborate.

### **The Benefits of Problem-Solving and the Barriers to Effective Problem-Solving**

This literature review has explored TDP and its impact on the dyadic relationships between student, parent, and teacher, as well as the importance these relationships have on the learning experience of the student. This next section addresses the research on the effects of engaging in the problem-solving process and the barriers that can interfere and disrupt a parent's experience of an effective problem-solving engagement.

Problem-solving skills are central to the practice of the CPS method and the three-step sequences of engagement (the Empathy Step, the Sharing Step, and the Collaboration Step). The practice of this method promotes the development and exercise of the skills that also contribute to the reduction of challenging behaviours in children, and the reduction of both parent and teacher stress (Azad et al., 2019; Greene, 2021; Health et al., 2020; Perry & Ablon, 2019; Sheridan et al., 2012). Azad et al. (2019) explored the problem-solving strategies between teacher and parents and various core behavioural components of problem-solving such as mutual concern, identifying the cause of the problem, as well as planning, implementing, and the evaluating of the potential strategies. Interviews and observations of the 39 parent-teacher dyad participants were conducted, and a demographic survey was completed by both teachers and parents (Azad et al., 2019). Findings demonstrate that the core behavioural components of problem-solving and the psychological involvement (such as verbal/nonverbal communication, and respectful engagement) between the teacher and parent are related (Azad et al., 2019). In particular, when either one (the parent or teacher) systematically coordinates their problem-solving efforts with the other, their efforts were reciprocated. Findings also indicate a connection between family income and teachers' colour (Azad et al., 2019). More specifically, low-income parents and parents engaging with white teachers demonstrate fewer of the core behavioural problem-solving skills than higher-income parents and parents engaging with non-white teachers (Azad et al., 2019). This might

suggest that lower income white families challenge the teacher less often than higher income White parents or parents engaging with non-white teachers. It might also suggest that high income white parents challenge the teacher more often than low-income white parents, or Black parents. The research on the parent and teacher experience presented in the study above highlights the importance of a critical lens when examining the power dynamics of the parent-teacher relationship as well as the student-teacher relationship. The benefits of the adoption of intentional and inclusive problem-solving skills development for both student and adult are clearly demonstrated in the studies reported in this review. These problem-solving skills are fundamental to the effective practice of the CPS method and the experience of parents navigating the complex relationships within the school system.

Harsh discipline within the family context can have a negative impact on family functioning and can be sustained through inter-generational transmission (Carvallo et al., 2018; Niu et al. 2018). Therefore, it is important to support parents' and caregivers' problem-solving skills for the benefit of their children. Shokoohi et al.'s (2011) study that evaluates a program that specifically promotes problem-solving skill development for the parent, and subsequently their school-aged child. Raising a Thinking Child aims to teach parents how to develop their own problem-solving skills as well as support their children's problem-solving skills to reduce challenging behaviours (Shokoohi et al., 2011). Their findings indicate that the enhancement of parents' problem-solving skills increases the parents' experience of supportiveness from their child, spouse, and other family members, as well as improved positive engagement between parent and child (Shokoohi et al., 2011). Their findings also indicated an increase in communication, which is recognized as an important mechanism for the prevention and reduction of challenging behaviours (Shokoohi et al., 2011). This study provides evidence of the impact relationships can have on the development of neurobiological mechanisms of problem-solving skills by promoting

regulation through supportive relationships and effective communication (Perry, & Ablon, 2019).

An effective problem-solving process has the potential to activate the neurobiological processes that regulate the brain, enabling the experience of relating and reasoning, and is a critical element to the mediation of our stress response (Perry, & Ablon, 2019). However, there are potential barriers that can interrupt the experience of problem-solving and collaboration. One of the barriers is the emotional state and psychological context of many parents who have children with challenging behaviours and high needs. Emerson (2020) explored the experiences of mothers of children with disabilities and the traumatic stress that is associated with caring for children with high and challenging needs. Navigating the unique challenges of their particular disabilities (challenges such as requiring medical and or mental health care services that most likely have waitlists, months or even years long, forcing parents to assess and triage their children's conditions themselves) provide parents of children with disabilities with multiple sources of traumatic stress impacting their ability to optimally care for their children (Emerson, 2020). In addition to the often seemingly perpetual traumatic stressors these parents manage, they also harbour feelings of helplessness and hopelessness for the future of their children and their quality of life (Emerson, 2020). Compounding all these stressors are the anxieties and worries parents have for their disabled or high needs child when they go off to school. Will their challenging behaviours be understood by the teacher and by their classmates? Will they face unnecessary and unjust punishment? Will their child feel safe and valued by their peers? Emmerson (2020) found that parents who suffer from traumatic stress can feel misunderstood and find it challenging to work with professionals as they struggle to express their feelings and needs. An important aspect of both the problem-solving and the collaborative process is the requirement to be in a regulated and calm state of mind to access the cognitive skills required to engage meaningfully with

professionals, such as a school teacher. Azad et al. (2017) explored the importance of accessing the required skills to experience an effective collaborative engagement. Their research reveals that when parents and teachers demonstrated an inability to identify a mutual concern or develop a specific goal disrupts their ability to problem-solve in a planned problem-solving activity. Communication is essential to the parent-teacher relationship and the experience of meaning collaboration (Tucker & Schwartz, 2013). Communicating and identifying a mutual concern is one of the core principles of the collaborative problem-solving process that requires both the ability to empathize and to share concerns (Azad et al., 2017; Perry & Ablon, 2019).

Another potential barrier to the problem-solving process is the parents' perception of the problem. Marquis and Baker (2019) examine parents' self-report of parent-adolescent conflict with their developmentally delayed adolescent child in comparison to the observation of their parent-adolescent conflict. The findings revealed that higher self-reported conflict by mothers is related to observed lower youth problem-solving skills, as well as a decreased chance for reaching a resolution (Marquis, & Baker, 2019). In other words, a mother's perception of a conflicted relationship with their adolescent child is associated with lower problem-solving skills of their adolescent child. In addition, that mother and adolescent child have a decreased chance for reaching a solution (Marquis, & Baker, 2019). This study highlights the importance of the parent's perception and the impact their perception has on the problem-solving experience with their child (Marquis, & Baker, 2019) as well as the impact that effective problem-solving skills has on the experience of their child.

An effective problem-solving experience is one of the foundational aspects of this thesis. The skills associated with effective problem-solving are the same skills required for effective collaboration. The last section for this review explores how a parent's practice of the

CPS method and their partnership with their child's teacher can affect their child's learning experience at school.

### **The Collaborative Problem Solving Method and Parents' Experiences**

The practice of the CPS method specifically develops and exercises the skills involved for the experience of empathy and has been shown to improve a parent's ability to empathize with their children (Ashworth et al., 2012; Heath et al., 2020; de Oliveira & Jackson, 2017). The ability to empathize with the person that you are supporting while they are facing a challenging experience, or with whom you are attempting to resolve a challenging experience, is fundamental to the collaborative problem-solving experience (Ashworth et al., 2012; Greene, 2021). The CPS method brings to consciousness the importance of empathy skills and the practical application of these skills parents use for developing healthy relationships (Heath et al., 2020).

Previous research has demonstrated that parents have experienced the benefits of an increased ability to empathize resulting from their practice of the CPS method (Ashworth et al., 2012). A comprehensive 12 week program was implemented delivering one-on-one CPS training to family participants by certified CPS practitioners. The researchers provided limited details on the specifics of the CPS intervention provided as the training for each family was individualized, specific to the needs of each family (Heath et al., 2020). However, they did offer the potential learning goals that are associated with the practice of the CPS method. These goals include the development of perspective taking (with a change of attribution from wilful misbehaviour to the understanding that their child's behavior is a representation of their skills), improved problem-solving skills, the prediction of challenging behaviours, improved communication and listening skills, and improved parents' empathy (Heath et al., 2020). Included in the implementation of this intervention was the focus on the

development of children's executive functions which included planning, cognitive flexibility, self-regulation, and problem-solving (Heath et al., 2020). A pre- and post-treatment evaluation, which included measures for youth emotional and behavioural difficulties, parenting stress, child executive functioning, parent empathy, and parents' fidelity to the CPS method reported an improvement in parents' empathy skills, their ability to take into perspective their child's point of view, and the ability to better predict their child's challenging behaviours (Heath et al., 2020).

Not only does research on the practice of the CPS method demonstrate an increase of parent's empathy, but it also demonstrates a decrease in parental stress (Heath et al., 2020; Epstein & Saltzman-Benaiah, 2010; Booker et al., 2018). In the Heath et al. (2020) research study, the reduction of parental stress correlated with the increased ability to empathize. A pilot project of a CPS group intervention for parents of children with Tourette's syndrome and oppositional defiant disorder offered evidence that the practice of the CPS method resulted in a reduction of maternal parenting stress (Epstein & Saltzman-Benaiah, 2010). As did the comparative research study of Booker et al. (2018) in which child participants and their mothers were randomized into one of two evidence-based parenting treatment programs: parent management training program (PMT) or the CPS method program. Results revealed that parenting stress is significantly reduced because of both training programs as well as improved positive relationships between parent and child (Booker et al., 2018).

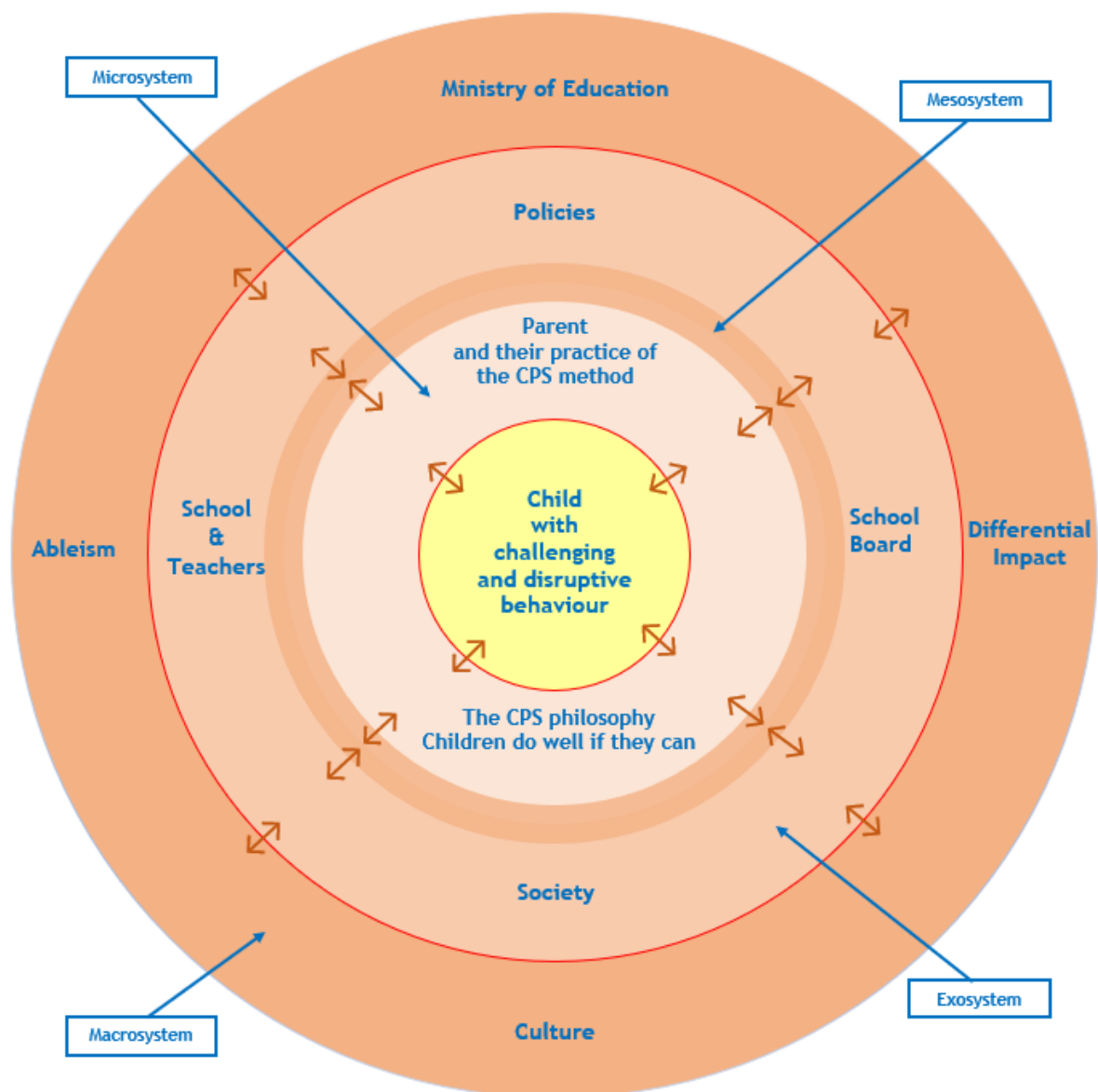
The focus on empathy and on the building of relationships in the practice of the CPS method provide the opportunity for practitioners to develop better informed and meaningful relationships with their children and with the influential adults in the child's life, such as their child's school teacher/s (Heath et al. 2020, Perry & Ablon, 2019). It is the experience of these relationships and the meaning that the participants take from these experiences that is central to this study. The aim of this research is to capture the experiences of how a parent's practice

of the CPS method has impacted their experience and perception of their child's school teachers as they support their child with their learning and academic experiences. The CPS method offers a different perspective and philosophy on human behaviour and interaction that in many ways contradicts the conventions of TDP (Greene, 2014). The CPS method's sequence of engagement has been shown to help and benefit some of the most challenging and intense relationships parents can experience through the activation and practice of empathy and through the understanding that people are not defined by their behaviours, they are simply using the skills that are available to them, at that moment (Epstein & Saltzman-Benaiah, 2010; Perry & Ablon, 2019). As the CPS method and the experience of the sequence of engagement have been demonstrated to improve relationships (Heath et al., 2020; Perry & Ablon, 2019), the intention of this research study is to explore the experiences of parents, who are practitioners of the CPS method, and how CPS perspective and philosophy of human behaviour and engagement affect how parents perceive and ultimately relate to their child's teachers.

### **Conceptual Framework**

The conceptual framework comprises the philosophy of the CPS method and the concepts of differential impact and anti-ableism. The philosophy of the CPS method is based on the notion "kids do well if they can" (Greene, 2021) and partners well with Ungar's (2017) differential impact theory (DIT) and anti-ableism. The DIT is premised on the notion that the impact of an experience and the phenomenological meaning constructed from those experiences are contingent on a variety of environmental, personal, and physiological factors (Ungar, 2017). Like the DIT, the CPS philosophy recognizes the connection and relevance of the environment and life conditions of the individual to the meaning of their behavior.

Figure 3  
Conceptual Framework



Maintaining the lens of differential impact is critical to this study as it promotes the inclusion of the unique and diverse experiences that are the essence of the parent's story. Ableism, the devaluing and limiting of an individual's capacity who is perceived to be different or to have a disability (Ontario Human Rights Tribunal, n.d.), in much the same way as DIT, is a key frame of reference to maintain throughout this research process as there is a strong possibility that ableism has intersected the diverse lived experiences of the parent participants and impacted their experiences of the relationships with their children and their teachers.

Above is a visual representation of the conceptual framework that is modelled after Bronfenbrenner's (1979) nested systems theory (see figure 3). His theory focuses on the context of the child's environment and the impact of the relational effect of the four interconnecting systems: the microsystem (family, school, health services, church, etc.), the mesosystem (the activity and interaction of the microsystem within and with the exosystem), the exosystem (social services, media, local politics, etc.), and the macrosystem (attitudes, ideologies, culture). This adaptation of Bronfenbrenner (1979) nested systems theory identifies the layers of the environmental contexts that impact the child's learning experience at school. The first nest (microsystem) directly surrounds the child and usually holds the closest relational experience to the child, represents the parent who adheres to the philosophical premise of 'children do well if they have the skills to do well' and who practices the CPS method as their daily problem-solving strategies. The next nest (the mesosystem) surrounding the nest of the parent with their beliefs and practices, provides the environmental context in which the parent and child navigate their relational experiences. Environmental contexts include the school environment with the teachers, their pedagogical practices, the policies that they are obliged to observe, and the societal expectations that they strive to uphold. The outer-most nest (the macrosystem) represents the much larger environmental context representing the cultural values, customs, and governing systems that impact the relational experiences of the other nested systems and the trajectory of their relational experiences. This outermost layer directly impacts the formation of a person's internalized attitudes and beliefs around teaching and learning, that ultimately impacts the creation of school policy and the practices within the schools.

### **The Collaborative Problem Solving Philosophy**

The philosophy that underpins the CPS method is the basic premise that behavior is based on skill and ability, not willful manipulation or poor motivation, and that children really do want to “do well,” be successful, accepted and valued in their family/school/community (Greene, 2021). If a child is not doing well and is behaving maladaptively, the understanding is that something is preventing the child from doing well and it is the parent or teacher's job to figure out what the child needs to do well, what environmental changes are required to support the child and what cognitive skills require extra support to help the child behave more adaptively. This understanding is in direct contrast to the belief that the child who is not doing well is doing so because they do not want to do well, and it is the responsibility of the parent or teacher to motivate the child to want to do well (Greene, 2021).

The cognitive skills that the CPS method target fall into five categories: language and communication skills; attention and working memory skills; emotion and self-regulation skills; cognitive flexibility skills; and social thinking skills (Greene, 2021). The experience of challenging behavior is, in fact, the experience of the inability to meet the expectations of the current situation and is referred to as unsolved problems that are a result of lagging or underdeveloped skills (Greene, 2018). The identification of the specific lagging skills for each unsolved problem is a crucial component of the CPS method as it removes the focus of attention away from the challenging behavior and places it on the unsolved problem that is causing the challenging behavior. Through the process of identifying the lagging skills of a child with challenging behaviors, those challenging behaviors then become predictable, enabling the parent to proactively address unsolved problems using the Plan B approach of collaborative problem-solving (Greene, 2018).

### **Differential Impact**

Ungar's (2017) differential impact theory (DIT) suggests that the qualities and aspects of the environment impact the epigenetic, neurological, cognitive, and development process. More specifically, the quality of the psychological, sociocultural, and economic resources provided by the environment intersecting with the individual's exposure to risk creates consequential change in the individual (Ungar, 2017). This theory de-emphasizes individual motivation as the impetus for change and bases the theory on three principles. First, the context of the environment and the high-level systems such as parenting systems (the functioning of the parent's own self-regulatory cognitive skills, emotional well-being and relational health), school systems, and societal systems create change in individuals at all levels of the human experience: physical, mental, and relational (Ungar, 2017). Creating change in the environment leads to experiential change in thoughts, feelings and behaviours independent of that individual's personal motivation for change (Ungar, 2017). An example of the need to address the larger social systems can be illustrated in the psychological stress associated with being a single parent. Addressing the systemic barriers and inequities the single parent is experiencing would reduce much of that stress associated with being a single parent and thus change the parenting experience (Ungar, 2018).

Second, the individual's level of risk exposure has the most influence on the impact that the environment has on the individual and the change that they experience (Ungar, 2017). Personality characteristics can mediate lower levels of risk, however, as levels of risk increase, the personal attributes diminish in their effectiveness. As risk increases and becomes more complex, a more comprehensive response such as interventions and access to resources is required (Ungar, 2017). Research demonstrates that children from disadvantaged backgrounds who attend high quality schools that have educators proficient in meeting their

students' social and emotional developmental needs experience the largest impact from the environmental enhancement of the school (Cadima et al., 2016).

Third, understanding why a person changes is best achieved through a thorough understanding of the environment that this individual comes from and in which they live, as the complexity of challenges reflect the complexity of systems required for a meaningful response (Ungar, 2017). A complex environment that contains multisystemic forces requires a critical assessment to better address the individual's well-being (Ungar, 2017). This is demonstrated in the experiences of children who have been exposed to bullying at school. The violence that they experienced contributed to an increase in their own aggressive behaviours that, in turn, impacts their home life, such as increasing parental stress levels (Ungar, 2018). The DIT is relevant to the impact experienced by the participant in this study in that the CPS practice will have a differential impact on the various relationships within the ecosystems that the participant experiences.

### **Anti-Ableism**

Ableism, defined as discrimination based on ability and "ableness" is an essential corporeal standard that is constructed by oppressive socio-economic political systems, stigmatizing those who do not meet this standard (Campbell, 2012). Campbell (2012) demonstrates that there are two fundamental notions to ableism: the belief in the normative, or the normal individual; and the divide and disconnection between the normative, how people are meant to be, from the abnormal and sub-human (Campbell, 2012). Ableism is woven into our social systems and subconscious, internalizing the stigma and devaluing disability (Campbell, 2008), impacting the learning experience of students with challenging behaviours and their parents' parenting experience (Biklen, 2020; Hehir, 2002).

Campbell (2008) outlines the assumptions and practices that reinforce discriminatory treatment of people with situational disabilities and how they are embedded into our social awareness as “business-as-usual.” The internalization of ableism is pervasively embedded into our collective subconscious camouflaging an unconscious and mindless state of status-quo (Campbell, 2008). This internalization of ableism is achieved through strategies of dispersal and segregation that include negative concepts of disabilities, the negation of their experience, as well as the deprivation of meaningful role models (Campbell, 2008). The negation of experience queues the individual with a situational disability for the experience of shame; the awareness of one’s limitations and struggles to meet the unachievable expectations of the abled world (Campbell, 2008). The pressure to emulate the non-disabled existence produces the compulsion to assimilate and assume identities that are additional to self (Campbell, 2008). The adoption of these subjective identities reinforces the binary acceptance of the normative standards and the stigmatization of disability deficiency (Campbell, 2008).

One of the ways ableism is represented in schools is through the assumptions and assessment that educators make about their students’ competencies (Jorgensen et al., 2007). These assumptions influence the goals and expectations of the educators as well as the goals set in the individualized education programs (IEPs) created to meet the developmental and learning needs of students that require extra support (Jorgensen et al., 2007). Jorgensen et al.'s (2007) research demonstrated that an effective way to challenge the notions of ableism and promote inclusion is through presumed competencies. Educators who received a professional development intervention that emphasized presumed competence as well as positive behaviour supports, such as implementing collaborative learning and increasing expectations for student learning, provided IEPs that reflected a positive and presumed competence to learn and achieve that was not provided at the pre-intervention assessments

(Jorgensen et al., 2007). Providing these educators with this intervention also correlated with their students spending more time within the general education classroom instead of segregated learning environments (Jorgensen et al., 2007).

Ableism impacts the parenting experience within the school environment as well through the internalization of the assumed normative standard that is expected of parents. The parenting experience of children who exhibit challenging behaviours that include physical aggression, self-harm, and suicidal ideation can be traumatizing and overwhelming for parents (Schnabel et al., 2020). In fact, Schnabel et al. (2020) discovered that the parenting experience of children with autism meets the diagnostic criteria for post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) (Schnabel et al., 2020). The psychological distress from PTSD for parents is commonly represented as major depressive disorder, panic disorder, agoraphobia, generalized anxiety disorder, social anxiety disorder, and alcohol use disorder (Schnabel et al., 2020); all of which pose challenges to the establishment of positive trusting teacher-parent relationships.

The intersection of ableism (as well as racism) with the disciplinary practices in public-school systems disproportionately target Black, Indigenous, students of colour, and students with disabilities (Haight et al., 2016). This is a particularly relevant issue for this research study as the CPS method is often adopted and practiced as a response to the unnecessary and harmful use of traditional discipline practices (Greene, 2018). The trauma sensitive practice of the CPS method also offers the benefits of co-regulation and that would support teachers in their efforts to build partnerships with the parents of students with challenging behaviours who may be living with PTSD (Perry & Ablon, 2019)

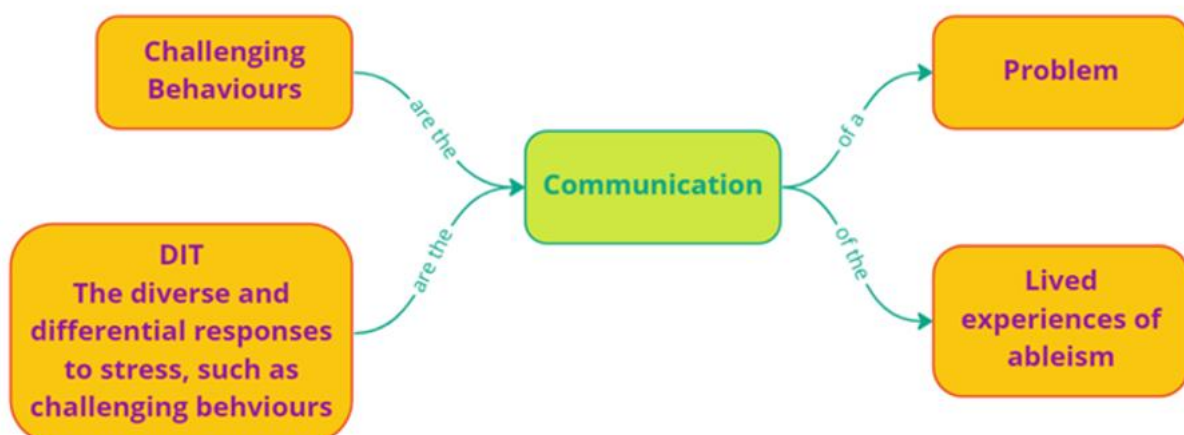
Systemic and internalized ableism impacts the experience of many parents as they support their children in their learning journey (Jorgensen et al., 2007). The CPS method activates neurocognitive skills that promote coping mechanisms such as self-regulation and

cognitive flexibility that may help mitigate the stressors that systemic and internalized ableism exacerbates (Perry & Ablon, 2019). An anti-ableist lens is critical to this study as it highlights and honours the lived experiences of internalized and systemic ableism that the participants may have experienced.

### Bringing Together the CPS, DIT & Anti-Ableism

The CPS method recognizes that behaviour is communication, and that challenging behaviours express the communication of a problem. A straightforward example would be a toddler who cries when their toy is abruptly taken away from them. The toddler's crying (the behaviour) is communicating that the toddler did not like having their toy taken away so abruptly and that they did not have the cognitive skills to express their frustration in any other manner (the problem). Both DIT and anti-ableism align well with the notion that challenging behaviours reflect the communication of experiencing a problem. DIT represents the diverse and differentiated response to stress is the communication of the experienced problem which is the lived experiences of ableism (see figure 4).

Figure 4  
Behavior is Communication



### **Methodological Framework**

This qualitative research study is a narrative cross multi-case analysis. The purpose of this study is to understand the experiences of parents practicing the CPS method and the impact that practice has on their parenting experience and their perception of the relationships with their child's school and teachers. A narrative design was chosen for its ability to explore participants' experiences and their reflections on the meanings of those experiences (Seidman, 2019). This narrative and reflective design present individual stories with a focus on understanding the lived experiences and the contributions of those experiences (Creswell, 2012). A participant's story that is created through narrative inquiry, is a means by which human beings make sense of themselves and the world around them (Seidman, 2019), offering a sense of purpose within the personal narrative (Kovach, 2009). Narrative inquiry also enables the researcher to make meaning from the "story" which holds insight into identity, culture and "self-in-relation" (Kovach, 2009). The case study design was chosen for the ability to do an in-depth exploration of the participants' experiences (Yin, 2018). Yin (2018) suggests three reasons a case study would be chosen as a research method: first, the main research question involves asking "how" or "why"; the researcher has no control over the events; and the study is of a contemporary event, as opposed to a historical event. The focus and content of this study meet Yin's (2018) criteria as this dissertation explores how and in what way the practice of the CPS method impacts the participants (not the researchers) lived and living experiences and perceptions of their child's teacher.

The phenomenological nature of this study, that explores the meaning that the parents attach to their experiences, lends well to the use of a narrative inquiry. My aim is to "get at the nature, or essence, of lived experience" of the parent participants (Anderson & Holloway-Libell, 2014). Seidman's (2019) interview method guides the semi-structured interviews exploring the past, the present, and what those experiences mean moving forward. This

process is similar to the CPS method of problem-solving; what has happened to create the problem; what impact does that have in the present and for all involved; and how can we move forward with meaning. The function of the succession of the interviews is also to cultivate a connection between the researcher and participant which contributes to the trustworthiness that is required for the disclosure of personal and meaningful experiences (Knox & Burkard, 2009). In the CPS method, there is an analogous function of the interpersonal relationship that cultivates the connection and trust that is necessary to establish a genuine experience of collaboration and a meaningful sequence of engagement.

### **Research Design**

This qualitative case study employs a narrative inquiry to establish the case profiles. Each case profile consisted of parent's stories that were collected through semi-structured interviews. The interviews were face-to-face online due to the local health regulations and restrictions due to the current COVID-19 pandemic. Inclusion criteria for participation in this study include being a parent or primary caregiver of a school age child and obtaining a familiar and comfortable understanding of the method and using the method to problem-solve the daily challenges that parents and families face. The participant could have learned the CPS method through one of the programs offered through two of the local children's mental health centres, one centre dedicated to children up to twelve years of age and the other centre to youth and adolescence, or they could have learned through their own self-learning and practice of the method via the available literature and online resources. Three to five participants were sought through recruitment from the support of the two local children's mental health centres who provide CPS training and parent/caregiver practitioner support in the region, and through on-line social media family support groups for parents of children with special needs and challenging behaviours.

The semi-structured interviews adopted an adaption of Seidman's (2019) interview method which is phenomenologically based and is intended to reconstruct the participants' experiences (Seidman, 2019). Seidman's (2019) method typically involves three separate interviews, but for the purposes of this study the three interviews were condensed into two separate interviews combining the first and the second into one. The interviews were spaced three to four days apart allowing the participant to reflect on the previous interview and the questions that were asked (see Appendix B) while still maintaining the important relational connection with the interviewer (Seidman, 2019). The first half of the first interview is focused on the history and the experiences that led the participant to practise the CPS method (Seidman, 2019). The participant was asked to reflect on their experiences leading up to the decision to pursue the practice of the CPS method. The second half of the first interview was focused on the current lived experiences as a practitioner of the CPS method and were asked to reconstruct details of their relationships with their child's school teacher. The second interview focused on the reflection on the meaning of the participant's experiences and sought to capture "the intellectual and emotional connections" (Seidman, 2019, p.18) of their practice of the CPS method and their experiences as a parent and their relationships with their child's school teachers.

Managing the participants' stories by ensuring the security of participants' information and consent forms, interview recordings, and transcript files are critical measures (Seidman, 2019). The cross case analysis did not commence until all three interviews and a satisfactory member-check for each participant and their story were complete; a necessary step to avoid projecting or imposing meaning from one interview on to the next (Seidman, 2019). Audio recording was also a necessary step to ensure the most accurate representation of the participants' consciousness that is reflected in their choice of words (Seidman, 2019). Transcripts were stored on the researcher's laptop that is password protected. Each interview

was approximately one hour long, audio-recorded and transcribed by the researcher; a necessary process that promotes a thorough knowledge and appreciation for the interview (Seidman, 2019). To ensure the privacy of the participants, pseudonyms were used to replace their names and the names of their children that they identified. After the transcription was completed, the process of reducing the transcript to create the profiles followed a process of winnowing (Seidman, 2019). Profiles and themes were created by the marking and labelling of passages from the interviews that have been identified as important. These passages are presented in the words of the participants and in the first person. This process preserves the contextual relevance of the passage to safeguard the research from the misuse of the participants' experiences (Seidman, 2019). It is through this process of judgement of what is significant in the transcript that the researcher begins to analyse and make meaning of the content (Seidman, 2019).

The analysis process begins with establishing themes. This process was ongoing throughout the weeks that the participants' stories (data) were being collected. The simultaneous collection and analysis of data allows for rudimentary theme identification and clarity in both the development of analytic questions and the flexibility to make responsive decisions for the forward momentum of data collection and analysis (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Data analysis is a dynamic process that begins with identification of themes; as the creation of each theme begins to describe the data, they also begin to interpret the data (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Themes are crafted by identifying and examining thematic connections, interpreting the connections, and reflecting both on the "connective threads" of the participants and the connections to the pre-existing literature, and on the personal experience (Seidman, 2019). From here, the researcher completed a cross-case analysis (each profile represented as each individual case), contrasting, and comparing the experiences represented in the profiles. The interpretation includes reflections on the learning experience

of the researcher; identifying the connective threads the researcher can make; identifying the meaning behind these connective threads; identifying new understandings; as well as connecting the interviews to the literature (Seidman, 2019). Through the process of comparing and contrasting the stories, a new and possibly clearer perspective was gained of both processes and outcomes which lead to a deeper understanding of their experiences (Creswell, 2012)

### **Trustworthiness**

As I endeavour to produce research that is reliable, accurate and consistent, I must ensure that I present research that depicts the essence and basic structure of experience as well as research that adheres to a strict validation process (Creswell, 2012; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). This phenomenological study is of the lived experience, experiences that are often intense and meaningful, and that can be similarly experienced by me, the researcher. To prevent the beliefs and biases of my own experiences interfering with my ability to appreciate and recognize the elements or structure of the participants' experience, I set aside or bracketed my beliefs and assumptions (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016, p.26). The necessity of bracketing became possible through critical self-reflection and acknowledging my own biases, prejudices, and viewpoints (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).

The validation process is also an important step in providing credible research. These processes include the research strategies of member checking, the mindful inclusion of as much relevant detail from the transcripts as possible, and stating researcher positionality (Creswell, 2012). While ensuring that I protected the privacy of participants using pseudonyms and eliminating any detail that might reveal identification, I strived to best share their voices and stories by inviting each participant to review the transcript of their interview for the member checking process. This process not only enables the participants to evaluate

the accuracy of the transcript, but it also provides the reader with the opportunity to evaluate the validation process of my interpretations. To further clarify my interpretation and bias, I provided a statement of positionality. The intent of the positionality statement is to identify and situate my biases, values and beliefs within the research design (Holmes, 2020). By doing so, I am acknowledging and recognizing that I am intrinsically a member of the social environment which I am researching and that this membership can affect all levels of the research process).

### **The Participants and Their Stories**

Guided by the interviews and transcripts, I created profiles for each participant by marking and labelling the passages that were identified as important and significant to the contextual relevance of the participants' experiences (Seidman, 2019). The profiles are presented in two sections with the sub-titles Before Discovering the CPS method, and After Discovering the CPS Method. The voices of the participants are imperative so the passages chosen are presented in the first person (Seidman, 2019).

### **A Time to Heal, Evelyn's Story**

*Before Discovering the CPS Method:* "It all started two years ago. He was in grade four. He was nine." Evelyn's youngest son, who is adopted, was diagnosed with attention deficit and hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) at age seven, and although she and her husband "knew he was different," he had relatively few behavioural challenges. That is, until he reached grade four. Evelyn had heard the rumours that her son's grade four teacher was "known not to be an easy teacher." However, she knew her son was quite shy with adults, "He's not someone who just disturbs the group; he's not someone who talks back; he's just a shy person who keeps to himself, who is social with his friends." She was certain that he would be fine; "Well, that was a little naive on my part." Two weeks into the start of school,

Evelyn learned that her son was sent to sit in the hallway because he was playing with his fingers and not listening. She explained to the teacher that “this is not appropriate; this is a child who has difficulties with attention and he needs to move. This is a tip, this is a sign that he needs a break, like a movement break, not being put sitting in the hallway and shamed that way.”

One morning, as she was dropping her son off at school and looking forward to arriving at her new job - she had just started working as a nurse with HIV/AIDS and hepatitis patients - her son refused to get out of the car. “And I said, oh, tell me you're joking because he loved school. He loved school! He always wanted to go. Never once did he tell me he didn't want to go to school.” She remembered that he had an oral presentation that day and wondered if that was the problem, but after waiting for about 45 minutes and never having seen him behave like this before, Evelyn felt that something was not right and took him home. He spent the whole day outside, and when asked, her son simply replied that he just needed to be outside. Her son refused to tell her what happened at school for him to react like this and her concerns continued to grow as he then repeated this uncharacteristic refusal to go to school every Monday.

Evelyn definitely “knew things were not going right with the teacher.” She soon noticed rather harsh comments on her son’s tests, such as “you need to listen more;” “you need to concentrate;” and “you need to do better.” Evelyn knew that these comments were not appropriate for children, especially for a child with ADHD. She discovered that this teacher was making other pedagogical decisions that raised red flags, increasing her concern. Her son was being held back from recess to give him more time to complete work or to finish examinations. She also learned that her son’s class was being segregated into two groups: a group of autonomous children; and a group of non-autonomous children. Autonomous children were allowed to sit two-by-two, but the non-autonomous children had to sit alone.

Evelyn was really bothered by this.

Monday morning drop off continued to be a challenge for Evelyn and her son. She recalls one Monday morning she brought her son into the school when he began crying and unable to console himself. The principal intervened and informed her son that she was going to call one of his friends to meet him and walk him back to class. He did not want to do that as he was still overcome with tears. The principal insisted that if he did not accept the offer of a friend to walk with him that he would have to walk by himself. Reluctantly, Evelyn's son walked to class on his own, still crying and upset. Later that day, Evelyn learned that the teacher, with the help of a school board social worker, staged a group intervention with his class for her son. "I said, group intervention! She said yeah, we brought all the kids, and a social worker came in and talked about how he had to talk about his feelings, so the group could be supporting him." She knew her son was uncomfortable about sharing his feelings and was worried about the traumatic impact of being coerced into doing just that, not in front of just one person but in front of his whole class.

Just before Christmas, Evelyn and her son experienced one of the last attempted drop-offs that brought her to tears. Once again, her son was refusing to leave the car. Evelyn went into the school to inform them that her son was unable to attend school that day, but this time it was suggested to her that they try with the help of the school's social worker. She thought to herself, not only might it be possible for the social worker to help bring him in, but perhaps she would be able to provide tips as to how to help bring him in on other rough mornings. To Evelyn's surprise, her first engagement with the social worker was awkward; "And then she came out the door, she didn't talk to me. I didn't know her; she didn't know me. She didn't talk to me. She refused to talk to me. She said she was just gonna bring him in." So, the social worker sat in the car with her son. Evelyn saw that they began having a physical interaction where the social worker was trying to force his boots on him. This lasted for about 10 to 15

minutes. Quite distraught, Evelyn tried to explain how she should not be doing this with her son, but the social worker insisted that this was the only way. The social worker eventually realised that her strategy was not effective and recommended that she, with the help of Evelyn and her husband physically take him into the school directing Evelyn to pull the car up to the building as close as possible. This did not make sense to Evelyn, and at this point she was completely distraught, in tears and unable to think clearly, so she started the car. It was then that her son ran away.

He was found close by hiding in the nearby woods safe and sound. Remembering this experience often brings Evelyn to tears. “Like, to me, that was so not respectful, but I felt so vulnerable that I was going along with that, and it was awful.” That whole experience went against everything that Evelyn was taught about how one cares for and treats others, especially a person who is vulnerable; “I would take them where they're at and I would ask them what I can do to help you?”

In January, her son attempted to return to school, but the stress was too much. Evelyn knew that her son needed time for himself, so her family made the decision for him to stay home for the rest of the school year. Initially, she encouraged him to continue with school work, but even that was too much for him. “This is like me putting someone on sick leave and saying, ‘but take your computer home and keep working at home’.” Instead, she and her son went skiing during the day and other fun activities. “He got better and slowly we were able to integrate, not into the classroom, but the school, like the after-school program, but he was never able to go back to school.”

“He’s still not in school now, two years later. And at some point, someone sent me the link for the Bright and Quirky conference that they have every year in the fall. Dr. Ross Greene was one of the presenters and then he presented on the CPS model, and you know, ‘children do well if they can’ resonate so much with me.” This philosophy resonated with the

way she wanted to raise her children; “Now we have something that validates and that can support the way we want to parent, right? We had evidence-based proof that the way we wanted to parent was effective and was the way to go.”

*After Discovering the CPS Method:* Evelyn found a CPS provider available in Montreal. This provider worked at Dr. Ross Greene’s organisation, Lives in the Balance, and was able to provide coaching support as Evelyn and her family learned how to use the method. “So, we did every two weeks, like training CPS coaching, to make us like professionals using this and that totally changed the way we approached this situation.”

“So, this is how we found the CPS model and it’s been very challenging to use it because our son does not want to talk about it.” Evelyn describes her practice of the method as “using the Plan B and the empathy step as little pieces here and there and everywhere, over months in order to understand him and understand what bothers him and how we can work.” Not being able to have a full Plan B experience has been challenging, but Evelyn has had ample experiences where she has been able to practice the empathy step of communicating to her son her feelings of empathy for him as he navigates through his daily challenges. The challenges she faces when attempting to execute a successful Plan B experience with her son demonstrates to her the reality that “CPS or Plan B doesn’t solve mental health problems.”

Even though she feels that they have a long way to go, progress has been made over the last couple of years. Evelyn has found that she often relies on Plan C (lowering expectations placed on her son), and that it has helped restore her son’s trust in her. The winters are typically hard on her son, he spends most of his day on his electronics and does not want to interact. However, now her son is less defensive about wanting to be alone. Now he communicates with “Mummy, could I please be alone? I prefer being by myself” now, instead of “I hate you and leave me alone, I want another family.”

“We wouldn’t be the poster child for CPS,” Evelyn reflects on the progress her family has made with learning the method. As she stated, the CPS method does not solve existing mental health problems, but she does see that her son feels safe with them and that he is happy at home, “I think we're not escalating the situation and we're in a calm place because we're using CPS.” Evelyn understands that her son is in a depressive state, being diagnosed with depression and anxiety there will be times when her son would rather not play with his friends. Her husband supports the practice of the method, he participated in the coaching sessions and has read Dr. Greene’s book. However, he takes a passive role, leaving Evelyn to guide him and the family through the method.

Evelyn’s older son participated in the learning experience as well and completed the “homework” assignments that the CPS provider assigned during the coaching sessions. Her older son was “an easy kind of 16 year old.” Problem-solving was not difficult for him. However, he is still a teenager and sometimes, out of frustration, he would make the comment that they are not hard enough on his little brother.

Evelyn's practice of the CPS method began to permeate into other areas of her relational experience. She acknowledges that the pandemic has been affecting people’s mental health and that some people are struggling more than others. She also found herself using the CPS method at work with her colleagues, “I found myself using it at work with my colleagues, and this is something that's so much more natural because we tend to act this way with adults and colleagues.” She also found herself using the method with herself. When preparing the dinner table and expecting all family member to sit together to eat, she realised that the expectation of where her son eats has more to do with her expectations of living up to societal standards rather than respecting her son’s wishes of where he feels more comfortable eating. Removing unnecessary expectation has helped her realize that listening and trusting her child is probably a good place to start when building a relationship with him.

Evelyn's experience of the CPS method when engaging with her son's teacher and school involved the support of a Psychoeducator.<sup>1</sup> Preparing for the possibility of her son's return to school, she met with the new grade five teacher and the principal (the same principal as the previous troublesome year). The Psychoeducator introduced the CPS method and the philosophy behind the method to them. "So, she says we'll have to go slow with them, she says, 'I don't like to put in their face everything they're doing wrong. I just want to go slow and try to make them understand that if someone could do well, they would do well.'" Evelyn believed that the Psychoeducator's explanation helped the teacher and Principal better understand her son. She noticed that the new teacher seemed to respond well to the CPS philosophy; however, she was not as sure about the principal's reaction. Admittedly, Evelyn was still triggered by the trauma her son endured due to the decisions this Principal made last year. "I had had so much bad experience with her that I just can't even bring myself to think, 'oh, she had good intentions', she did so much damage."

During the summer before the school year began, the new teacher made a few visits to the family home to help prepare for her son's return to school and perhaps to start developing a friendly and trusting relationship with him. However, despite these efforts, interactions between the new teacher and Evelyn's son were limited due to her son's anxieties of interacting with adults. Attempts to return to school were made, but proved too stressful for Evelyn's son, so for now, he has returned to learning and healing at home.

### **My Daughter's Voice, Leah's Story**

*Before Discovering the CPS Method:* "It was a long road, I guess, but this one here had us on our toes right from birth." The one Leah is talking about is Lilith, her oldest

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<sup>1</sup> Evelyn is a Quebec resident and their public school system includes the support a Psychoeducator who provides evaluation, counselling, proactive support to students who demonstrate psychosocial adjustment difficulties and to promote optimal development, independence, and problem-solving skills.

daughter. By the time Lilith was four, Leah and her husband had tried many things to best support her daughter's development and was now working with a child psychologist. Lilith was highly verbal and was having full conversations by 18 months, "And when she needed to process something, she really needed to process stuff out with me and it could be hours." Leah never imagined that she would be engaging in such deep conversations with a toddler, sometimes for up to a few hours at a time. She felt proud that her daughter, at such a young age, was looking to her for help with processing her emotions and ideas, "and I think that moment just seeing her as a person, and it was almost like I was talking to another adult, and she was like two years old and I'm just like this is the way that we're gonna go forward." Although Leah knew that this was the way she wanted to parent, she also knew these intense engagements were unsustainable.

Leah and her family lived fairly isolated in a Franco-Ontarian community and her hands were full. While navigating the complexities of raising Lilith, Leah was also pregnant and had another child a couple of years younger than Lilith. Leah and her husband endeavoured to practise the exercises that the child psychologist prescribed, "It was sort of CPS aligned in the sense that it encouraged more connection and more looking at a child's needs rather than their behaviours. But, you know, there's pieces still missing." She was not alone with her dissatisfaction; her husband had similar feelings. "My husband really was not on board with it at all." In addition to their overall discontent of the professional support they were receiving, Leah's husband's parenting experience included the balancing of his traditional Asian upbringing as it intersected with Western ideology and parenting practices. This awareness helped Leah understand some of the challenges he was facing in adopting the alternative problem-solving practices of the CPS method, and the similar practices that the psychologist was prescribing.

*After Discovering the CPS Method:* Then one day, “during one of my late night Google searches, I came upon Ross Green;” Leah discovered the CPS method. While reading about the method, she realised that this method might be able to truly help her better understand and support Lilith, “All these challenging behaviours we're dealing with are not just because we're terrible parents or because we're not trying hard enough or because there's something wrong with the kid.” Her parenting knowledge that was handed down from her parents was authoritative and was not in line with what she wanted to be doing. It seemed to Leah that the CPS method did offer her what she was looking for.

She admits that it is not easy, “I found it really hard to implement in real life. And I heard from other people since who have also found that to be true.” Leah persisted practising the method and a couple of years later she found someone, her current mentor, who was able to support her in bringing together the collaborative problem-solving process with the actual parent experience. Learning the CPS method has helped Leah to be less rigid, especially regarding schedules, “So from the time that they wake up is what they set to the time they go to bed at night is pretty much what they set as well, and it's not so much of like, I'm just following their lead, it's like everybody has come to this agreement.” Leah is the first to admit that her practice of the method is not perfect, but it has provided her family members a system that works best for them. “And I mean we're still not perfect, we're still figuring it out, and we still do, you know, have to fix stuff, tweak stuff, talk about it, but it's not like it's my decision and they have to follow it.”

One of the daily challenges that Leah had struggled with is meal time. Providing nourishing meals for her children requires a certain amount of flexibility and balance. “I don't set a menu anymore for meals because, for me right now, I understand that their food preferences are very challenging, they have a lot of sensory challenges.” Her two youngest children require a snack as soon as they wake. The timing of their breakfast is imperative to

stave off potential meltdowns. Whereas Lilith is not interested in eating when she wakes. The varying and changing food preferences does present challenges for Leah and has forced her to modify her understanding and expectations around food. “They know that I’m not pushing food on them because they have to. I have brought it to them that I’m concerned about what you’re eating; these are my concerns what could we do to solve this? Rather than you have to eat these certain foods at this time, because I said so, which would have totally been the way that I was raised and how we started raising our kids.” This is truly a learning experience as she has struggled with balance in her collaborative parenting style, “I went too far, the other way of just letting them eat whatever they wanted whenever they wanted, and that’s also not sustainable. So, it’s pulling it back and forth, figuring out what works for the whole family.”

When Leah and her family moved to the city, Lilith began communicating to her that she wanted to attend a school. This seriously conflicted with Leah’s beliefs and understanding of the school systems. “And I’m like everybody else is talking about how school is terrible, and how ‘don’t put your kids in school’ and ‘why would kids want to go to school?’ and, ‘if they could experience it, they’re not gonna like it’.” Leah, determined to continue educating her children through home-schooling, began attending a home-school meet-up. It was during one of the first meetups where she met an educator with whom she confided that her daughter was requesting to go to school. “My daughter is telling me she wants to go to school and I’m like, once again that feeling I’m talking to an autonomous person who is telling me their beliefs. Yet I’m trying to reconcile that with my adult knowledge of our schooling system and my other knowledge of my child as they are, and their behaviours.” The educator advised Leah to send her to school. “She’s like, let her go, and I should have listened to her then, I didn’t.”

“So, we made it happen this year and we had to do a lot of advocacies and we had to do a lot of research to find the right school for her and it ended up being right near our house,

which is fabulous.” When they first began looking for a school, not all schools worked out. The first school that they investigated was an alternative school, “It seemed on the surface to follow very much the principles that we were following.” The school followed principles of child-led learning, emphasising the child’s interests and less of a prescribed program. However, that was not Leah’s take away from her conversations with the school’s principal. “She was convincing us, or trying to convince us, that Lilith wouldn't be able to adapt to the school environment. Because she had been unschooled her whole life and it would be just too hard for her to get used to sitting in a classroom and having to raise her hand and having to ask to go to the bathroom.” Leah was really surprised and shocked. She did not expect that kind of response to wanting to try something different, wanting to build new skills.

Leah started to connect with the families in their neighbourhood and discovered that the school closest to their home was their best option. The school was a Catholic school and initially this concerned Leah. Christianity was not their faith, and it was not important to her family. Leah brought her concerns to the school and their response resonated with Leah. “The way that they have turned it around is that they believe in all of us essentially being on the same team, all of us being a human group of people. And some of us believe different things but we're all doing this for the greater good of humans and they're willing to let everybody be who they are, and believe what they want, and at the same time, teach them the skills to be able to interact with people who believe other things.” Leah was amazed by this response, interacting with people who are different than you was important to Leah and her family.

Leah acknowledges that if this process of starting school would have begun before the pandemic had hit, it probably would have been easier. “They wouldn't let us into schools anywhere. We couldn't meet any of the teachers or any of the principals or any of the resource teachers, anybody in-person.” Connection for Lilith is important and more in-person contact would have made things easier for her getting started. Leah and her husband also

experienced their own disconnect, not having a sense of what their daughter is doing or who the people are that she is with. “It feels really like this huge disconnect for us as parents to know, like what is actually happening with her so that we can translate that into words to the schools to help with what she needs.” Relying on Lilith as an inside source for information had proven to be unreliable; navigating through her school experience seemed to be more than enough for Lilith to manage and placing any more expectations on her only increased her frustration. These preteen years are important years for learning how to fit in, and Leah knows that her social experience at school is important to Lilith.

Communication between the school and Lilith's family has been minimal. Lilith's teacher has a busy class with 12 of her students having an individualised education plan (IEP), one of which being Lilith. The teacher has communicated to Leah that Lilith is a great student who does not cause any problems. Leah finds this assessment troubling because she is well aware that compliant behaviour does not necessarily reflect that her developmental needs are being met nor that her abilities are being recognised. To compound Leah's insecurities about her decision to support Lilith attending school, within the first month of classes Lilith's class already experienced a change of teachers. Now, Leah and her daughter were forced to adjust to the new routines and expectations of this new teacher. Leah, not wanting to come off as “that parent,” is respecting the teacher's wishes to communicate through her daughter's planner or through email; despite preferring face-to-face meetings with Lilith's involvement to promote that sense of connection she knows her daughter is missing, and to ensure her daughter has a voice at the table. As a practitioner of the CPS method, collaborating with Lilith as to what preferred supports are offered in her IEP is important to Leah. “We read it over with Lilith and we went through it and wrote Lilith's comments, and Lilith's goals and then sent that back. But that did not come across in written word, right? Like, that this is Lilith's goals, this is not our goals. This is us supporting Lilith

and so when we bring concerns to the school, it sounds like we're complaining that the school's not doing their job, whereas it's, 'no Lilith is telling us, these are her experiences, and this is not meeting her goals.'”

Leah is persistent with her practice of the CPS method. It has not been an easy road for her, but Leah and her family are experiencing positive outcomes from her collaborative guidance. She recounts how the practice of the CPS method has impacted her husband's relationships with their children, “his relationship with the kids is definitely grown so much since we really started working through CPS.” She describes an experience that portrays how her husband gently takes over a challenging parenting situation giving Leah a needed break. “Just the other day, Lilith was having a really really tough day and I was not handling it properly, and normally I'm the person who's like the calm one, the one that resolves it all, the one that, you know, sees below the behaviour and everything else. And he basically kicked me out and sat with Lilith and they figured out what was going on and made this plan to read together for half an hour three times a week if they are not getting enough connection time. And so yeah, this family is just very blessed by the whole concept.”

### **A Parenting Toolbox, Heather's Story**

***Before Discovering the CPS Method:*** Heather's 16 year old son has complex mental health issues that include borderline personality disorder, gender dysphoria, major depression, and anxiety. In addition to this complex diagnosis, “My son's go-to coping mechanisms are suicidal ideation and self-harm.” Heather and her son have had multiple visits to the children's hospital and the in-patient unit and emergency room. Understanding her son and his behaviour was important to Heather. Through the children's hospital, she took the cognitive behavioural therapy (CBT) and the dialectical behavioural therapy (DBT) courses offered to parents.

Parenting a child with complex needs is never easy and Heather was beginning to understand that her expectations of compliance and conformity from her son were unreasonable. Expectations such as cleaning his room, with no questions asked was not realistic. “It was just a matter of saying ‘you need to clean your room,’ not, ‘why aren't you able to clean your room?’” Reflecting back, swim class was another unreasonable expectation that Heather had placed on her son. “You know, growing up he was developing a fear of being in the water and taking swimming classes. So, we didn't try to sit down with him as a small child to try to understand why. What were his issues? We just saw that he was having them and that he needed to still go to these swimming lessons.”

By the time her son was entering grade seven, she knew he needed additional classroom support, so she arranged for him to have an educational assessment. The assessment reported confirmed that her son suffered from both depression and anxiety, and she was sure the report would provide enough evidence for that support. It would be another three years before her son received a formal individualised education plan (IEP). “I had handed them the educational assessment, saying that he had major depression and anxiety, and then they didn't give him one.”

*After Discovering the CPS Method:* Heather was involved with a local parent support group, and it was through this group that she learned of a local mental health centre for adolescent children and young adults. This centre practised the CPS method and taught it to the parents of the children they counselled, including Heather. It was around this time that her son had just completed a 42 day in-patient care visit at the children's hospital and as he was transitioning back home, he was often, in a state of dysregulation. During this period, Heather took some time off work to practice some much needed self-care and to practice the various parenting strategies she was learning. It was then that she noticed a shift in her parenting practices. “I think alongside with the CPS and the Smart Recovery for Parents and Family

and Friends was starting to help me pivot my parenting style.” Although Heather was recognising how her parenting style was evolving, she did not experience a significant change in her son’s behaviour that she could attribute to having learned the CPS method. When attempting to implement the CPS method, guiding her son through the sequence of engagement was almost impossible. “He’s a super feeler and a real avoider of feelings so I couldn’t get into depth with the empathy stage or drilling or anything like that with him.” Despite this challenge, Heather sees the potential benefits of the CPS method and continues to apply the principles of the method whenever possible. However, during his more intense episodes she also feels that she needs additional support beyond the CPS method. “So, it has a lot of limitations in that sense that it was ineffective for us at that time.”

Knowing that her son is very reluctant to share his feelings and will often close off with the mention of emotions or his feelings, she keeps her cheat sheet<sup>2</sup> handy (cue cards that outline the steps of the CPS method and helpful tips to get started). She does her best to get him to express his concerns when there is a problem so that she can actively empathise with him. This has been easier to do recently as he is more regulated these days. “I think his system is now calmed down a little bit more where I can tap into a bit more but he’s still in, like the fight or flight mode.” Compared to last spring, Heather’s son has been better able to express to his mother his concerns when she engages the collaborative problem-solving process with him these days, “and I continue trying to encourage him to pull that information from him.”

For the most part, Heather's engagement with her son’s school and his teacher was positive. Her son does not display many behavioural issues at school, “So if you didn't know, other than that he was an introvert, you wouldn't know that he had many mental health issues.

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<sup>2</sup> Both local children’s mental health center’s provide parents learning aids to support their CPS practice. Cheat is one of those learning aids.

So, there wasn't that interaction where they had to manage, necessarily, his behaviour at school." Although she perceived that the teachers' intentions were to find the best way to deliver the courses to her son, she knew that there were limited resources available to them. Therefore, most meetings typically would jump right into problem-solving without investigating individuals' preferences or perspectives. Heather's son's participation in the parent-teacher meetings was also limited and he generally responded with compliancy. "We get his consent and agreement but there's not really [like] a collaboration of coming together of what, how he wants to try to meet his school goals, which is basically attending and trying to pass." They would present the programs and supports that were available, and whatever else was necessary to move forward. Heather felt that there was a limited collaboration, at least with her, "They're not gonna necessarily dismiss what I say. There are limited options when working with the school because there's only certain things that you can do with them, but in terms of coming up with solutions, yeah, it's collaborative because it's with everybody, we try to, we've had lots of care conference meetings and to talk about what, what's best for my son."

Heather was doing her best to help his teachers be aware of his challenges so that they could provide support to him and promote a sense of belonging, a place where he could feel that they are there for him. Most of her son's teachers were understanding and did their best to accommodate him, even though they had not yet received his formal IEP. Heather knew that her son needed the IEP and she did her best to advocate for one. "I had already set everything up; I had handed them the educational assessment, saying that he had major depression and anxiety, and then they didn't give them one." By grade nine, her son had a few red flag incidents that were quite concerning; there had been reports from the school that her son was engaging in risky behaviours such as smoking cigarettes, riding his bike recklessly in traffic, and creating suicide pacts. The teachers and staff were always supportive, and quite

willing to implement an informal IEP. However, there was one teacher, his history teacher, who refused to recognise it and refused to provide any accommodations, persistently placing unrealistic expectations that her son was unable to meet. At the same time, he was being admitted to the children's hospital. The amount of homework this teacher was assigning became overwhelming. The experience of homework piling up and the inability to meet his teachers' expectations eventually turned the thought of homework into a trigger. "It was like the first day almost, where at school he came home and he had like four or five chapters to read and assignments to do, and it was crazy, and it was just too much for him. For someone who doesn't have that much resilience yet, right?" Despite Heather's efforts to help his history teacher to better understand her son, his teacher seemed inflexible to accommodate him without a formal IEP. Heather was really confused by this. She was working well with the vice principals and all the other teachers were on board as well. It did not make sense to her that this teacher would not consider that her son required accommodations for an effective learning experience.

Heather and her family were receiving intensive family support. She regarded her practice of the CPS method as one of the tools in her parenting toolbox. With the collection of parenting strategies that she was learning and practicing, Heather was developing her parenting and problem-solving skills to be able to customize her response to her son's complex needs. Heather and her son continued to work on implementing the different strategies, to address his lagging needs and help him develop more adaptive coping mechanisms, as opposed to engaging in risky behaviours.

Just recently, he and his mother did experience the full sequence of engagement and are awaiting the outcome of their first collaborative solution. The problem they are working on is her son's wish to engage in his coping mechanism of self-harm. "He wanted to keep his sharps in his room. And we had taken it away at one point because he had, he was starting to

blur the lines between suicide and self-harm. So, we're getting very concerned about his safety and he indicated one day while he was at school to his caseworker that he needed to have these blades back or else he was going to do something really impulsive and drastic because he felt that he wasn't willing to part with his blades." Heather's son is very attached to his blades, and, at that time, it was clear that he felt that he was unable to function without them and that he has been unable to find a safer coping mechanism to deal with his intense emotions. "So, I picked him up from school because he was saying he was really going to hurt himself." A peace conference was arranged between Heather, her son, the school, the school social worker, and their psychiatrist from a mental health centre that Heather and her family are working with. Heather's son's concerns were listened to, and a compromise was made; her son would keep his blades, but provide daily evidence that they are kept clean, a necessary preventative measure against infection. "So, we came to an agreement, both not meeting each other's needs 100%." Heather and her husband were not at all comfortable with this compromise and are very uneasy about the outcomes of this proposed solution. At the same time, she knew that it was imperative to find a middle ground. "So that was yeah, that was one of the hardest things I had to do. I didn't really have many things, but that was one of the hardest ones."

When faced with a problem, Heather and her son continue to work their way through the CPS method. The problems they tackle may not be as intense as the one just shared, but they are still meaningful, nonetheless. For example, as she and her son recently prepared for a temporary stay at a live-in treatment centre. Her son was requesting to remain under the care of the private therapist with whom he had developed a trusting relationship instead of switching to the in-house clinician. Heather did her best to follow the sequence of engagement beginning with understanding her son's concerns, even writing them down in his presence. However, even though she completed the second step of sharing her concerns with

her son, she was unable to follow through with the final collaborative step. Heather panicked with the knowledge that time was running out to organise all her son's supports and resources. Then learning that the in-house clinician would have limitations on how they could provide intervention on meeting the treatment goals for her son should they remain with the private therapist, she came to the decision that her son would switch from their private therapist to the in-house clinician. Her son was quite upset with her unilateral decision and actions.

Heather takes every opportunity to practise the CPS method with her son. Over these last few weeks, those opportunities have been scarce as he has not been very receptive. "He's too much in the hyper state, always in fight or flight. When we mention emotions, forget it, he's gone, he is done, he wants to avoid. So that's where the challenges are". One thing Heather has noticed is that her son is more willing to sit through the process if there is something that he needs or feels that he wants, which is a positive step towards the appreciation of the CPS principles and method including the benefits of effective problem-solving.

### **My Son: The Self-Advocate, Christina's Story**

*Before Discovering the CPS Method:* Ben was diagnosed with Autism Spectrum Disorder in Junior Kindergarten. He was an early talker, and he was insatiably inquisitive. His play was mostly solitary unless I or any other adult had time to engage with him. If he were playing with a toy, he was trying to figure out how it worked or how he could take it apart.

From kindergarten until grade four, there were only mild challenges with his behaviour in school. He was never aggressive, just the opposite. He wanted to be friends with everyone, even with those who did not like him; and if you did not like him, he never gave up on you; he would take every opportunity to give a friendship with you another try. He was

nice to everyone, sometimes too nice. He didn't always recognize that other children valued their personal space. Sometimes we would get a complaint from the parents of the child that Ben was most drawn to. By grade four, he was beginning to figure out these social norms, but his unrelenting pursuit of friendship, often with those who didn't want to be friends with him, had made him a target for being bullied. His teachers were doing their best to look out for him.

Problems really began in grade five, at his new school. It was a small school and he had not benefited from having developed any relationships with anyone. He was bullied relentlessly. His teachers did not see it, and in some cases may have made it worse. The bullying that he experienced was mainly teasing and doing things they knew bothered him, such as poking him as they walked by, chewing their gum loudly around him (he has sensitivities around sound, the sound of gum being chewed is often a trigger for him). If Ben tried to report this harassment to the teachers, they would often dismiss him or suggest that he was somehow responsible for their treatment of him by creating uncomfortable situation and provoking his peers. Eventually he gave up reporting the bullying incidences as he claimed it just made the bullying worse. Closer to the end of grade five, Ben was getting so deeply frustrated by the inaction by his teachers that, at one point, he fell into a meltdown and threw a chair at a window. He was given a one day suspension for that. Later, there was another incident when he was fed up with the dismissive attitude of his teacher that he refused to comply with a request that she made of him resulting in her shoving his desk away from him. Ben reported that the desk caught on his knee which hurt him. Subsequently he became quite frightened of her, and she became a trigger for him. I learned that this teacher denied doing anything but did admit to needing a break from that incident and having to leave the classroom.

Most days he came home unhappy with stories of classmates or teachers treating him unfairly. Our attempts to help his teachers understand why Ben was having difficulties was always futile. They just would not believe that he was being bullied. They would explain away any complaints that he made as a misunderstanding or simply deny that anything had happened. He would often ask to stay home, and I often obliged. Sending him to a place where he did not feel safe was breaking my heart, it felt like torture. I was constantly worried about him. Although I had an agreement with the school that he would be allowed to call me or his father anytime he wanted, he reported to me that a couple of times he was denied that allowance, so I gave him a working cell phone for him to keep in his pocket in case of an emergency. I knew that was against the rules, but I really wanted him to have some kind of assurance that he had access to his parents. Every maternal instinct in me told me that he should not be going there.

Ben also became totally engulfed by a video gaming habit. That was all he could do. This did not worry me too much because I knew this was his primary strategy to deal with the stress and trauma that he was experiencing at school. He also seemed to be making friendship connections with other kids online. Sometimes I would hear him giggling, and the conversations (I would sometimes listen in on) were often interesting. Gaming had become one of his primary coping mechanisms, and it still is. Even with this reliable coping mechanism, by the end of the grade five school year, he was having meltdowns almost every night. In his dysregulated state he would go into graphic detail of how painful it was to go to school. The breaking point for me was when he started to threaten me with suicide and he would tell me, in detail, how he would do it. I did not know how to deal with this or how to parent him through this. Any traditional parenting made him worse. Being “firm” with him was not only futile, but it was also destructive, he would get even more reactive and angry. At the height of his stress, he became very sensitive to any kind of criticism and he would easily

meltdown. At that point, all I could do was listen to him, and wait till he calmed down. He was always very apologetic and very remorseful. We made appointments with our family doctor, who put us in connection with the Children's Hospital. Ben was denied psychiatric support because his behaviour was not extreme enough for their services. I ended up reaching out to one of my professors who recommended a local children's mental health centre.

*After Discovering the CPS Method:* This centre introduced me to the CPS method. I watched the video and I read Dr. Greene's book, and everything changed for me. The lightbulb went off. The philosophy of "kids do well if they can" completely resonated with me. The CPS method helped me understand that our behaviour does not define us. I knew Ben was not a bad child for the terrible and mean things he would say during a meltdown. I knew he was the insanely inquisitive and cuddly boy that I love. We (I, his father, and Ben) participated in a 12 week program where a certified CPS practitioner would come to our homes and help us with our practice of the method. I thought it was great and knew this method was the way I wanted to parent my children; it explained their behaviour, an explanation that made sense to me.

Ben responded well to the method, although it took about a year for his meltdowns to significantly reduce. He continued to struggle through most of grade 6, but there was a difference. There was a new principal that year, and Ben bonded with him. In fact, he would often take himself down to the principal's office when the classroom got too stressful. The principal told us that he believed Ben, and that he was trying to work with the teachers. He assured us that Ben was always welcome to visit if he was having a hard time. The teachers remained unconvinced and insisted they had a zero-tolerance to "real" bullying; during one of our parent teacher meetings one of the teachers disclosed that they did not think teasing was actual bullying, teasing was "just something boys do."

Although I started the process of learning the CPS method, the method did not impact how I perceived his teachers at this school until much later. The behaviour of his teachers did not change nor did their seemingly indifference to Ben and his experience by disregarding the bullying and his pleas for help. I continued to be frustrated with them and confused as to how they could not see that he was a victim in their classroom. I was still too dysregulated with my worry for him that my ability to have a compassionate perspective of his teachers was not yet possible. He was, however, better able to advocate for himself. As the core group of children in his class continued to bully him, French class became the worst. He and his French teacher did not get along, so I think the tension between them may have contributed to the negative classroom environment and enabled the bullying to fester. One day, Ben had enough and decided he was no longer going to sit in the classroom anymore, instead he would sit in the hallway and do his French work from there. He was adamant and the teacher was unable to do anything about it. Eventually, she and Ben were able to collaborate and come to an agreement that he would attend class only when the French teacher was required to complete her assessments and grading of his progress, otherwise, he would remain in the hallway by the class door. It was not what I would consider ideal, but it was a solution that he agreed to, and it was how he wanted to finish the year.

The most remarkable moment I experienced from him was accidentally bumping into him in the school hallway as he was walking out in protest of his teacher's arbitrary punitive disciplinary practices. His Dad and I were there for a teacher-parent meeting, and Ben had no idea we would be there. His class was getting ready for their outdoor Phys-Ed class, which incidentally was led by his French teacher. On this day however, there were a few students who were unable to regulate themselves as they waited in line while she was getting ready. As a consequence, to the rowdy behaviour of these few students, his teacher decided to keep the whole class inside and forgo any physical education for that day. This decision upset Ben

and he knew this was unfair. He knew from listening to me as I talked about what I was learning in my own classes of child development and the importance of physical activity and outdoor learning. He knew that denying him his physical education was wrong and that it was important aspect of his learning and his school experience. In protest to her unilateral and unjust use of punitive consequences, he collected his coat, backpack and walked out of class. He was going home in protest!

When we bumped into each other in the hallway, Ben was visibly upset and explained why he was leaving. By then, both the educational assistant (EA) and the principal (the one we were getting along with) arrived on the scene and were able to witness my reaction; it was not what they expected. I was overwhelmingly proud! My son was standing up to, what he perceived to be an abuse of power by his teacher. He was speaking truth to power. This was self-advocacy at its finest! I could not help but to defend him and support his decision to leave school and go home in protest. The EA and the principal disagreed with my decision and suggested that we try to find a solution together. I suggested that a solution had been found, and for right now, the solution meets the developmental needs of my son.

Ben, his father, and I, investigated what middle school would be best for him and the three of us collaborated on the decision. It turned out to be the right decision and he had a pretty good year. There were a few incidents of bullying on the school bus, but the school quickly provided Ben with a ‘school bus ambassador;’ an older student who is directed to sit with Ben on the bus and support his engagement and peer relations. The strategy was help at reducing the stress somewhat, but not completely and we ended up driving him into school more often than not. All his teachers, including the resource teacher and his EA at his new school were very supportive of us as a family. Our engagement with them was primarily focused on academic and learning issues. By now his meltdowns were few and far between. He still spends most of his time gaming when at home. School for grade eight and nine has

been virtual due to the pandemic. We decided as a family to register in virtual online learning due to his father having a serious health condition and is immunocompromised, as well as to provide Ben a break from the social pressures that were present in the school environment. Our decision has helped with the social challenges he faced at school, but it has also reduced his opportunities to build necessary social skills. I remember having a really successful sequence of engagement one afternoon when he was in grade 6, on a day when his father was picking him up. I had noticed for the last few months that the transition from my place to his father's place was becoming increasingly more difficult for Ben, he was becoming more and more frustrated with his father's timing. If he was too early, a meltdown was often imminent. So, one afternoon I asked him, "Why is leaving for Dad's place so frustrating for you?" It turns out the children that he was playing with online lived in a different time zone, and the only time they had to play was between three and five o'clock (our time). He was friends with these children and looked forward to playing with them after school. We actually thought this was great, so his father and I had no problem working around this and collaborated with Ben on the best time for his pickup.

Today, a day in our life today is straightforward. When he wakes, he heads directly for his desk. He eats there, he plays there, and he goes to school there. We have agreed that for any family outings, he must be told a day in advance, and I must provide him with a reminder a few hours in advance, as well as a one hour heads up. This is our routine; it keeps us regulated and it makes for easy problem-solving and collaboration. Due to the pandemic and the low-key lifestyle, we are forced to live, the problems that our family face are most often negligible and uncomplicated, so we are getting good practice problem-solving the little things, like dinner choices, or bed time, or pick-up times.

The one variable that I have no control over is what happens in a game or online. If he gets into an argument with someone and if he feels he is treated unfairly, he can get quite

upset and dysregulated. All I can do for him is to remind him that I am here for him, that I will do anything I can for him, and to listen to him as he vents. This would be the empathy step, the first of the CPS method, and in these situations, it is the only step I can complete with him. Sometimes, when he calms down, we can discuss what happened, but most times a discussion too soon after will trigger a meltdown.

Ben's father and I have had many virtual meetings with the various teachers over the last couple of years. Since discovering the CPS method, I feel much more confident talking with them and can have a more empathetic perspective for daily challenges they face as teachers, not to mention teaching during the pandemic. I do warn them that if they want to work with Ben, they will need to make sure it is collaborative, or he will not likely cooperate. All of his teachers are quite willing to honour his IEP and support him the best they can, keeping in mind the constraints of the virtual world in which they operate.

We have had a couple of situations where Ben expressed his dissatisfaction with his instructors. At the beginning of the year, Ben was assigned an EA that failed to leave a positive impression on him and was criticized by Ben for being condescending. Ben refused to work with him. Since he is in a virtual online school, he would simply not log into the appropriate channels when it was time to work with this EA. The other challenging situation happened just recently involving another French teacher, his grade nine French teacher. This teacher also teaches another course he is taking that, in part, practises social skills. I have a feeling that the adverse experiences he had with his grade six French teacher is still affecting him because he really dislikes this teacher. He had been refusing to engage with her for assessment, claiming his microphone is broken. I have met her online and had an in-depth conversation with her and she seems very friendly and kind, well-informed and articulate, so his dislike for her confuses me. However, I cannot deny his feelings, they are very real. In his French class, I can tell he is operating at a very low tolerance level by the irritability in the

tone of his voice. In the other class, the social activities she designed to help reduce stress in the body are, in fact, increasing his stress. The virtual platforms create additional stressors for Ben such as students talking over him, interrupting him, or just saying stuff that Ben perceives to be redundant and useless. The frustration in his voice is quite clear to me as he reluctantly participates.

For now, he has decided to stick it out with both courses. His teacher, on his request, has agreed to exempt him from any social activities so that he can just focus on his academic responsibilities, and he has agreed to using his new microphone for the purposes of assessment and evaluation. He knows he has our support, and we will do our best to get him through this year. We have come a long way over the last five years. I don't know where we would be if I had not discovered the CPS method.

### **Theme Analysis**

To examine the participants' experiences and the meaning they have in relation to this study, a thematic analysis was chosen. Similar to the process of developing the profiles, as I listened to the interviews and read the transcripts, I highlighted the passages and elements of the participants stories that I interpreted to be important, or passages and elements that they seemed to emphasize. These noted passages and elements became the themes that have been examined for commonalities and singularities in a cross case analysis. For the most part, the themes were identified in the order that their story unfolded beginning with their re-account of their historical context (what brought them to the practice of the CPS method), followed by their present reality (what is it like practicing the CPS method), leading to the participants' understanding, insight, and meaning those experiences have for them (what meaning do these experiences hold) (see table 1). Identifying thematic connections between the participants'

stories provides the connective threads that can be linked to the pre-existing literature enabling our knowledge of the practice of the CPS method to evolve.

### **Evelyn's Theme Analysis**

The themes described in Evelyn's theme analysis are presented roughly in the order that they occur. The first three themes focus on the experiences that motivated Evelyn to seek an alternative parenting strategy. The next two themes describe her experiences with teachers and with being a teacher, as well as her experiences with the transferability of the CPS method.

### **The Motivations to Find an Alternative Perspective**

*Unreasonable Expectations:* Evelyn shared a number of examples that led her to believe that the teacher and the school were unable to understand and appreciate her son's challenging behaviour: thus, placing unrealistic expectations on him. The first example she mentioned was the consequence her son was given for playing with his fingers; he was forced to sit out in the hallway. To Evelyn, this seemed to be an arbitrary consequence based on the teacher's lack of understanding towards her son and what his behaviours represent or communicate. Grouping the students into autonomous versus non-autonomous children was another practice that she felt was inappropriate. At the same time, Evelyn learned that her son was missing recess, she knew that this was not appropriate. She knew that recess was an important time for her son during school hours. His symptoms of attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) were mediated by the outdoor, self-directed play. The final example that Evelyn shared was the classroom intervention that was held for her son. A group intervention may be beneficial to some students, but Evelyn was concerned that the focused attention could inadvertently trigger more stress and anxiety for someone who is introverted and shy like her son. Each of the examples Evelyn shared represent an

expectation that her son was unable to meet. When Evelyn decided to home-school her son, she quickly learned that home-schooling was another unrealistic expectation for her son. Evelyn felt that her son needed to heal, and she came to the conclusion that completely removing the expectations of doing any school work was an important part of his healing process.

Evelyn realized that she too struggled with expectations that she held in regard to the school. She expressed frustration over the school's lack of collaborative efforts with her, so she brought the Psychoeducator that was supporting her family to facilitate the meeting she had with the school regarding her son's future at the school. Despite the Psychoeducator's best efforts to help the school understand that Evelyn was the best expert for the school to rely on, and to help them understand the benefits of the CPS method, she ultimately decided that the family home was the best place for her son to heal.

***Punitive Response of Traditional Discipline Practices:*** Punitive TDP is another theme that is represented in Evelyn's story. "I was told that we just needed to be more strict" was one of the first strategies that the school recommended to Evelyn to better control her son's behaviour. As mentioned earlier, playing with one's fingers or not possessing the skills that qualifies the students to be considered autonomous was enough for Evelyn's son to receive a punitive response (isolation from the classroom or from one's peers). Evelyn was also discouraged by the negative and disparaging comments her son's teacher was writing on his tests which led her to question the teacher's pedagogical beliefs.

The use of TDP was not limited to his teacher; both the principal and the board social worker that was designated to his school also used the punitive practice on Evelyn's son. On the occasion that Evelyn was dropping off her son, who was at the time in tears and inconsolable, the principal's strategy was to call over one of his classmates to support him and walk him into class. Seemingly frustrated by the son's rejection of that plan and his inability

to self-regulate, the principal seemed to pressure him by insisting on calling over a classmate regardless of his feelings or wishes. This threat forced Evelyn's son into deciding at a time when he felt he was not ready to make one. The interaction Evelyn's son had with the social worker while in the family car was possibly the most dramatic and coercive implementation of TDP. Not only did the social worker attempt to physically coerce him to wear his boots, but she also threatened to physically carry him, against his will, into the school.

**Trauma at School:** The experience of trauma while at school is another theme found throughout Evelyn's story. Her son's uncharacteristic refusal to go to school was the first indication that something had gone wrong. The dramatic scene in the family car with the social worker that resulted in him running away to a nearby wooded area cemented Evelyn's concerns. Her son's coping mechanisms, whether it was escaping to the outdoors or into a video game in his room, did not go unnoticed to Evelyn; she understood his need to process stressful and difficult experiences.

The experience of trauma has not been limited to her son; Evelyn has had her own emotional pain to deal with. She was overwhelmed by the experience of watching the social worker forcefully struggle with her son. She was in tears and feeling helpless while she listened to the social worker command that they carry her son into the building and then watch him struggle to get away and run away. Evelyn recognized that her experiences with the school were still quite raw when reflecting on the role of the principal, "but I had had so many bad experiences with her that I just can't even bring myself to think 'Oh she had good intentions' this time. I don't even know, she did so much damage, I don't know."

**Evolving Expectations:** Evelyn noted many times throughout her story how her perception of her younger son had evolved since learning the CPS method. With her deliberate practice of the empathy step that reflects her commitment to understanding him, she noticed that he is becoming more trusting of her. Slowly, he began communicating his

needs to her, such as wishing to be alone and preferring to be by himself. Evelyn's mindful practice of the empathy step has brought her to a place where she can say "I'm understanding of my child and I'm respectful of how he is and what our days are like." Evelyn's realization of the problematic nature of expectations became apparent when she understood that her expectation for her family eating dinner together was unrealistic for her son, and unnecessary for her.

### **Evelyn's Relationship with Teachers and Teaching**

After the ordeal with her son's grade four teacher, Evelyn decided to bring the Psychoeducator that had been working with her family to the next parent-school meeting. The role of the Psychoeducator was to help explain the CPS method and philosophy to the principal and the teacher for what was supposed to be her son's grade five class. The meeting was somewhat successful in that Evelyn was able to see a positive reaction from the principal and teacher to the CPS method. The experience also provided Evelyn with a boost of confidence as the Psychoeducator explained that Evelyn is the expert on her child's behaviour, and that the school should prioritise her expert knowledge when supporting her son's learning experience. Evelyn believed that this new teacher was going to be much more empathetic than the grade four teacher. She also recognised that teachers and school staff are being impacted by the pandemic and are experiencing stress as well.

One of Evelyn's good friends is a teacher, and this teacher is of the more traditional mindset that children do well only if they want to do well, and that some suffer from a lack of motivation. Evelyn recounts that her friend feels that students purposely try get out of doing work and (Evelyn) finds this disappointing. She hopes that one day her friend can develop a more compassionate approach to supporting her students, an approach that Evelyn believes would improve her friend's teaching experience.

During the interview as Evelyn was sharing her upsetting school experiences with her teacher friend, she clarified that she did not want to come across as too negative towards teachers. As a teaching nurse herself, she sees similarities between public school teachers and nurses; they both work with a vulnerable population and both jobs are relational. She reflects on how the pandemic impacts each person differently. “And I was just telling my students last night because they were saying, patients come to the hospital, and they can be violent and aggressive towards the nurses. And of course, this is inappropriate, but I said, we have to think that our coping mechanisms are all a little less than what they used to be because we're all under stress and some people are more affected than others.”

### **Transferability of the CPS Method**

When Evelyn began practising the CPS method, she recognised its transferability to other relationships we encounter. “Well, when you do CPS, you don't do it for one child in particular, like we may have started because of the problems we're facing with my youngest son, but I think it's a skill that is gained that you can apply in all the spheres of your life.” Since learning the method, Evelyn has taken the opportunity to experience other relationships through a CPS lens. She recalls a conversation with her cousin (who is a special education teacher) on some of the difficulties her son had while at school. The cousin seemingly did not understand the gravity of Evelyn's situation. “I said, he's actually been diagnosed with trauma from the school and she kind of laughed at it. She's like ‘trauma!’ She said, ‘give me a break,’ and she really made fun of this.” Understanding that her cousin is most probably affected by the stressful realities of the pandemic, Evelyn is able to understand why her cousin might have reacted with insensitivity. “I'm very well aware that the environment where they work is not easy and that they've been working hard for the last two years. So, they may not be in their best behaviours, or they might not be using their most receptive approach.”

Being conscious of the potential reasons why people around her seem to be struggling

with their own unempathetic behaviour, the workplace may have been one of the spheres of her life that was the most accepting of her adoption of the CPS method and philosophy. "I found myself using it at work like with my colleagues, and this is something that's so much more natural because we tend to act this way with adults and colleagues."

### **Leah's Theme Analysis**

Leah's theme analysis begins with the recognition that she did not want to parent her children in the traditional paradigm of authoritarianism and discipline. Identifying and respecting her daughter's coping strategies as well as supporting the development of Lilith's sense of autonomy were dominant themes throughout our interview. Then last theme of the adaptability of the CPS method was also frequently reflected upon, especially as it pertains to the future for her children and the potential for a more equitable and progressive society.

### **Beyond the Traditional Paradigm**

*Traditional Parenting and Discipline:* Dissatisfaction with traditional parenting styles is one of the predominant themes in Leah's story. Her primary parenting education came from her parents, who she described as authoritarian. Reflecting on their traditional practices, she speculates that they may have inhibited the evolution of alternative strategies for her parents, "I know when my parents were parenting, they could almost have done the same thing, but they just didn't have the resources, it was like time was too short." Prior to learning the CPS method, she had struggled with implementing traditional parenting strategies when managing her daughter's challenging behaviour. When she discovered Dr. Greene and the CPS method, she discovered "all these challenging behaviours we're dealing with are not because we're terrible parents or because we're not trying hard enough or because there's something wrong with the kid." She recognised how the traditional paradigm of parenting promotes, on a "shallow surface level," a negative perception of her daughter's

wishes for such in-depth conversations and explorations of her thoughts and feelings; how it does not always permit prioritising the developmental needs and respecting the child's coping strategies when they conflict with the parents' priorities. She recognised that traditional discipline can promote a relational experience that is confrontational in nature "The older parenting ways; it's you against your kids and so they are instinctively fighting back because they don't feel safe, they're trying to protect themselves." Now, as a CPS practitioner, Leah is able to align her perspective of her children with the parenting principles she now holds.

Leah struggles with the difficult memories of her own lived experience of attending school, memories that may have impacted her ability to consent to her daughter's wishes to attend school, "Yet I'm trying to reconcile my adult knowledge of our schooling system and my other knowledge of my child as they are and their behaviours, and the way that they would be perceived by other people." Lilith's teacher assures Leah that her daughter is not a problem in class, however, Leah's concerns of Lilith's skills of dodging the proverbial radar by not associating herself with problematic behaviour speaks to the inefficiency of traditional discipline practices, a practice that focuses on the behaviours that the teacher finds problematic, not necessarily to the behaviours that could be problematic to the student's learning experience. Leah understands that we are taught to judge people based on their behaviour, "We see people based on how they affect our lives and especially for a teacher with multiple students, I mean, she's got a very tough class load." Leah is very much concerned that Lilith's compliant and obedient behaviours does not reflect her needs and therefore could be overlooked by her teacher.

Leah reflects on her parenting journey of becoming less scheduled and rigid as she evolves from a binary and limited perspective that a traditional parenting paradigm promotes, "It started with de-schooling in the sense that was where I began, but is really being an un-socializing, you know, my whole life of what I have learned as this is 'the right way or the

wrong way,' or how people are, how people are supposed to be, all of those judgement words are just, you know, they're just beliefs, they're just thoughts." Leah hopes that by doing the difficult work of un-learning the problematic traditional ways of parenting today and establishing a collaborative paradigm, we can spare our children from that extra work.

### **Respecting Coping Strategies**

Respecting coping mechanisms and the behaviours that represent them is another theme in Leah's story. Several times Leah acknowledged specific behaviours that she felt she needed to respect. While recalling her daughter's exceptionally early verbal skills, she recognized how they were likely connected to her hours-long explorations of her complex thoughts and intense discussions with her mother. Lilith's inquisitive and connection-seeking nature was quite evident during our interview. As she played alongside her mother, there were a few times when she would chime in on the interview to ask her mother about me, trying to understand what we were doing. "And now it's like she's trying to connect with me and she's trying to connect with you and feel safe with this person that I'm talking to and so it all makes sense to me." The experience of connection was also important for Lilith regarding school and transitioning into the new lifestyle. During their search for the right school, the pandemic made that difficult, "They wouldn't let us into schools anywhere. We couldn't meet any of the teachers or any of the principals or any of the resource teachers, anybody in person." Once in school, Leah became concerned about the feedback from her teacher. Lilith's teacher reported that she was compliant and inconspicuous. Leah knows that this passive behaviour is atypical for her daughter, and she is concerned that her daughter's motivation to fit in and conform may be disruptive to her overall well-being.

## Autonomy

Leah mentions the concept of autonomy and the capacity to self-govern throughout her story. She emphasizes the importance of respecting and supporting Lilith's sense of autonomy, which includes supporting her wishes to attend a public school. When the need to problem-solve arose, Leah recognized the importance of upholding her daughter's capacity for self-determination by paying close attention to her daughter's behaviour and listening to her on the premise that her daughter is competent and capable of problem-solving. Leah's respect for Lilith's autonomy extends to all her children, empowering them to make informed decisions on important life choices, such as respecting their food sensitivities and collaborating on family meal plans to best support their individual health and development.

Leah's realization of her daughter's entitlement to her autonomy really hit home when she attended the home-school meet-up and was taking advice from the educator whom she had just met. "If I had, you know, the knowledge that I have now, I wouldn't have been asking a stranger what to do with my child. I would have been asking my child what to do with it, right? It was preposterous to me at the time to ask my child what was right for her and to discuss my concerns about that with her."

Autonomy and the ability to effectively self-govern is typically contingent on the development of our neuro-cognitive skills. Leah acknowledges the future benefits of teaching children the CPS method and skills when reflecting on the effort required for re-learning the new mindset of the CPS philosophy and unlearning the old traditional ways of parenting, "At the same time, yeah, it's like I think that effort is minimal compared to the skills that it's giving them."

**Adaptability**

Leah regards the CPS method as having the attribution of adaptability, a comprehensive method that can be applied to all relationships. The adaptability of the method not only can be used to support her relationships with others, but it also enables her to pass on these skills and teach these skills to her children. “It just gives that framework or that, you know, that other meaning to understanding, like, not even just parenting but understanding all relationships.” Adaptability was a principle that was upheld at the school that Lilith and her family chose and was important in promoting an atmosphere of inclusion and belonging, especially to those students who hold different religious beliefs.

Today, Leah expresses the limitless possibilities that the practice of the CPS method has on her life as a parent and on the untold future. “I’m exploring that in terms of the whole world, not just in terms of schooling and then in terms of parenting and relationships, now it’s, it’s my whole life. It’s everybody’s lives that I’m really broadening that out to, and it’s pretty cool to think of we can make, you know like anything we want to be whatever we wanted to be.”

**Heather’s Theme Analysis**

The order of Heather’s themes was done according to both the relevance and the emphasis that I perceived Heather to be attributing to elements within her story. As Heather is navigating her way through the various parenting courses and support programs, she makes sense of them as each having a valuable place within her parenting ‘toolbox’, a series of courses on evidence-based parenting practices that she has completed. Her experiences of the Empathy stage was a predominant reflection, as was her perspective on the function of the method. The final two themes: the complexity of the challenges; and the deficiencies and gaps in the public school system provide the rationale for her struggles with implementing the

CPS method, highlighting the systemic inequities (such as the delay of implementation of an IEP) she and her son face, and the intensity and the seriousness of her family's struggles.

### **The Parenting Toolbox & Preparedness**

Several times throughout Heather's story she references her parenting 'toolbox.' This toolbox contains various evidence-based strategies and practices that promote and support the development of the essential skills for self-regulation and the effective management of challenging experiences. Some of these strategies include Cognitive Behavioural Therapy (CBT), Dialectical Behaviour Therapy (DBT), the CPS method, Smart Recovery For Friends and Family, and, emotional coaching. Both CBT and DBT were methods that Heather learned before the CPS method. Before discovering the CPS method, Heather was already somewhat familiar with learning and practising parenting strategies to help and support her son. Reflecting on how we learn parenting skills, she recognizes the gap in parenting knowledge. "Because no one really teaches you that, yes. So, I needed other reference points that were positive. So that's why I kind of was gravitating towards books to help." When Heather was first learning the CPS method, she found that it was the first tangible conceptual tool that she could use. It was a tool to help her and her family achieve a collaborative resolution. "And then I took CPS, I realized, you know, listening to what his concerns are and where they're having difficulty meeting expectations. So, it's important you know, that's how I saw it as a tool to get to a collaborative solution." With the skills Heather has been developing through the parenting courses and the resources that she has been collecting, she has developed her own resource management system where she has easy access to her resources, such as her assessment tools and notes. "And when I know that I'm needing to have this discussion, just seeing how far I can get down into the process of the CPS model, then I just pull it out. I might make some rough notes before I know I'm gonna have this conversation with my child and I just have it with me."

Heather's parenting toolbox was not a resource limited to strategies to support her son, it also contained strategies for self-care. The self-care strategies included joining local parenting support groups such as Smart Recovery for Family and Friends, seeking treatment from a naturopathic doctor, and practising guided meditation. Heather's parenting toolbox enabled her to feel prepared and equipped to support her son and it proved to be an effective coping strategy for her, "So, all of those things, and the four months that I was off, is what helped me develop more patience and see where, you know, these different tools fit into where or how I can apply it to the different situations." However, her need for a sense of preparedness had been problematic as well. This coping mechanism gone wrong was best demonstrated when she failed to account for her son's concerns regarding switching to the in-house clinician or remaining with the private therapist.

### **The Empathy Stage**

The empathy stage is the first step in the sequence of engagement (regulate, relate, reason) in the CPS method. The child's experience of empathy (by the parent or teacher) is essential for that child's experience of self-regulation. Without regulation it is very difficult, almost impossible, for the child to then relate, or to reason, with their parent or teacher (Perry & Ablon, 2019). Heather recognized how important it is for her son to be in a state of regulation. She also recognizes how important the opportunities for dialogue are, the opportunity when he is in a calm and in a regulated state, "But there haven't been many opportunities to be able to do that with him because he hasn't been receptive. He's too much in the hyper state, always fight or flight." Persistent with her practice, Heather knows that she must carry on with the empathy stage, "What I did is just try to take the steps slowly, understand, not jump to the solution but more at least stay in that empathy stage, in understanding what his needs are." As she and her son practise the empathy stage, she does feel that her listening skills have improved, "So just having actual curiosity and a lot of

compassion and empathy for what he's saying, right? Just trying to understand him better and always trying to say that.”

Heather’s practice of empathy is deliberate and steadfast. She will sit with her son, pad and pencil in-hand, and patiently wait with him until he is ready. Her approach is also intended to prevent herself and her son from falling into the trap of conforming and unreasonable expectations. Conforming was once an expectation Heather had of her son; however, she now recognizes how problematic that was. “When you’re conforming, you're not asking about your child's point of view, just asking them to do it. So, this really helps me understand why he isn't able to meet this expectation.” It was also through her use of empathy that helped her realize that swimming was not for her son. Having the patience while engaging in the empathy stage and being open to hear her son's concerns is especially important to Heather as it replaces any need for TDP. “So, it's just having more patience, and that giving more space, and you know instead of having a punitive kind of result to what he needs. It's not a yes or no, and that's the end of that; it's more of understanding what he needs.”

### **The Function of the Method**

When Heather signed up for this study, one of the first things she shared was her perceived limitations of the CPS method. She explained that due to her son’s avoidance of discussing anything related to his feelings, she was unable to advance through the three steps of the method. “I couldn't get in-depth with the empathy stage or drilling or anything like that with him. So, it has a lot of limitations and in that sense, it was ineffective for us at that time.” She also explained that due to his complexities of needs, additional support strategies, beyond the CPS method, were required to adequately respond to his challenging behaviours. Heather explains how the CPS method is for her and her family, “We started doing other

parent support programs and talking to psychologists. They were basically explaining that the CPS is one tool and you kind of had to take from their bag of tools depending on the situation. And so that's how I see CPS.” She also perceives the CPS method to oversimplify challenging behaviours, especially when complex diagnoses are involved. “I honestly struggle with that because here, the model says that it's not about the disorders, it said it's about the expectations not being met right? But to me his expectations not being met is very closely related to his borderline personality disorder, it's a lot of black and white. So yeah, I struggle with that. It's not just his expectations not being met, it's driven by his ability, his need for it to be this or that.”

Despite her perceived limitations of the CPS method, Heather does re-story how the CPS method, a tool among others in her parenting toolbox, has helped her understand what her son's needs are. She also acknowledges how the function of the method includes helping her slow down the process of problem-solving so that she can understand and include her son's needs. “And instead of jumping straight to the solution, then I would know, okay, this is the biggest part of finding out what he needs and to sit there, as long as it needs to be, to figure out and hear and validating him of what it is that he feels the expectation that he's not being met.”

When asked if the CPS method has impacted her perception of his teachers, or other adults in their life, she admitted that was not a connection she made as she was learning and practising the method. “I only thought of it as a tool to help work with my child better. And I just want to make a note in the CPS model, well, the interactions that I had or even the videos that I watched of Dr. Green, and the course there was mostly the relationship between the child and the parents. Yeah. So that's why I didn't make that link.”

The final example of an identified function that the CPS method served for Heather and her family was the collaboration to establish a middle ground regarding the issue of her

son's blades. Their collaborative problem-solving effort afforded them a space where they can trust each other and work together to keep her son safe. It was not her ideal solution, but it was collaborative.

### **Complexity of Challenges**

Early into her story, Heather identified her son as having complex needs. Her son was diagnosed with borderline personality disorder (BPD) which includes oppositional behaviours and the feeling that people are against him. Twice her son was admitted to their local children's hospital for psychiatric care, once at the beginning of 2021 and then once again near the end of 2021. Heather explained that longer stays at the hospital often resulted in some form of regression contributing to the complex transitions when coming home. Another transition experienced more recently was her son's move into the day treatment program; not only was he moving out of his home again, he was also switching therapists, which involved its own transitional experience of uncertainty and potential dysregulation.

Heather's struggle to advocate for an IEP at his school highlighted the complexity of his needs. Although her family's experiences with his teachers were more or less positive (with the exception of one grade nine History teacher), it was a different story during his later years of primary school. "It was frustrating, and we were wondering, we had no idea how much worse his mental health was gonna get and it did get much worse. However, from a parent's point of view, when your child from grade five, is somewhat managing pretty okay to having suicidal thoughts and having a plan, you're wondering what else can you do? And then if his school is not supporting you in that sense, you're left with wondering." To add to the sensitivity of this situation, her son was not flagged as problematic because his quiet and introverted nature did not warrant their attention, which may have contributed to the school's refusal to provide an IEP.

**The Deficiencies & Gaps at School:**

The final theme identified in Heather's story is her perceived deficiency and gaps within the school system. Heather's first recognition of a gap was when she was unable to convince her son's school to provide him with an IEP. Despite her providing them with all the essential documentation, he was denied an IEP (and the access to resources that come with that IEP) for the following four years. Without an IEP, Heather was disappointed with the lack of resources available for her son. Due to the limited options, problem-solving with the teachers was somewhat simplified. "There are limited choices. So, it's usually we skip to the problem-solving part of it, in terms of options, in terms and finding the best way of delivering courses to my son." It wasn't until after her son began engaging in risky behaviours at school such as smoking cigarettes, recklessly riding his bike in traffic, and creating suicide pacts that the school began to recognize her son's need for additional support. "My son is in grade 10 now, and we had done an educational assessment in order to support getting IEP back in the summer, when he was going into grade seven and only until now is when it's almost in place that IEP."

**My Theme Analysis**

The themes for my story were presented in the order of relevance and evolution. The bullying that Ben experienced at school, and how he responded to it, led to his experiences of TDP by his teachers and school administration. Both the bullying and his experiences of TDP developed into the experiences of trauma in the classroom which became the catalyst that led me to seek help for our family. Our family developed a series of coping mechanisms that became prominent features in our daily lives. The final theme identified as validation and self-advocacy reflects the growth and development since the beginning of our CPS journey.

### The Catalyst for Seeking Change

**Bullying:** The issue of bullying is an important theme, as it provides context to the adversity that Ben was experiencing at school. As a student with ASD, his social skills were not compatible with the social skills of his neuro-typical peers. Ben was usually vague about how he was treated, but he did give a little insight and disclosed that a group of children would poke him (typically in the upper body region) as they walked by him, or they would purposely chew with or without gum or food and overemphasizing the smacking noise that they knew bothered him. One of the most impactful bullying experiences he had was when a classmate put chewed gum on the inside of his baseball cap, so when he put it on his hair got stuck in it, resulting in us having to cut it out of his hair. It was humiliating for him and was a hurtful act.

His peers were not the only ones contributing to his adversity; his teachers also were a source of anxiety and frustration. They refused to believe that he was being bullied, often blaming Ben for creating situations that provoked his friends. In fact, he gave up on reporting the bullying as it just made the bullying worse. Although they acknowledged that there was teasing happening in their classroom, they insisted that this was typical “boy behaviour.” On the day that he was suspended, the teasing was relentless. Despite Ben’s pleas to be moved or his classmate moved, the teacher dismissed him and threatened punitive consequences if Ben continued to cause trouble for himself and his classmate. In response, Ben refused to cooperate in the lesson. Ben became keenly aware of the bullying behaviour of his peers, and due to his sensitivity to the issue of justice in the classroom, he had little tolerance for his teachers' arbitrary and unjust use of TDP. So much so, that when one of his teachers attempted to deny him his right for physical education and outdoor learning, he staged a protest and left.

***Traditional Discipline Practices:*** As mentioned earlier, Ben was not an aggressive child, and he was not in any way a threat to other children. He was, however, unnecessarily exposed to the use of traditional discipline practices. Throughout grade five, he was often sent to the principal's office as a punishment for his own expressions of frustration and responses to the bullying he was receiving from other children in his class. For the better part of the school year, Ben received punitive responses to his requests for help from his teachers. When he brought his new basketball to school some of his classmates would pretend to play basketball with him, but then not share the ball with him. The teachers were not helpful and recommended that he improve his basketball skills. Ben required a special eyeglass cleaning cloth that he kept on his person (as he was very sensitive to the slightest of dirt on his lens), he was shamed by his teacher for being overly zealous about keeping them clean. Ben's one-day suspension for throwing a chair at the window is a perfect example of a zero-tolerance punitive response; a response that did not address the reason why he threw the chair in the first place; a response that excluded him from the classroom and from the potential of any meaningful learning that could have taken place.

***Trauma in the Classroom:*** Trauma, and the emotional pain experienced by the events at my son's elementary school impacted our whole family. For most my son's adverse experiences at school, I received only vague descriptions of what happened. However, what is clear to his father and I was that those events impacted him profoundly. For Ben to openly defy his teacher to the point that he resorted to violence, throwing a chair at the window, to have daily meltdowns, and to threaten suicide, suggested that he was having traumatic experiences at school. As terrifying the thought of our child committing suicide was to us, we did learn, through an assessment at local children's mental health centre, that he is considered

lower risk for such severe self-injury, and that his dramatic expression of possible suicide was most likely offering him a cathartic release.

As his father and I became more fluent with the practice of the CPS method, we began to recognize the significance of his gaming routine. Gaming became his primary coping mechanism to help him deal with and process his stressors and continues to do so. Although we are now almost three years away from his experiences in grade five and six, triggers still seem to surface occasionally, such as his French class and teacher, or his condescending EA.

The theme of trauma is not inclusive to Ben, it includes his parents as well. Advocating for Ben in an environment that felt hostile was extremely difficult and emotionally taxing. We had several parent-teacher meetings addressing a variety of issues: our concerns about Ben's experience of bullying; our concerns about the reports of his frequent disruptions (meltdowns) in class; our concerns regarding reports of his refusal to complete work in the classroom. Any defence for Ben explaining his anxiety about the bullying in class or how important the sense of belonging is in the classroom community seemed to fall on deaf ears. The school's apparent indifference intensified the anxiety both his father and I experienced when sending our son to a place in which he did not feel safe. At the height of his stress, he was having meltdowns almost every night. These painful expressions of the emotional stress that our son was enduring at school taxed our own mental health.

### **Coping Mechanisms**

The third theme identified in my story is the coping mechanisms that we relied on to support each other the best we could. Ben's gaming habit is one of the more predominant coping mechanisms identified within our family dynamic. The systematic nature of the video game and the elimination of in-person engagement (and social skills required to effectively engage) probably enhanced his draw to the activity. Playing video games was not the only

coping mechanism he relied on during his grade five and six experience. His requests to stay home became another coping mechanism. By the end of the first year, he was staying home from school almost once a week.

Today, three years later, Ben still leans on his gaming habit to make it through the day. Some of his encounters with teachers or EAs that seem to trigger him have resulted in him logging out of the online class or activity he was participating in with them. The online high school platforms that are used can be annoying and disruptive with time delays and other similar interpersonal communication challenges. Although I cannot remember the last time he had a meltdown, his frustration tolerance depletes quickly, so I have given him permission to log out of class if he is finding it too stressful.

The empathy step provided me with a coping mechanism that when implemented almost every time assured Ben's return to calm. At the beginning, his regulation process would take upwards to an hour, sometime two; however, as he began to accept that I understood his pain, he would quiet down and regain his composure. Ben's father and I also had developed our own system of coping mechanisms in order to better support him and maintain our mental health as a family. My strategic move (a move out of the family home) to a location that enabled the three of us to be a figurative arm's length from each other was a deliberate action to reduce my own stress during such a significant life change. Another coping strategy I implemented was Ben's carrying a cell phone on his person while at school. It was technically against the rules, however, I wanted him to feel that he always had access to myself or his father during times of stress. Ben's morning and afternoon school bus experiences in grade seven provided another context that led to the coping mechanism of his father driving Ben into school. Our family needed peace, and this was the surest way we knew how to achieve that.

### **Validation & Self-Advocacy**

Ben's sense of validation and his self-advocacy is the final theme identified in my story. One of the most challenging barriers that Ben faced at school was his teachers' disbelief and dismissal of being bullied. The impact of his teachers' disregard of his experience had a profound effect on his mental well-being and the trajectory of his learning experience; an impact that had a profound effect on the trajectory of my own academic direction. The experience of validation, feeling believed, was also an essential need for Ben to calm a meltdown. The first step of empathy in the CPS method calls for the parent to empathize with their dysregulated child. Once I began to respond to him in this fashion, his meltdowns began to be more manageable.

His experience of validation from his father and I is closely linked to his experiences of self-advocacy. His response to his grade five experiences of injustice was primarily refusal to do work and meltdowns. This changed in grade six with the new principal (and possibly with the blossoming of my new CPS skills). The new principal believed his accounts of being bullied by his classmates and provided him with a safe and calm place to go whenever needed. This helped Ben feel more confident at school. Now his response to his experience of injustice included removing himself from the stressful environment (such as his French class) and relocate his seating arrangement to better suit his needs (sitting out in the hallway), or to stage a protest and walk out of class (his response to the cancelation of their physical education class). Although refusal to work continued to be an issue for him (as did the occasional meltdown), the addition of his self-advocacy was a big improvement.

The last two years of school have been virtual which has had a very positive effect on his stress levels regarding being bullied. However, virtual learning is not without its challenges. Teachers and classmates talking over each other, and over him, is a recurring issue. An issue that has become less so, at least for him, as he simply just logs out of class.

The virtual learning challenge has now become one for his teachers as they struggle to develop effective strategies to keep him engaged and present in the virtual classroom.

Table 1  
Summary of Thematic Analysis

Participant	Theme	Detail
Evelyn	Motivations to Find an Alternative Perspective	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Unreasonable Expectations Her son being unable to meet teacher's expectations Her son being unable to meet expectations of homeschool Evelyn struggles with her own expectations of her son's school.</li> <li>• Punitive Response of Traditional Discipline Practices Segregation practices in the classroom (autonomous vs. non-autonomous). Disparaging comments by teacher on schoolwork. Principal's ineffective transitional support.</li> <li>• Trauma at School Traumatic experience with school social worker</li> <li>• Evolving Expectations Mindful practice of the Empathy Step</li> </ul>
	Relationships with teacher and teaching	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Support from Psychoeducator.</li> <li>• Her friendship with another teacher.</li> <li>• Her cousin, the educator.</li> <li>• Her reflections of the systemic challenges and the pandemic that teacher must manage.</li> </ul>
	Transferability of the CPS method	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• "A skill you can apply to all the spheres in your life."</li> <li>• The impact of trauma on the practice of the CPS method</li> </ul>
Leah	Beyond the Traditional Paradigm	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Traditional Parenting Her rejection of the discipline practices that she was raised with.</li> <li>• Traditional Discipline Her acknowledgement of the failures of TDP.</li> <li>• Respecting Coping Strategies Respecting the coping strategies that her daughter relies on to meet her developmental needs.</li> <li>• Autonomy Her awareness of the importance for Lilith to have a healthy sense of autonomy and the value that will bring to her well-being.</li> </ul>
	Adaptability	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• "It just gives that framework or that other meaning to understanding, not even just parenting but understanding all relationships."</li> </ul>

<b>Heather</b>	Parenting Toolbox and Preparedness	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Her comprehensive repertoire of evidence-based strategies to support her son.</li> <li>• Her self-care strategies to be best prepared to support her son.</li> </ul>
	Empathy Step	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Her perceived challenges executing the Empathy Step.</li> <li>• Her dedication and commitment to the CPS method.</li> </ul>
	Function of the Method	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Her perceived limitation of the method.</li> <li>• It's place in her toolbox to support her son.</li> <li>• Her acknowledgment of the absence of the transferability of the method.</li> </ul>
	Complexity of Challenges	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The complexity of challenges her son's mental health and the barriers to an inclusive learning experience at school.</li> </ul>
	Deficiencies and Gaps	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Deficiencies and gaps within the school system.</li> </ul>
<b>Christina</b>	Catalysts for Seeking Change	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Bullying.</li> <li>• Traditional Discipline Practices.</li> <li>• Trauma in the Classroom.</li> </ul> <p>Persistent disregard from teachers resulting with meltdowns.</p>
	Coping Mechanisms	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Gaming providing an escape and a safe place to socialize.</li> <li>• The persistent practice of Empathy Step building trust.</li> </ul>
	Validation and Self-Advocacy	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Ben's sense of self-efficacy and self-advocacy.</li> </ul>

### Cross-Case Analysis

The four participants shared rich experiences that contained both common elements and singularities (experiences that are unique to the participants). A cross-case analysis of the stories and themes was performed to best explore the meaning and relevance of the participants' experiences. Each story provides relevant and essential knowledge sculpted from lived experiences. A cross-case analysis mobilizes that knowledge from each story through comparing, thus creating new knowledge. From the theme analysis, the common experiences, and connective threads, that reflected or pertained to the philosophical principles of the CPS method, ableism, and the DIT were gathered. Singular experiences that were

unique to each participant, that may not have been reflected in the support literature, but that do provide insight to the uniqueness and diversity of our human experience.

### **Common Elements**

There are many common elements between the four stories represented in this study and they are organized into ten categories: the adversity each family experienced as they navigated school and family life; the ableism embedded into their lives; the experience of trauma; the complexity of their children's challenges; their futile efforts of advocacy for their children; the role of homeschooling or the complete reprieve from school; their practice and execution of the CPS method; their parenting principles and values; the connection to the CPS method; and, the impact their practice of the CPS method on their experience and perception of their children's teachers and other adult relationships (see table 2).

### **The Experience of Adversity**

All the families in this study had experiences with TDP within the school or within their family experience. In school, Evelyn's son experienced a couple of forms of traditional disciplinary practices from exclusion (being placed out in the hallway as punishment for playing with his fingers) to the threat of forceful confinement (being carried into the school against his will). My son received a one-day suspension for his meltdown that resulted in him tossing a chair at a window; his reaction to the inaction by his teachers to address the bullying that he was enduring. The suspension was effective at removing Ben and the behaviours that his teachers found challenging, it was not effective at reducing the bullying nor did it help his teachers understand why he was upset enough to behave as desperately as he did (Haight et al., 2014). Both Evelyn and I tried to advocate for our sons and help their teachers better understand their behaviours, and in both cases, there was a feeling of being marginalized as teachers disregarded our concerns (Bell, 2020). Leah's daughter did not have any direct

experiences with TDP, but she has experienced a limitation of the TDP; its failure to identify potential problems or challenges in children with compliant behaviour (Kirby, 2020).

Heather's son, like Leah's daughter, also did not have any direct experience with TDP, and was perceived by their parents as not having their needs met; either from an inadequate IEP, as in Leah's story, or by not being granted an IEP in the first place, as in Heather's story.

Evelyn, Heather, and I each recount the stress that our sons incurred from the disciplinary actions or unreasonable expectations by their teachers (Oberle, & Schonert-Reichl, 2016). In Evelyn's son's story, her son's maladaptive behaviours of playing with his fingers or not living up to the expectations of autonomy set by his teacher, or of the principal's expectations of consoling himself in a timely manner were not behaviours that his mother believed warranted punitive action. Evelyn struggled to establish a mutual ground or understanding of her son's needs with his teacher or principal, hindering any meaningful parent-teacher partnership to support her son's learning experience (Martin et al., 2018). Heather's son was relying on the support of his unofficial IEP when his history teacher declined to comply with it. The expectations of the course were beyond his ability without the support of an IEP. The stress her son experienced of not meeting those expectations contributed to the stress that eventually required intense medical interventions.

My son, Ben, was repeatedly denied help or support and was often blamed (and subsequently punished) when he tried to report the bullying from his peers. With the teacher's non-intervention and the display of moral disengagement from his peers, reporting the bullying just made that bullying worse (Campaert et al. 2017; Thornberg et al., 2019). Ben's teachers were not promoting the cooperation and communication skills required for meaningful problem-solving, instead promoting disharmony and frustration within the classroom experience as seen Thornberg et al.'s (2019) research on relational impact on bullying in the classroom. In these three stories, the teacher (or principal) responded to

behaviours they found challenging with use of TDP, or expectations that the students were unable to meet, leaving them in an even more vulnerable position by forcing them to navigate the negative relational experiences from the very people who are supposed to support and protect them (Campaert et al, 2017). Although Leah and her daughter did not have any direct experience with TDP at her daughter's new school, Leah held strong reservations about sending her daughter to school in the first place which speaks to the association of TDP in public schools (McIntosh et. al, 2018).

Each parent-participant shared their experiences with TDP on a personal level. Evelyn experienced her older son once suggesting that she be stricter with his younger brother. Even though her older son responded well to the traditional parenting style she knew before learning the CPS method, her younger son has a different response to traditional practices (Ungar, 2017). Leah reflected on her own authoritative upbringing by her parents. She knew that responding to her daughter's hours-long conversations with a punitive response, as her own parents might have, would only cause conflict and that was not how she wanted to parent (Carvalho et al., 2018; Niu et al. 2018). Heather reflected on how she was never taught positive parenting techniques and how that propelled her and her husband to start researching and learning on their own (Niu et al. 2018). When my son began having meltdowns, I knew that any attempts at a TDP response would result in exacerbating them (Del Vecchio et al. 2020; Larsen & Jordan, 2020). I found parenting with harsh discipline frustrating as it created more chaos and disruption.

These experiences of TDP served as poignant and pivotal experiences for me and the other three participants. Each parent rejected the belief that TDP was in the best interest of their children's well-being. They rejected the ableist notion that our children need to be motivated by the threat of punishment or exclusion (Greene, 2018). Each family experienced ableist behaviours and expectations from teachers and school staff ranging from unreasonable

expectations in the classroom to forceful physical encounters. The next common element found within the participants' stories is the experiences of ableist attitudes, behaviours of teachers and some family members.

### **Ableism**

Evelyn had several experiences that speak to an ableist mentality. Many of these experiences happened while at the school. Evelyn remembered she was advised by school staff to be stricter with her son. This is assuming that increasing the severity of punishment is an effective means to motivate her son to be more compliant, a strategy that might work on some children who have the self-regulatory skills to do so (Greene, 2018). Evelyn knows this assumption is misguided; not all children develop at the same rate. She knows her son enjoys school and being with his friends, and believes his teacher is responding with a misinformed approach due to her misunderstanding of his behaviour (Kirby, 2017). Another experience that happened at her son's school was the class intervention. Class interventions bring the attention of the whole class onto an individual who is struggling, with the aim that the class will support the struggling student and participate in any problem-solving experience. An assumption of this strategy is that the student who is the center of attention will benefit from this attention. However, as Ungar (2018) suggests with the differential theory, events such as class interventions will have a differential impact due to the diversity of human experience that includes the biological, psychological, and relational experience. Evelyn's son is introverted and shy, Evelyn was concerned that the teachers did not take that into consideration when thinking of her son's best interest; while many children are able to benefit from this type of intervention, she did not believe her son was one of those children.

Evelyn re-storied her experiences as a teacher and recounted her awareness of the ableist double-standard of teaching adults versus teaching children. As a teacher at the university level, she recognizes the standard of treating adult students with respect and

dignity, especially when it comes to their unique learning needs, viewing each student as a competent learner, and never entertaining the consideration of the use of TDP. Whereas teaching children in the primary or secondary grades often involves a teacher's use of exclusionary practices of TDP (Kirby 2017). She also reflected on how her family was not the poster family for the implementation of the CPS method, a similar reflection was made by Leah. This could speak to the unreasonable expectations we place on ourselves as parents, impacting our sense of self-efficacy (Carvalho et al., 2018; Niu et al. 2018). Each of the parent-participants of the current study, including myself, revealed that they were raised in a traditional parenting paradigm, where results are quickly obtained; we were punished, or we were rewarded. Parenting is a learning journey that takes practice; this is also true for the CPS method. The skills acquired through the practice of the method require just that, practice. Evelyn's appreciation for Plan C and the ability to remove and reprioritize expectations also illustrates aspects of ableist ideology. The purpose of Plan C is to remove, albeit temporarily, an expectation that the child is unable to meet. This action recognizes that the child has yet to obtain the skills required to meet that expectation. When there are too many expectations to deal with, the reprioritizing of those expectations becomes necessary. This was a great relief to Evelyn and her son, and I, too, mentioned how Plan C provided Ben and I with a space to connect and bond, helping us to rebuild trust in each other.

A few times throughout Leah's story she recounts memories and experiences that speak to the internalized ableism that permeates our mindset and attitudes about parenting (Biklen, 2020). The first example is illustrated when Leah recounts that prior to her CPS discovery, it would have been impossible for her to do the interview with her children around. This is due to the knowledge that she had gained from her practice of the CPS method that has helped her understand the unreasonable expectations of parenting in a traditional paradigm. During the interview, her children were curious about what she was

doing on the computer, who she was talking to and what they were talking about. Leah knew that attempting to suppress their curiosity by exclusion would only exacerbate their curiosity that would most likely lead to frustration and challenging behaviours. Leah also knew better than to try to suppress Lilith's need to have meaningful conversations with her. She recognizes that her daughter, regardless of how young she is, has real feelings that need processing through conversation and dialogue. Ableist ideology would have you believe that Leah's children should leave their mother alone during the interview and wait quietly until she is done (Campbell, 2012). It would also have you believe that Lilith was too young for such in depth conversations, that she should play with age appropriate toys and activities.

Another example of ableist ideology impacting Leah's experience happened when she sought out possible enrollment of her daughter into a Kindergarten program at the alternative school in her region. Much to Leah's surprise, the principal advised her not to enroll her daughter into school, suggesting that her daughter would not be able to adapt to a school setting. The principal has not met Leah or Lilith but has the implicit assumption that she understands Leah's situation and her daughter's competence better than Leah (Biklen, 2020; Kirby, 2017). After discovering a suitable school for Lilith, Leah experienced ableism regarding the process of submitting concerns and goals for her IEP. The concerns and goals were decided upon by Lilith. Any concerns brought forward were based on Lilith's experience. Leah recounted that the school perceived her to be complaining, compelling her to explain that these concerns and goals come from Lilith, not herself. Heather's story also told of difficulties regarding her son's IEP. Her frustration was founded in the school's refusal to create and implement an IEP despite providing the medical documentation as evidence that her son required accommodations. The barriers of communication that Leah experienced and the disaccord between Heather and her son's school directly impacts the potential for any meaningful collaboration (Tucker & Schwartz, 2013).

Ben's and my experience of ableism was evident in the school's reluctance and often refusal to acknowledge the bullying from his classmates. Their reaction of blaming Ben for provoking his peers and dismissing the bullying as teasing speaks to the ableist mentality and the moral disengagement of blaming the victim (Campaert et al., 2017).

### **Trauma**

The children of Evelyn, Heather, and myself all experienced some level of trauma related to our children's school. Each of these students experienced a deeply distressing experience with a teacher or staff member that resulted in recurring emotional responses impacting their ability to function normally while at school. For Evelyn's son and my son, Ben, the distressing experience was in relation to TDP, an adverse experience that is related to the experience of trauma (Haight et al., 2014; Dutil, 2020). Evelyn's son experienced the lack of tolerance from his classroom teacher, as well the school social worker who once suggested physically forcing him into the school against his will; an experience that negatively impacted her son's sense of personal safety (Dutil, 2020). The repeated refusal by Ben's teachers to accept his claims of being bullied and his need for their support left Ben feeling hopeless and sometimes desperate. A similar attitude of denial by the teacher for their students' needs and the inflexibility to take their perspective seems to have been the case for Heather's son, who endured the intolerance of his history teacher and his refusal to accept the modifications requested in his unofficial IEP, a learning support critical for her son's academic success (Haight et al., 2016). The stress from that History course compounded her son's stress levels resulting in the requirement for medical attention.

The experience of trauma did not escape the parents. It is not uncommon for parents of children with disabilities and challenging behaviours to have high levels of traumatic stress, that include the feelings of helplessness and hopelessness for the quality of their child's life now, and in the future (Emerson, 2020). Evelyn, Heather, and I all had such

stressful experiences with our children's teachers or related to our children's teachers.

Evelyn's experience of the social worker attempting to force her son into a pair of winter boots and the suggestion to carry him into the school against his will brought her to tears.

Sending my son to a school where he did not feel safe and witnessing my son suffer through his meltdowns and threats of suicide eroded the mental health of his father and I. Heather restored an intense parenting experience that navigated the boundaries of her son's suicidal ideation, an experience that she credits as one of the hardest things she had ever done.

Interestingly, both Evelyn and I acknowledge that we were too close to the traumatic experiences to be able to transfer our CPS skills of compassionate perspective onto the teachers and staff involved in those challenging situations, while Heather acknowledges that it never occurred to transfer her skills to adult relationships. This may suggest that the experiences of trauma may impact or interrupt one's access to those neurocognitive skills necessary for the experience of transference, in specific situations.

### **“CPS Does Not Solve the Mental Illness”**

Evelyn and Heather both shared their experiences on how their practice of the CPS method is situated within the context of supporting their sons. As both of their sons have received a diagnosis of depression and are receiving the services and support of mental health professionals, both parents have articulated their understanding that the CPS method is not the final or only solution to the mental health challenges their sons endure. This difference of experience speaks to the DIT that recognizes the individual and unique biological and psychological systems, along with individual genetic dispositions, requires an individualized and tailored response (Ungar, 2017). Evelyn expressed this sentiment by stating that the CPS method does not solve the mental illness of her son. Heather's experience of the method is that it works in conjunction with other evidence-based therapies. She also expressed her thoughts on the issue of the value of a diagnostic evaluation versus the CPS perspective that

recognizes challenging behaviour, across all or most diagnoses as unmet expectations. Removing the label of the mental illness does not remedy the mental illness, the complexity of challenges remains, and the lagging skills continue to require ongoing training and practice, regardless of diagnosis.

### **Futile Efforts of Advocacy**

Each parent experienced the failed attempts of their advocacy for their child. Evelyn tried to explain to her son's teacher that exclusionary practices are not appropriate for her son. Her attempts to interrupt or stop the social worker's seemingly aggressive strategies of assisting her son with his boots went unnoticed as well. Leah understood that her daughter would benefit from visiting her new school before classes started to reduce her anxiety. However, the pandemic thwarted her attempts of any successful advocacy. Heather provided her son's school with all the medical evidence necessary for the approval of an IEP for her son, only to wait an additional four years for that approval to happen. My efforts to help my son's teachers understand that he was being bullied were ineffective; regardless of what I said, they remained unconvinced. Evelyn and her son's teachers, as well as myself and Ben's teachers were unable to establish mutual concerns regarding our sons, as such Evelyn and I were unable to effectively problem-solve with their teachers (Azad et al., 2019). Each story told of a parent's ineffective advocacies for their children, either due to precautionary measures related to the pandemic, or to the differences of opinion or misunderstandings between the parent and teacher.

### **Homeschooling / Reprieve from School**

Each child from each of the stories experienced time away from school. Evelyn's son's reprieve from school started at grade five after his challenging experiences. Leah's daughter was initially homeschooled and then decided to attend a school for the very first

time in grade four. Although the decision to homeschool was not a result of negative or challenging experiences had by her child, as is the case with the other parents in this study, the decision to homeschool was in part due to her parent's concerns of having adverse experiences at a public school. Leah's fears and concern represent the unique parental systems that directly impact her daughter's experience of school and education (Ungar, 2017). Heather's son became overwhelmed with the workload in his ninth grade requiring him to take a break from attending his high school. Our decision to keep Ben home for virtual online learning provided by our school board was primarily to keep his father safe from catching COVID-19, but the social challenges that often disrupted his learning experience very much factored into our decision, making it an extremely easy decision for us. Each child storied in this study is impacted by different environmental factors such as parental systems (Leah's fears of systemic inequities in the public school system), educational systems and policies (Heather's experiences with IEP protocol), and social factors (our concerns for COVID-19 and the health of our family members) (Ungar, 2017).

### **Practice and Execution of the CPS Method**

The second category of commonalities concern the parents' practice and execution of the CPS method. Challenges moving beyond the empathy step of the CPS method is one of these shared experiences of the parents' stories. Evelyn, Heather, and I shared how we struggled to support our children past the first step of the sequence of engagement, the Empathy Step. Any invitation to respond to the expression or articulation of our understanding of their struggle or pain was initially rejected. The research of de Oliveira and Jackson (2017) on the self-perception of maternal empathy and the mediating effect of that self-perception, revealed that the more empathetic a mother perceived herself to be the more she felt capable of providing the support her child's needs. Each parent told of how their child would slowly begin to respond and share their feelings and thoughts over time

supporting the finding from Ashworth et al. (2012) that increased parental empathy is associated with increased parent and child communication. Leah was the only parent who did not tell of any experience of difficulty moving past the empathy step.

Evelyn, Leah and I recounted experiences with implementing Plan C with the children and the benefit the parent and the children received from it. Evelyn reflected on how Plan C removed unnecessary stress in her son's life, giving him the space to develop more trust in his relationship with his mother. Leah recounted how Plan C enabled her to be in-the-moment with her children, recognizing that they are all human and that it is ok to move a problem outside of that moment and address it later. Evelyn and Leah's experiences resonate with my own. Implementing Plan C regarding some of the expectations that are not critical has reduced stress levels of both me and my son. Reprioritizing some of the non-urgent or non-essential expectations provided Ben and I with a space of peaceful co-existence, where my expectations of imposing unrealistic expectations on my son were suspended. Without yet having developed or fine-tuned the skills acquired by practicing the CPS method, Plan C reduced the amount of tension my son and I were experiencing. That reduction of stress provided us the opportunities to relate with much less dysregulation and be much calmer. Each parent found the practice of Plan C to have an important function within their parenting practice and experience, each for a different reason, navigating the relentless societal expectations that impact the parent and child experience (Ungar 2017).

The third category of common elements are the parenting principles and values that each parent highlighted in their stories. There are four parenting principles identified: coping mechanisms; problem-solving on their own; 'this is how I want to parent'; and the perfect CPS practice.

### **Parenting Principles & Values**

In each of the parents' stories there are descriptions of the various coping mechanisms and strategies that the children and the parents rely upon to mitigate the stressors in their lives. Leah realized early on that her daughter, Lilith, used her advanced verbal skills to engage in detailed conversations with her mother to make sense of the world around her. This was very evident during our interview sessions. Lilith would often chime in with questions or insights for her mother as she shared her story with the lady on the computer. Leah also recounts her disappointment of being unable to visit the school with her daughter before classes started. Leah understood that establishing connection through visiting the school before classes started and creating a little familiarity was key to mitigating the anxieties that her daughter was experiencing as her first day was approaching. Evelyn recounted some of her son's coping mechanisms, the most profound of which was his retreat into the woods for escape and respite from the overwhelming experience with the social worker in the family car. She also mentioned playing with his fingers while in class and his gaming activities while at home.

The coping mechanisms mentioned in these stories were not limited to the children; coping mechanisms that the parents relied on were disclosed as well. Evelyn shared that she participated in the coping mechanism of online parent support groups, as well as receiving professional support for her practice of the CPS method, as well as for her own mental health. Leah's story did not disclose any specific coping mechanisms; however, it seems that her husband plays a role in helping her cope by supporting her especially at times when she is in need of a break. Heather was quite clear as she recounted her awareness that she was in need of self-care strategies and healthy coping mechanisms. She was able to take time off work to focus on herself and her son. Her toolbox and the preparedness that she organized proved to be very useful, such as the portfolio of parenting classes of evidence-based programs that she

and her husband completed, courses that promote the development of healthy and beneficial coping mechanisms. The coping mechanism that I most relied on during my son's meltdowns was the first step of the CPS method's sequence of engagement, the empathy step. I knew that if I could convey to my son when he was in the height of his dysregulation that I understood and felt his pain that he would calm and slowly regulate sooner than if I had just left him alone. Both Evelyn and Heather underscored their deliberate use of the empathy step which might suggest that they too experienced this step to have provided them a mechanism for coping as well. Ben's father and I devised our own system of transportation to school and a system of communication with hidden cell phones for emergency use. My strategic move to a place close to the college created an ease of accessibility through geographical proximity that was also intentionally arranged for coping purposes.

Each of these unique coping mechanisms of both child and parent speaks to the differential experience and impact of the parents and children in this study. Whether it is an intense oral engagement and inquiry, an escape into the woods, a parent's support groups, a parenting toolbox, or a secret cell phone, each are individualized and tailored responses to the various parenting, school, and societal systems that have a differential impact on our lived experience (Ungar, 2017).

**“This is the way I want to parent.”**

In three of the four stories I noticed a theme of affirmation, ‘this is the way I want to parent,’ when the parent discovered the philosophy behind the CPS method. The parent's story in which I did not see this take place was Heather's story. This may have been due to her familiarity with various other evidence-based parenting courses and practices. It was Leah that coined the phrase ‘this is the way I want to parent.’ Evelyn recounted how the philosophy of the method resonated with her, and how ‘it was the way she wanted to raise her children.’ My experience was not much different from either story. The method instantly

made sense to me, it gave me a working explanation as to why my son behaves the way he does sometimes, and it gave me a plan for what I can do to really help him.

### **Impact on the Perception of Teachers and Other Adult Relationships**

The transferability of the CPS method, the ability to apply the philosophy ‘kids/people do well if they can,’ or to implement the sequence of engagement with relationships beyond the familial context, is one of the attributes of the method (Greene, 2018). Each parent recounted their perception of the teachers in their child’s life as well as other meaningful adults. At this time, Evelyn is clear that she does not have the capacity to adopt a more understanding position on the behaviours of her son’s grade five teacher and the principal who supported that teacher due to the trauma that she experienced in relation to her son’s own traumatic experiences at the school. This experience is supported in the research of Schnabel et al. (2020), which examines the relationships between the experience of trauma by parents with their children who have challenging behaviours that disrupt establishing positive parent-teacher relationships. Despite this admission, she does offer her perception of her relationship with her colleagues, friends, and other family members. Evelyn found the method to be easily transferable at her workplace and in her relationships with her colleagues. She also highlights an experience she had with a friend she tried to support who is a teacher struggling to understand the communication behind her students’ behaviours. She described a troubling encounter she had with her cousin who held misinformed ideas on the effect of trauma on children. She recognized that both her friend and cousin, each are educators, most likely had been impacted by the stress of pandemic, both personally and professionally.

Leah reflected on her experience with the principal who tried to dissuade her from registering her daughter in school. She attributed the principal's disinclination for the success of her daughter’s school experience as the inability for perspective-taking by that principal.

When her daughter did begin her school experience, Leah paid recognition to the challenging class load of her daughter's classroom and how that may have influenced the teacher's perception of her daughter's compliant behaviour.

When asked the same question as to how her practice of the CPS method impacted her perception of her son's teachers, Heather was to the point; the thought had never crossed her mind. She had always understood the method to be a practice between her and her child. Heather does re-story some of her experiences with his teachers as positive and collaborative (or as collaborative as their school resources could permit). She described her perceptions of most of his teachers positively with the intention of promoting a meaningful learning experience for her son (as they implemented his unofficial IEP).

Like Evelyn, in the beginning of my CPS practice, I struggled to transfer the philosophical underpinnings of "people do well if they can" to the relationships with my son's grade five and six teachers. To this day, it is painful to reflect on those experiences. It has been almost three years, and now I can acknowledge and understand that my son's grade five and six teachers were stressed and unable to meet their professional expectations. Like most public school teachers, they had large class sizes, several students with IEP accommodations to juggle, and dwindling resources as funding of schools in Ontario continue to be cut. Today, my relationships with his teachers are that of a comradery, I perceive them as teammates. During these stressful pandemic learning environments and less than optimal virtual learning platforms, all of us have the same objective, which is to get my son through the semester with success; an experience that reflects the research findings of Kuhn et al. (2017) on parent-teacher relationships and the experience of partnership with the promotion of positive parental engagement. Every single teacher he has had from grade seven through to grade nine have been extremely accommodating to his learning needs and to his social and mental well-being. My perception of people, which includes his teachers, has

developed into the understanding that their behaviours and actions reflect the skills that are accessible to them at that moment.

Table 2  
Summary of Cross Case Analysis: Common Elements

Common Elements	Description
<b>The Experience of Adversity</b>	Each parent storied either their child's adverse experiences at school such as bullying, TDP or relational challenges with teachers, or their own adverse experiences.
<b>Ableism</b>	Each parent storied experiences that reflected internalized ableist attitudes by their teachers and school staff, by friends and family members, and by the medical system.
<b>Trauma</b>	Three of the four parents re-storied the distressing and traumatic experienced their child endured.  Whether the trauma was at school or implicated with the stress connected with school, each parent acknowledges the traumatic impact those experiences had on them.
<b>CPS Does Not Solve Mental Illness</b>	Evelyn and Heather reflect on the function of the method and how the method fits into their comprehensive approach to supporting their child.
<b>Futile Efforts of Advocacy</b>	Each parent recounts failed attempts to advocate for their child, such as obtaining IEPs, mental health care, and better inclusion in the classroom.
<b>Homeschooling / Reprieve from School</b>	Each parent re-storied the necessity to homeschool their child or for their child to take a reprieve from the traditional paradigm of school.
<b>Practice and Execution of the CPS Method</b>	Each parent reflected on the practice and execution of the CPS method, finding challenges with the Empathy Step, and experiencing the benefits of Plan C.
<b>Parenting Principles &amp; Values</b>	Each parent reflected on the various parent and coping strategies that reflected their parenting principles and values, such as respecting their child's coping strategies, while honouring their own.
<b>"This is the way I want to parent"</b>	Each parent recognized the value that the CPS method brings to their relationship with their child.

	Three of the four parents expressed the sentiment “this is how I want to parent” when they were first introduced to the method.
<b>Impact on the Perception of Teachers and Other Adults</b>	<p>Three of the four parents experienced the transferability of the CPS method.</p> <p>Each parent recognizes the systemic challenges that teacher deal with, and that these challenges make their job more difficult.</p> <p>Two of the parents acknowledged that the traumatic experiences with their child’s teachers interfered with their ability to transfer their skills of the CPS method to their experience of the teacher.</p>

### Singularities

This next section identifies and explores the meaningful singularities of each story, the unique experiences of each parent that did not seem to be a shared experience with the other parents. Most of the singularities are captured from the parents' stories, however, some of them are observations made during the interviews (see table 3).

The first singularity from Evelyn’s story is one such observation. Evelyn was the first interview, and I was impressed with the detail she was able to provide. Although she was fluent in English, her French accent made it obvious that English was not her first language, which only contributes to her impressive detailing and re-storying of her lived experiences. An example of a well-detailed experience was her encounter with the school social worker, an experience that was clearly impactful and left an explicit imprint on her memory. In fact, her experience of watching helplessly as a woman (whom she had never met before) forcibly try to manipulate her son, and then to suggest physically carry him into the school without his consent also qualifies as a unique parent-child traumatic experience that the other parents in the study did not experience. The last meaningful singularity offered in Evelyn’s story is her son’s need to take a rest from all academic learning (including learning at school or at

homeschool). Heather's son did have a similar experience of taking a temporary break from school, but his learning was not put on hold for an undetermined amount of time as it was for Evelyn's son.

Leah's story begins at home with a learning context of homeschooling, as opposed to the other stories where the children were already in school or had recently left. She is also the only parent who recounted a distrust of the public school system and a concern for her daughter having adverse experiences if she were to attend a public school. A side observation during our interview that was impossible to miss and ignore was her children occasional chiming in on our interview. The inquisitive interruptions were delightful and met perfectly the expectations of any curious child who felt safe in their environment to explore and investigate. Those brief encounters had a true "CPS vibe" as Leah supported her children's curiosities while collaborating with them on strategies to help them wait as she continued with the interview. It seems fitting to present the next singularity which is Leah's insistence on reinforcing and amplifying her daughter's voice and her daughter's wishes to her teachers. Leah highlighted in her story the importance of the schools understanding that it is her daughter that is leading her educational journey. Her views on the adaptability of the CPS method are another singularity within her story. She was the only parent to offer so early in the interview her perception of the adaptability of the method from one relationship to another. In fact, she attributes the feature of adaptability as one the features that drew her to the method.

Heather's story has several meaningful singularities. The first singularity occurred right at the beginning of the interview. Heather explained that she wanted to participate in this study because she wanted to report a limitation she discovered as she practiced the method. The limitation involved transitioning out of the empathy step. Heather was able to model and provide empathy to her son and inquire as to what the problem was (the first step

of the CPS method, the Empathy Step), but her son was unable to reciprocate and move into the sharing of concerns (the Sharing Step). Heather perceived this as a limitation of the CPS method. Also, Heather's reference of the collection of parenting courses and strategies as a parenting toolbox is another singularity in her story. Her toolbox allows her to customize her response and guidance to the complex needs of her son. The last meaningful singularity from her story is the view of the transferability of the CPS method. Heather was forthright and acknowledged that she had never considered implementing the method into her engagements with anyone other than her children. Her focus is on her son and supporting him through his mental health challenges.

Most of the singularities in my story focus on Ben's experience. However, one meaningful singularity identified was the exceptional coping strategies that his father I adopted to help us cope and conserve our mental health during these stressful times. The strategies included my strategic move to be close to both my son's school and his father's workplace, breaking school rules and providing Ben with a cell phone at school so that he could call me when he felt he needed to and driving Ben to school to avoid the bullying on the school bus. Ben's father and I sought professional help with our family doctor, requesting a referral to a child psychologist. Our referral was denied, and this experience is another singularity within my story. I perceived this as a system-level failure, our provincial health system failed our family. We did not have any knowledge of the local mental health center for children in our city (the center that taught us the CPS method) and our family doctor said there was nothing else he could do. The feeling of helplessness and abandonment from our family doctor and the medical community is singularity that was not present in any of the other stories. The last two singularities are centered on Ben. His relationship with his grade six principal is the first singularity. This principal was new to the school and his bond with Ben was completely unexpected by his father and me. Although Ben still struggled with

bullying from his peers in his sixth grade, his relationship with the principal made a world of difference for my son. The last singularity is Ben's self-advocacy. With the support of the principal, and the knowledge he picked up from me as he listened to the discussions I would have regarding my studies in early childhood development, Ben had new skills in grade six. He also collaborated and problem-solved with his French teacher regarding his seating arrangement, as well as staging a protest (against that same teacher) over what he perceived to be a mishandling of justice.

Table 3  
Summary of Cross Case Analysis: Singularities

Participant	Singularities
<b>Evelyn</b>	She provided a teacher's perspective. Unique parent-child traumatic experience at the school. Her son was the only child that needed a full break from school and traditional learning.
<b>Leah</b>	She began with homeschool, with a child eager to attend public school. Her challenges were not with the fear of TDP, but with the concern that a hyper focus on TDP will leave her daughter behind and unseen.
<b>Heather</b>	She came to the interview with an open objective to examine her perceived limitation of the CPS method. She learned a series of evidence-based practices to create a toolbox of strategies to support her son. She was the only parent that did not experience the transferability of the CPS method.
<b>Christina</b>	The exceptional coping strategies and measures taken to support Ben's needs. Ben developed a unique and comforting relationship with his school's principal. Ben was unwavering with his self-advocacy and stance against injustice experienced within the classroom.

## Conclusion

The relational experience is the conduit in which the CPS method operates and guides individuals through an optimal interpersonal and learning experience. As the relational experience is supported with empathy and compassion, a collaborative resolution becomes more achievable. The purpose of this study is to examine the relational experience of the parent as they practice the CPS method and as they adhere the philosophical underpinnings of the method; the CPS method and the effective collaborative experience is contingent upon the subjective experience of those involved in the process (Heath et al., 2020). This examination of the parent's relational experience focuses on their perception and experience of their child's teacher. While all the parents experienced various levels of adversity with their child's teacher, all but one parent acknowledged that the method was transferable or adaptable to other relationships. Most importantly, this study revealed that the parent's practice of the CPS method can impact the parent's perception and experience of their child's teacher. There is, however, a caveat attached to this finding. Trauma did impact some of the participants' ability to apply the CPS philosophy 'kids/people do well if they have the skills to do well' and 'behaviour is communication' to their perception of the teachers that were implicated in the traumatic events. Two of the four parents admitted that they were not able to, at that time, transfer the CPS philosophical principles to these teachers to have a more compassionate perspective of them. In my experience, it took time to learn how to manage the stress and trauma that is associated with the teachers at the centre of my son's trauma at school, and perhaps time needed to hone my CPS skills.

Another finding is the impact of the parents' CPS practice on their children. Each of the four parents experienced their own child successfully executing their own collaborative problem-solving strategy, either with them (the parent) or with their teacher. Whether it was vacating an environment that felt unsafe, a determined self-advocacy for self-government and

control of their own educational journey, a bittersweet collaboration regarding self-harming tools, or a protest and walk-out over injustices in the classroom, each child demonstrated the competencies of their own collaborative problem-solving skills.

### **Limitations**

The CPS method offers an alternative, and possibly a provocative new mindset. It may be seen as provocative in the sense that it rejects the traditional understanding that unwanted behaviours require a negative or punitive response, or that the experience of a negative or punitive response will persuade the student to willfully change their behaviour to meet the expectations made of them. The CPS method suggests removing the focus from the unwanted behaviour and refocusing on the skills that the student requires to behave more adaptively and thus effectively. This new mindset may be challenging for some to understand and accept and may be difficult or incompatible to easily implement in public schools due to institutional policies based on traditional assumptions of learning. The traditional approach to guidance has become so intrinsic to the understanding of learning that it not only involves reward and punishment as a means for discipline and child guidance, but it also serves as a means for the evaluation of student learning. Students who meet the assessment expectations are rewarded with passing grades and students who do not meet these expectations are penalized with failing grades. A successful sequence of engagement can be very difficult to achieve in a school setting when there is still a lingering threat of a potential punishing consequence for the struggling student.

Another limitation of the CPS method coined by Evelyn is that “CPS does not solve mental illness.” This sentiment was clearly storied by both Evelyn and Heather. As effective as the method can be at helping parents and teachers support children through their challenging behaviours, if the source of the challenging behaviours is physiological, such as

mental illness, visual or hearing impairment, or even digestive disorders (all of which can be reasons for behaviours that parents and teachers find challenging and even overwhelming), in situations such as these, the CPS method will not be able to address the underlying problem that the challenging behaviour is trying to communicate. Although Evelyn and Heather reported improved relational experiences with their sons due to their practice of the CPS method and the Empathy Step, both sons still required professional care and treatment. As expressed by the Differential Impact Theory, the complexity of challenges (such as the complex challenges of both Evelyn and Heather's sons) reflect the complexity of systems required for a meaningful and effective response; a response perhaps like that of Heather's parenting toolbox.

Regarding the limitations of this study, parenting is a dynamic and multi-faceted experience of which a parent's relationship with their child/ren is all but one aspect (admittedly, a significant one). This study only focused on the parent's experience of the relationship with their child's teacher, but there are other relationships and factors that can impact a person's parenting experience and their practice of the CPS method, such as their spouse or partner, their workplace, extended family relations, and socio-economic factors. Regarding the students learning experience, this study limited its focus on the dyadic relationship of the teacher and parent. However, there are other dyadic relationships that can have a direct impact on the student's learning experience and deserve recognition, such as the relationships between the teacher and principal (perhaps even student and principal). Time was also another limitation; restricting the interview to one hour was very challenging. The depth, intensity, and detail of the experiences storied by the participants demanded the necessary time and respect to be shared in the space and time that was required.

### **Contributions & Further Research**

This study on the relational experience of the parent as they practice the CPS method contributes to the growing body of knowledge on the importance of the relational health of our children, and families. It highlights the importance of the relationships between the student, the parent, and the teacher, and the profound impact these relationships can have on the student's learning experience. This study also contributes to the research on the CPS method and the impact it has on parents, families, teachers, and health professionals.

In the context of supporting students and their families, providing them with an optimal learning experience, I believe further research on the teacher's experience of their practice of the CPS method is warranted. The current study demonstrated that the practice of the CPS method by only one person in the dyadic relationship has the potential to have a positive impact on that relationship, by improving that one person's (the parent) subjective experience and perception of the other (the teacher). Would a teacher practicing the CPS method in their classroom have similar experiences regarding the relationships with their students and the parents of their students? Teacher-parent school meetings perform a fundamental role in promoting and sustaining relationships between schools and the families they serve. Within each teacher-parent meeting a learning experience occurs, for both teacher and parent. The potential for that learning experience (within the CPS mindset of behaviour is based on skill not will) and the possible contributions and benefits the CPS method can bring to that relational learning experience for the parent could be addressed in future research. Another possibility of future research that bears relevance in the field of inclusive learning and relational health is the examination of the child's perspective of the CPS method. As the CPS method continues to be researched within the learning environment and within the family context, the child's experience and their perspective could provide a valuable insight to the efficacy and relevance of this alternative practice.

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## Appendices

### Appendix A. Definitions

#### ALSUP

Assessment of Lagging Skills and Unsolved Problems: This assessment guide identifies the specific lagging skills and unsolved problems that is impacting a particular child/adolescence's behaviour.

#### Challenging behaviours

The maladaptive behaviours that reflect the lagging skills that can include disruptive, aggressive, non-compliant, or unwanted behaviours. Challenging behaviours are typically in response to the inability to respond adaptively to the expectations placed on the child in a given situation.

#### Collaboration

The process in which the adult and the child work together to explore and discover possible solutions to the problem behind the challenging behaviour.

#### CPS method

The Collaborative Problem Solving (CPS) method: A method based on the philosophy that children do well if they have the skills to do well, and if they are not doing well, they either do not have the skills to do well or something is blocking access to their skills that would enable them to do well. The CPS method offers three plans or strategies of problem-solving: Plan A (the authoritarian approach); Plan B (the collaborative approach); Plan C (the reprioritizing approach).

#### Empathy Step

The first step in Plan B of the Collaborative Problem Solving method. The objective is to collect information and insight from the child exhibiting challenging behaviour to understand their concern and perspective as to why there is a problem. This process encourages the adult to empathize with the child, who in turn feels understood and validated.

#### Individualized Education Plan (IEP)

This document outlines the program of specialized instruction that promotes the optimal learning experience for students identified with learning challenges.

#### Lagging Skills

The arrested or underdeveloped neurocognitive skills that are the reasons behind their challenging behaviours and unsolved problems.

#### Plan A

The authoritarian style of problem-solving that the CPS method identifies as one of three possible strategies for managing challenging behaviour.

### Plan B

The collaborative, and preferred style of problem-solving involving a three-step sequence of engagement: the empathy step that promotes regulation; the sharing step that promotes relatedness; the collaborative step that promotes equitable and mutual solutions.

### Plan C

The temporary setting aside, or re-prioritizing, unsolved problems. This plan provides the opportunity to focus on high priority unsolved problems.

### Sequence of Engagement (Regulate, Relate, Reason)

This is the three steps carried out by the Plan B of the CPS method. The first step of 'Regulation' provides the opportunity to calm and regulate the brain. The second step of 'Relate' follows when regulation is established allowing for a relational engagement to be experienced. The final step of 'Reason' is the invitation for collaboration and meaningful problem-solving. Without the succession of these three steps in this specific order, the experience of genuine collaboration becomes less likely.

### Sharing Step

The second step in Plan B of the Collaborative Problem Solving method. The objective is to share the adult concern, providing the opportunity for child to practice perspective taking, the experience of a different point of view.

### Traditional Discipline Practices

Discipline practices based on the operant conditioning model of reward and punishment. Behaviours considered to be appropriate and acceptable are encouraged with

reward while behaviours considered to be inappropriate and unacceptable are discouraged with punishment.

#### Unsolved Problems

The representation of the lagging skills that are required for specific problematic situations resulting in a response of challenging behaviours.

## Appendix B. Questions for Participants

### Part One of Interview One: Focused Life History

1. Could you tell me as much as possible about the details of what brought you to the CPS method?
2. Can you tell me about the experiences that influenced you to consider exploring the CPS method?
3. How would you describe your parenting experience before learning the CPS method?
4. How would you describe your relationship with your children (and family) before learning the CPS method?
5. How would you describe your relationship with your children's teachers before learning the CPS method?

\*Explore the "notable" experiences the participant shared

### Part Two of Interview Two: The Details of Lived Experience

1. Please reconstruct a day in your *family life (on a school day)* from the moment you woke up to the time you feel asleep.

\*Still looking for concrete details, probe notable details

2. Describe how the practice of the CPS method works for you as a parent and your experience of a parent?
3. How do your family members respond to your practice of the CPS method?
4. How do you describe your relationship with your children now as a practitioner of the CPS method?

5. How do you describe your relationship with your children's teachers now as a practitioner of the CPS method?

Explore details that “stand out” mentioned by the participant.

#### Interview Two: Reflection on the Meaning

1. What did your parenting mean to you in the context of where you have been and where you are headed?
2. Describe the meaning the CPS method has on your parenting experience, and the meaning that this impact has to you.
3. Reflect on how the CPS method impacts your experience as a parent?

\*Explore connections between previous interviews

4. Describe the impact the CPS method has on your experience of your relationship with your children, and the meaning that this impact has to you.
5. Reflect on how the CPS method impacts your experience and your perception of your relationship with your children?

\*Continue to explore connections between previous interviews

6. Describe the impact the CPS method has on your experience of your relationship with your children’s teachers, and the meaning that this impact has to you.
7. Reflect on how the CPS method impacted your experience and your perception of your relationship with your children’s teachers?