A Phenomenological Study of Kindergarten Suspension of Ojibwe Tribal Students in Two Rural Wisconsin Public Schools
Dr. LaVonne Chenault-Goslin

- Educational doctorate in *Teaching & Learning*
- 30 years working in tribal community
- Mental health, social work, foster care, child abuse & neglect, youth services, community wellness education
- Knowledge of high number of Native American student suspensions
- Aware of numerous transition challenges from preschool or head start to public school kindergarten

email: lavonne_goslin@yahoo.com
Qualitative Phenomenological Study

What are the experiences of Ojibwe tribal students who were suspended in kindergarten?

Sub questions:

- What are the memories or perceptions of these Ojibwe tribal students?
- Do they believe this suspension impacted their subsequent school experience?
- What are the parents’ beliefs about their child’s experience in kindergarten?
Methodology

- Participants were recruited for this doctoral study who were enrolled and suspended in kindergarten in one of three identified Wisconsin public schools during a specific nine year time period.

- Students who agreed to participate in study were in Grades 5-8. One parent per student also participated.

- 83% male students participated; 17% female
ZERO TOLERANCE POLICIES AND SUSPENSION

- Students return to school displaying the same or more severe behavior...

- which leads administrators to repeatedly use suspension for the same students.

- Suspension also negatively affects academic achievement;

- it is a strong indicator that a student will drop out of school and may lead to juvenile delinquency.

- The effect of these zero-tolerance policies in schools--it becomes apparent that there is more evidence that they do more harm than good.

(Martinez, 2009. A System Gone Berserk: How are zero-tolerance policies really affecting schools?153, 155)
Summary of Suspension Rates

- 5th grade: Suspended in kindergarten. (* Had IEP stipulation) participant: Grades 1, 2, 3, 4, 5. *If student sent home, can return next day. (Had IEP stipulation - Not counted in average)

- 6th grade: Suspensions each year K, 1, 2, 3, 4 participant: Expulsions 5th & 6th grades (5 grade levels) (Expelled 2 years)

- 6th grade: Suspensions in Grades K, 2, 4, 5, 6 participant: Alternative Educational Placement 1/2 year in Grades 3, 4, 5 (5 grade levels) (Alt. Educ. Placement: 3 years)

- 6th grade: Suspensions in Grades K, 1, 3, 5, 6 (5 grade levels)

- 8th grade: Suspensions in Grades K, 1st, 2nd, 3rd, 4th, 5th, 6th participant: Not in home – Suspensions at different school – Grades 7-8 (9 grade levels)

- 8th grade: Suspensions in Grades K, 1, 2, 3, 4, 5 participant: Home schooled in Grades 6, 7, 8th. Attends public school 2 days per week in Grade 8. (6 grade levels) (Home Schooled: 3 years)

Suspension average: 6 grade levels per student

**5th grade participant not counted per IEP stipulation.**

(Summary Extrapolated from Table 13, p. 155)
Parent Themes

• Student Safety
• Perceived Risks
• Police Liaison Involvement 83%

• Alternative Educational Placement 83%

• Medication Issues Related to IEP's 83%

Child Themes

• Transition Issues 67%

• Bullying
• Labeling of Students
• Physical Restraint of Students
• Communication 50%

• Juvenile Justice Involvement 33%

• Meltdowns
• Physical Violence 100%

• Bullying
• Labeling of Students 50%

• Trust Issues
• Schoolwork
• Physical Challenges 17%
Parent Concerns
Individual Education Plans (IEP)

- 40% of parents indicated no one listened to them during the IEP process or at the meetings.

- 67% of students had pre-existing IEP’s when they entered kindergarten. No follow-through on the public school’s part when an IEP was already in place.

- Parents were made to feel inferior/inadequate in the IEP process

- Ongoing problems (in 1st grade)—child was still being locked in a special room
• Child had behavioral IEP. Teachers and staff need to pay attention in noticing bullying incidents. They need to start hearing and seeing what it is the kids are doing.

• Child had wrong IEP diagnosis for seven years. (Diagnosed with ADHD, turned out to be food allergies, which contributed to challenging behavior.)

• Parent concern about child not getting the right diagnosis.

• School staff did not know child’s diagnosis or medication even after working with child for some time.

• Parent was threatened by school officials with suspension or expulsion of his son if his son was not forced to take the medication for his diagnosis.
• Parent stated that child did not understand why he kept getting suspended (8th grader’s parent).

• Unprofessional conduct, comments, and trust violated by school staff (8th grader’s parent).

• Child suspended multiple times, then expelled. They had IEP’s and they tried different things. He was not there much in one grade, then the next grade—he was hardly there at all, then in the last grade—he hasn’t been there. So, for the last three years, he’s not been to school (6th grader’s parent).

• Parent felt it was very important for parents to receive IEP information and education about the process early on (8th grader’s parent).
FIGURE 5

Cycle of School Failure or Success

ATTENDANCE

BEHAVIOR

ACADEMICS

No More Suspensions
Maintaining Grades
Not Failing
Grades Improve
School Success

KINDERGARTEN SUSPENSION

PUBLIC SCHOOL EXPECTATIONS FOR KINDERGARTEN

Change School
Home Schooling
Alternative Education Placement
Juvenile Justice Involvement and/or Placement
Ongoing Suspensions
Absenteeism
Grades Drop/Failing
Possible Dropout

EXTERNAL
Poverty
Historical Trauma

INTERNAL
Loss of Language/Culture
Boarding School Impact on Models of Parenting for 3rd, 4th, 5th Generations

PUBLIC SCHOOL EXPECTATIONS FOR KINDERGARTEN
Recommendations

1. In order to be proactive, tribal governments and/or tribal representatives should advocate for the community to make sure needed services for tribal children with IEP’s are being provided in a timely manner so that these children can have an ultimately smooth entry into public school kindergarten.

2. To optimize a smooth transition into kindergarten, create frequent and intensified services for families of incoming kindergarten students who have existing Individual Education Plans (IEP).

3. Tribes/tribal groups with disproportionate numbers of special needs Native American students being suspended in school should consider obtaining funding for a tribal liaison position to present training for these parents about their child’s rights and how to be an advocate for their child; to empower parents in receiving quality, timely IEP services and resources on a consistent basis, and to be a strong tribal voice for the children and parents.

4. Focus on improving communication issues surrounding school suspensions between school staff, parents, students, and community.
• 5. A school/community team may be initiated—if one does not exist—to discuss whether school suspensions are reducing behavioral issues or intensifying the behavioral referrals of the same students? As an team, implement positive alternatives to reducing/dealing with behavioral issues.

• 6. Promotion of a curriculum for anti-bullying in school as well as destigmatization regarding unofficial labeling of students with challenging behaviors or who have received school suspensions.

• 7. If schools continue to use physical restraints, then clear policies on student restraint procedures, consistent and increased staff training on safe use of restraints, and clear policies and timelines on notification to parents.

• 8. Prioritize cultural sensitivity/staff competency efforts and community involvement to maximize best learning environment for students, especially those with a high percentage of enrolled students who are of diverse nationalities (specifically tribal groups).