SPECIAL EDUCATION IN INDIAN COUNTRY: CONCEPTIONS OF DISABILITY,
SPECIAL EDUCATION, SURVIVANCE AND REFUSAL

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A DISSERTATION

Submitted to
Michigan State University
in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the degree of

Anthropology– Doctor of Philosophy

2025

ABSTRACT

Indigenous students are disproportionately represented in special education programs in the

United States, with 19% of them tracked into special education programs in public schools.

Despite this fact, the intersection of Indigeneity and disability remains underexplored, offering a

unique opportunity to develop frameworks that promote positive educational outcomes for

Indigenous students. This dissertation examines how unique Indigenous cultural contexts

intersect with experiences of systemic oppression to shape understandings of disability, special

needs, and accommodations for Indigenous children in special education.

During nine months of ethnographic fieldwork at a Tribal school in central Minnesota,

situated within Anishinaabe territory, I explored how parents, guardians, and educators assessed

the need for special education services, the factors influencing placement decisions, and the

outcomes for students receiving services. I also observed the aids and accommodations provided

to students in special education and how these supports were implemented in practice . I also

interviewed students using a novel method that I developed for Indigenous children using art

elicitation. The interview method was mostly successful with students being able to express

aspects of themselves and identities in both visual media and in conversation. This method

allowed them to communicate complex topics and ideas, which are otherwise difficult for them

to vocalize.

My dissertation integrates analytical framings from Indigenous education, disability

critical race theory (DisCrit), and critical Indigenous theory in presenting several key themes.

First, the concept of survivance, the continued existence and survival of Indigenous people in the

face of colonialism, and refusal, the act of refusing settler colonial power, are useful for

understanding educational environments. The Tribal school itself was created as an expression of

both survivance and refusal, and these two concepts are also expressed by the families who attend the school. They express survivance by enrolling their children in a school that offers a culturally and community-based education, but they also express refusal in different ways, notably when elders reject or resist efforts to enroll children in their care in special education services. I emphasize the importance of trust and relationship-building with students and their families because of historical and contemporary trauma surrounding educational institutions. The legacy of trauma complicates the understanding and categorization of disability within the Tribal school context because, as I argue, there is an attempt to separate and make distinctions between students struggling with trauma and students struggling with disabilities, even though trauma and learning disabilities share similar symptomology. In this area, I argue that the focus on this distinction may lead to providing more effective interventions. It also challenges disability reductionism to instead engage more effectively with the long-term impacts of social issues affecting Indigenous people.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

This dissertation asks how Anishinaabe cultural contexts may affect definitions of disability, special needs and accommodations. To answer this question, I carried out nine months of ethnographic field work at a Tribal school in the Anishinaabe territory of central Minnesota, specifically focusing on special education. I explored how parents, guardians and teachers determine if students need special education classes or services; why students are placed in special education and the outcomes of receiving services. I also observed what aids and accommodations are recommended for students in special education, and how these are used by the students. My research provides new insights into conceptions around disability and what these conceptions mean to Indigenous students.

My dissertation has a historical and background chapter and three data-focused chapters that situate my research in the contexts of scholarly literatures on Indigenous education, disability studies and critical race theory (DisCrit), and Indigenous theories. Three key themes became prevalent through the research and are the focus of each chapter. One of these major themes is the concept of survivance in educational environments and how it is important to understand as part of building trust and relationships with students and their families. The second theme is trauma and how it complicates the understanding of disability in the Tribal school setting. The last theme is identity and how the special education students viewed themselves and others.

Background and the Context of Native American Education

For context, I will use the term Native American when referring to Indigenous people within the borders of the United States, and Indigenous people to refer to Indigenous people in general, both within and outside the US. The term Indian will only be used for direct quotations or is a

government naming norm, such as the Bureau of Indian Education. For this dissertation I will specifically be discussing the Ojibwe, which are part of the Anishinaabe cultural group. The Anishinaabe are sometimes referred to as the Anishinaabek in the plural form. The Anishinaabe consist of the Chippewa in Minnesota, and Odawa and Potawatomi and others in the broader region of the Great Lakes. With 130,048 individuals who claim this identity alone or in combination with other groups and are one of the ten largest nations in the US according to the 2020 census (Sanchez-Rivera, Jacobs, & Spence, 2020).

The Anishinaabe speak Anishinaabemowin, with many dialectical variations across the vast region that is their home. The Anishinaabe are culturally unique and different from other Midwestern nations like the Miami, the Ho-Chunk and the Meskwaki, they occupy a similar ecological environment, a similar history because of their regional location, and have interacted with each other over many centuries sharing cultural materials, norms, and practices (Edmunds, 2008). In Minnesota there are seven Ojibwe and Chippewa reservations. These reservations are all located north of Minneapolis-St. Paul, while the four Dakota reservations are to the south.

Minnesota is unique in that it has four Tribal schools that provide K-12 education, where most Midwestern states have one or two Tribal Schools or in some cases no Tribal schools at all (" BIE Schools Directory," ; Wolfe & Sheridan-McIver, 2018). Tribal schools were specifically created as a vehicle of Tribal self-determination and their curricula developed with community needs in mind (Tippeconnic, 2000). They are subject to federal laws and required to conform to national standards (Tippeconnic, 2000). Not all Tribes have the funding to support and run Tribal schools, and Tribes without Tribal schools rely on public schools for educating their citizens (Wolfe & Sheridan-McIver, 2018).

Minnesota is also unique because it has encouraged culturally responsive learning in

classrooms to promote knowledge of Native Americans within the state's borders. Minnesota has worked with Tribal communities to create appropriate resources for what the state of Minnesota refers to as Indian education, which includes professional development ("American Indian Education," 2023). The state has also worked with Native American communities to establish standards around Indian education.

Field Site

The group I worked with identified themselves as Ojibwe. To maintain anonymity, I will not be specific in providing details about the community, and I will refer to their Tribal school with the pseudonym Ode'imin School, which translates to heart berry or strawberry school. Ode'imin offers K-12 education, and an alternative education program. To attend the school, students had to be Tribally enrolled, but did not have to be members of the school's Tribe or the Ojibwe Nation. At the time of my fieldwork, there was at least one family who were Anishinaabe, but did not identify as belonging to the Ojibwe nation.

I worked with the elementary school program which constituted kindergarten through fifth grade and had about one hundred students enrolled in the year 2022. There was one teacher per grade, and the average class size was between fifteen to twenty students. Ode'imin school prided itself on its small class sizes and being able to give students individual attention.

Like most schools in Minnesota, the school utilized a multi-tiered system of support (MTSS), a framework that integrates student data with instruction to improve student achievement (Freeman, Simonsen, & McCoach, 2016). MTSS supports students' social, emotional and behavioral needs through a strength-based approach. The school also utilized positive behavioral interventions and supports (PBIS), which is a tiered framework for supporting students' mental health, as well so social, emotional, behavioral and academic needs

(Freeman et al., 2016). PBIS like MTSS is data driven, but engages the students, their families, and communities in co-creating culturally responsive practices with the school itself. Both PBIS and MTSS break down student support into three tiers. In MTSS and PBIS, tier one is core instruction for all students; tier two is targeted instruction for students who need additional help, which often takes the form of small group interventions; and tier three is intensive intervention for students who need individualized support (Freeman et al., 2016). Ode'imin was a tier two school since they were only capable of providing tier two supports for students.

Students that required more intensive interventions could not be accommodated by the school and often were required to attend the local public schools or more specialized institutions. The principal told me that they would have liked to accommodate tier three students, but because they did not have the funding or resources to support students with more intensive needs the school could not admit them. I discussed this with a member of the school board in an interview who said that she wished they could have them, and it was hard to turn away families who would have benefitted from the school. She told me:

> *I wish that we could take more, at least level three students. It's just hard telling the parents or family that we can't accept their kids because of their levels of IEP… Because if a kid wants to come to school here, we shouldn't tell them that they can't based on their IEP.*

Individual Education plan (IEP) which is a document that establishes an educational plan for the student, specifically the services the student will receive and guarantees specific accommodations for the student. The school maintained the state standards for accreditation but also implemented culturally important activities in the curriculum. For example, all students were required to take Anishinaabemowin classes, where they learned the language, played

traditional games, engaged in harvesting medicines, and did traditional crafts. Outside of Anishinaabemowin classes the school provided traditional drumming for the boys, and they hosted two powwows a year. They also took part in annual sugar bushing activities, where they harvested maple sap from the maple trees, and the adults reduced and distilled the sap into syrup, which was then used to feed the community at a pancake breakfast.

As students increased in age they could participate in more cultural activities. For example, middle school students were also taken out to do wild rice harvesting at the beginning of the school year on the local lake. In the winter they would make their own spears and go spearfishing on the ice and then process the fish.

Methodology

Anishinaabemowin has a word for science, Ezhichigeyang. The Ojibwe Word list translates the word science into naanaagadagagwegikenjigewin which means: "s/he investigates to know things" (Jones, Jourdain, & Tainter, 2011). However, Anishinaabekwe Kathy Absolon (2022) uses the word Kaandossiwin which means "How we come to know," as a way to construct her methodology and investigate the world around her using Indigenous ways of knowing and understanding. In Anshinaabe cultural contexts, the Anishinaabek observe their surroundings and how they relate to their surroundings (Absolon, 2022). They do not attempt to divorce themselves from the situation as they recognize themselves to be an important part of the system. In addition, Indigenous methodologies and theory recognize that there are multiple truths and multiple sources of information which are valid and can contribute to our understanding of our world (Absolon, 2022). Though participants may contradict each other and sometimes even themselves they are still speaking truths and contributing to the understanding of the school as a system and institution (Smith & Griffith, 2022).

I have attempted to incorporate the teachings in Absolon's (2022) Kaandossiwin within my own ethnographic study of the Tribal school. For my methods I used participant observation engaging as a classroom volunteer. I conducted semi-structured interviews formally with key interlocutors to contextualize specific observations and supplement participant observation.

I did not attempt to minimize or reduce my presence within the school to avoid disruption. Instead, I made myself a part of the system by becoming a paraprofessional providing educational support to special education students by assisting students with academic work, helping them with social and emotional learning (SEL), sensory breaks, and behavioral monitoring. I was split between providing in classroom support known as "Push in" services which is providing support for students within the mainstream, or general education, classroom setting. I also assisted with pull out services, when we took special education students out of the classroom to work on specific areas of learning such as SEL, academics, or sensory breaks.

I also occasionally worked as a substitute teacher filling in for general education teachers, or for special education staff such as special education teachers, and paraprofessionals. In doing this work I became involved in various activities alongside research participants, gaining a more comprehensive perspective that might not have been available otherwise (DeWalt & DeWalt, 2011).

I was able to do this work due to my own past experiences. Prior to graduate school, I worked for my local community mental health center and provided in home support to families with disabled family members. I was also informed by my own positionality. I am a former special education student myself, originally diagnosed as being emotionally impaired (EI). I am also the older sibling to two brothers on the autism spectrum who received varying degrees of accommodation. While my youngest brother is less severe, he still received special education

services and still struggles in different areas. The older brother is more severe, having gone to a day school for severely impaired children and young adults, and as an adult is supported by family and the county's Community Mental Health Authority.

Due to my own connections, my relations to my siblings and the institutions that support them, I have gained experiences that give me particular understandings of policy, disability, and educational services. This allowed me to relate to the students in my research in different and interesting ways that I was not necessarily expecting. It also helped me develop trust and establish a rapport with school staff, students, and to a certain extent, some of the parents and grandparents as well.

In becoming part of the system, I was better able to view things from the perspective of the staff who work with the students, while also being aware of the other parts of the systems and institutions that controlled and constrained my actions. My thoughts, feelings and opinions developed while in this position are important data because of the ways I was influenced by the various systems at play, as were my colleagues at the school. I reflected on this in daily fieldnotes I wrote during and after school hours.

In keeping with Absolon's (2022) methodology, it is also important that I ground and position myself in the context of this research. In the community I am an outsider as I am not a member of the Tribe, or the Ojibwe or Anishinaabe. Neither am I from Minnesota, nor do I have a connection to the state. I am a Euro-American person of Bohemian German descent on my father's side and Irish Dutch on my mother's. I grew up in a rural town in Michigan known as Chesaning, a corruption of the Ojibwe name which was Chi Asiniin (Big Rock Place). Coming from a rural town myself, helped me better relate to the students and their lives, despite not being Indigenous myself.

My schedule changed multiple times over the course of my fieldwork as it did also for the rest of the staff. During the beginning of each semester there was a lot of confusion between special education staff and the special education coordinator over the serviceable minutes each child was to receive and how they were going to accommodate what was in a student's One of the special education teachers complained and showed how they had been given five separate schedules over the course of the month of September.

Additional changes happened throughout the year as they had to shuffle staff around to cover different students based on changes in employment, and because the needs of the students changed. For the most part my schedule stayed the same from the end of September till the Christmas break, and then it changed again following the break and the new semester started. It changed a third time after Spring break when we lost some additional staff and I was transferred to work half of my time at the middle school and high school, and the other half at the elementary school.

As a paraprofessional our time is measured in minutes, as each student receiving special education services is required to get so many minutes of service from special education staff. If I were to approximate, from September to December, of the eight hours, or 480 minutes, in the school day I spent 90 minutes acting as a monitor for kindergarten and first grade recess and breakfast, as was expected of the paraprofessionals. I did 210 minutes doing push in services at different grade levels, and 90 minutes observing or assisting in pull out services. I took approximately two thirty-minute breaks during the day which I used to conduct various observations, interview employees or fill in when needed. I also took between 60 to 90 minutes at the end of school day to write down my notes of the day and have informal conversations with the rest of the special education staff who stayed after school to complete paperwork.

This changed significantly from January to April. For that time, I spent 75 minutes monitoring, since I had to do an older student's sensory break during recess, so I was only present for half of recess. In addition, the time I spent doing push in services increased significantly to five hours total. The only pull out services I did was for 15 minutes for a student's sensory break. Our special education coordinator was trying to encourage more push in supports for students.

The time from April to May was strange in that I spent roughly half of my day at the middle and high school. I will not be counting this in my time spent, which includes one of my breaks which I spent at the high school, or the time it took me to get from the high school to the elementary school. At the elementary school I came in during the second half of the day after they had recess and lunch, so I had no monitoring duties. All my time at the elementary school was shifted to push in services, which was a total of 240 minutes. I still had between 60 and 90 minutes that I spent with staff at the end of the day. Over the course of the school year, I spent roughly 870 hours conducting participant observation (Figures 1.1 and 1.2).

Figure 1.1 Time divided each day into tasks, measured in minutes.

	Monitoring	Push in	Pull out	Additional minutes
Minutes for Sep, 2022 to Dec 2022	90	210	190	90-120
Minutes for Jan 2023 to Apr, 2023	75	300	15	90-120
Minutes for Apr, 2023 to May	0	240	0	60-90

During my time at the elementary school, I was able to spend some time with each grade. The bulk of my time was spent with the second grade, followed by third grade, and then kindergarten. This also changed throughout the school year as well, as shown in Figure 1.2.

Figure 1.2 Time spent with each grade divided into minutes.

	Kindergarten	First Grade	Second Grade	Third Grade	Fourth Grade	Fifth Grade
Hours for Sep, 2022 to Dec 2022	120	90	150	90	30	60
Hours for Jan 2023 to Apr, 2023	105	90	120	180	30	75
Hours for Apr, 2023 to May 2023	0	30	30	0	60	60
Average time spent in hours	75	70	100	90	40	65

I did not strictly adhere to the schedules set during these three periods of time. I often subbed and filled in for other staff when they took days off, or if they needed to leave early, increasing my contact with certain students that I did not see on a regular basis.

Engaging in participant observation through volunteering is an essential part of Indigenous methodologies as establishing reciprocity is extremely important in Indigenous contexts. In Indigenous ontologies the world is regulated by a series of reciprocal relationships that establish trust and understanding. This is reflected in ceremony, language, and people's relationship with the world. For example, when harvesting medicines, engaging in prayer, or seeking knowledge from an elder it is important to leave a tobacco offering. I situate my service to the school and students in humble parallel to this fundamental epistemology.

Participant observation partially informed the semi-structured interviews I carried out. Semi-structured interviews, while made up of pre-formulated questions allowed for open ended answers. Semi-structured interviews are exploratory, allowing for the development of initial hypotheses or ideas, clarification of contextual information and observations, and operationalizing factors into variables (Schensul & LeCompte, 2013). While I had an established

interview guide, I used observations to direct and guide the interviews and formulate supplemental questions.

At the Tribal school I interviewed twenty adults who varied in their engagement with students. Of the adults I recruited, nine were elementary teachers, two special education teachers, four administrators, three specialized staff members which included the school social worker, nurse and a reading specialist, five parents who had students at the school, and seven special education students (Figure 1.3). Teachers, administrators, and staff were voluntarily recruited through daily interactions. The parents and guardians were voluntarily recruited through school handouts, chain-link referrals from teachers and others, and through my interactions with parents and guardians at the school. I was most successful in recruiting parents through in person interactions at school events. I also interviewed seven students, who were recruited using handouts sent home, and through in-person interactions with their parents at different events.

Figure 1.3 Number of participants and the roles they occupied.

Interview Type	Teachers	Special education teachers	Specialized Staff	Administrator	Parents	Students
Number of Participants	9	2	3	4	5	7

Analysis

During data collection I took written and typed notes of my observations from my time in the classroom and then stored these on a secure computer. While I took written notes during interviews, I also got permission from most of my participants to record interviews, which were later transcribed. Those that did not wish to be recorded were not recorded with the digital

recorder, instead I took notes as they spoke. Texts were scanned or downloaded onto my computer and then archived and cataloged digitally on my desktop.

Following data collection, I coded the interview transcripts, notes, and texts using the software MaxQDA for themes. Using a grounded theory approach, I used both axial and selective coding to code the data. Axial coding allows for the examination of relationships between various discourses and values that are present in the data. This analysis allowed me to see how different institutions, such as schools, Tribes, state and federal governments, and other organizations are siloed or intersect with each other based on values and discourses that are expressed in interviews and participant observation. Selective coding allowed me to organize the data and isolate specific values and discourses related to education, culture, and identity (Bernard, 2011).

Critical Indigenous theory was also used to analyze data in conjunction with post-structural theory. Critical Indigenous theory allows for the examination of settler colonial structures and its relations of power with Indigeneity, and allows for examination of specific Indigenous philosophical traditions (Moreton-Robinson, 2009). This is apparent in my analysis of schools as products of settler colonialism and its cultural structure in relation to how Indigenous people use schools to further goals of self-determination. To better understand schools as institutions that are present in Anishinaabe territory, post-structural theory is also been useful for understanding specific institutions, their historical basis and their proliferation within Western society and culture. Using these two theories in conjunction helped in understanding the complexity and the nuanced existence of schools in Anishinaabe and Indigenous territory.

Critical Indigenous theory can also be useful in understanding identity politics and identity construction among Anishinaabek youth with disabilities. Since critical Indigenous

theory looks at relations of settler colonial power and structures with Indigeneity, it can be used to understand and conceptualize Indigenous identity from an individual to a community scale. Settler-colonialism attempts to mediate and control Indigenous identity by imposing definitions of what it means to be Indigenous onto communities in the form of blood quantum, tribal recognition and "cultural authenticity" (Hannel, 2015). These settler-colonial ideas of Indigeneity are not necessarily ways in which Indigenous people construct their own identities historically, culturally, or politically (Hannel, 2015). However, the effects of settler-colonial definitions of Indigeneity have real impacts on communities and individuals (Hannel, 2015). This does not mean Indigenous people do not have control over their own identities. Ojibwe scholar Quigley (2019) identifies Indigenous identity as like water exuding, with a force of its own while also subjected to outside forces and power. Identities are expressed and performed as well as pressed and enacted upon (Quigley, 2019).

This research also relied on disability critical race theory (DisCrit). DisCrit focuses on the intersection of race and disability status and was developed by special educational professionals for educators to understand how these two identities affect their students (Migliarini & Annamma, 2020). As illustrated in Figure 1.4, it focuses on how students from marginalized backgrounds suffer from systematic oppression outside the classroom, how the school and classroom reifies that oppression, and how this oppression can be mitigated (Migliarini & Annamma, 2020).

Figure 1.4 Illustration of how DisCrit visualizes how the intersection of race and disability intersect and inform oppression inside and outside the classroom, which impacts students.
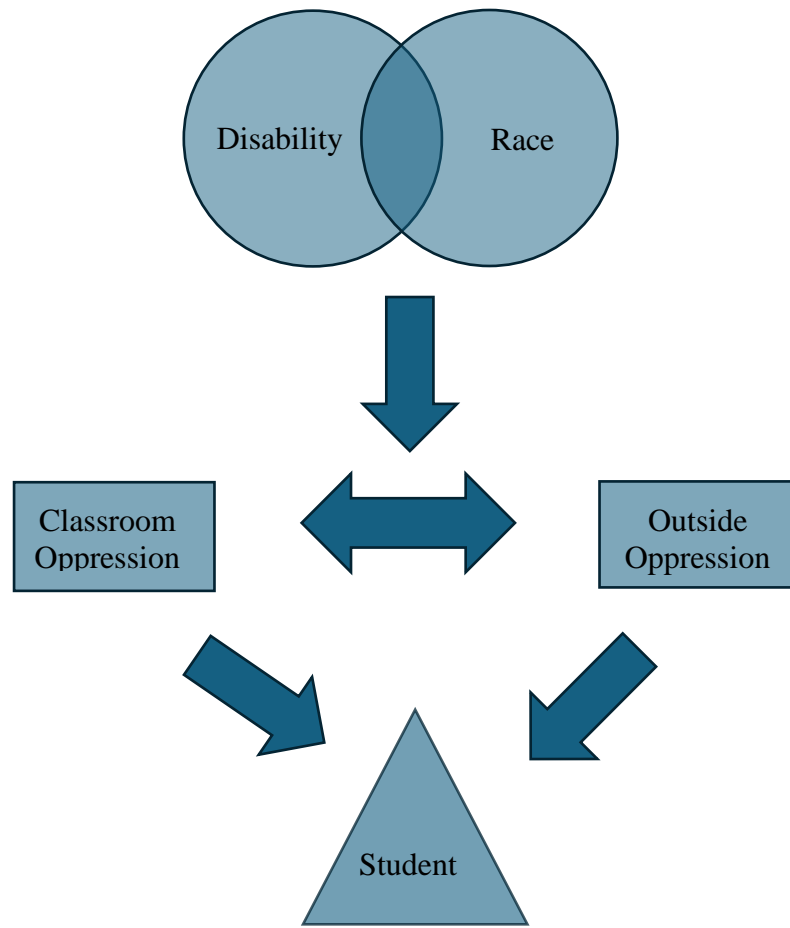
Because Indigenous students' experiences have been unexamined by DisCrit scholars, this study uniquely engages DisCrit and critical Indigenous theory to understand the intersecting identities of disability and Indigeneity through an anthropological lens. This work will add to the literature in anthropology that focuses on race and disability. Specifically, I add to the conversation a discussion of the ways in which cultural differences regarding conceptions and understanding of disability complicate special education placement. By using critical Indigenous

theory together with DisCrit a better understanding can be reached on how the intersection of

these identities affect individuals (Figure 1.5).

Figure 1.5 Illustration of Indigenous identity intersecting with race and disability

influencing both classroom oppression and oppression outside of school.
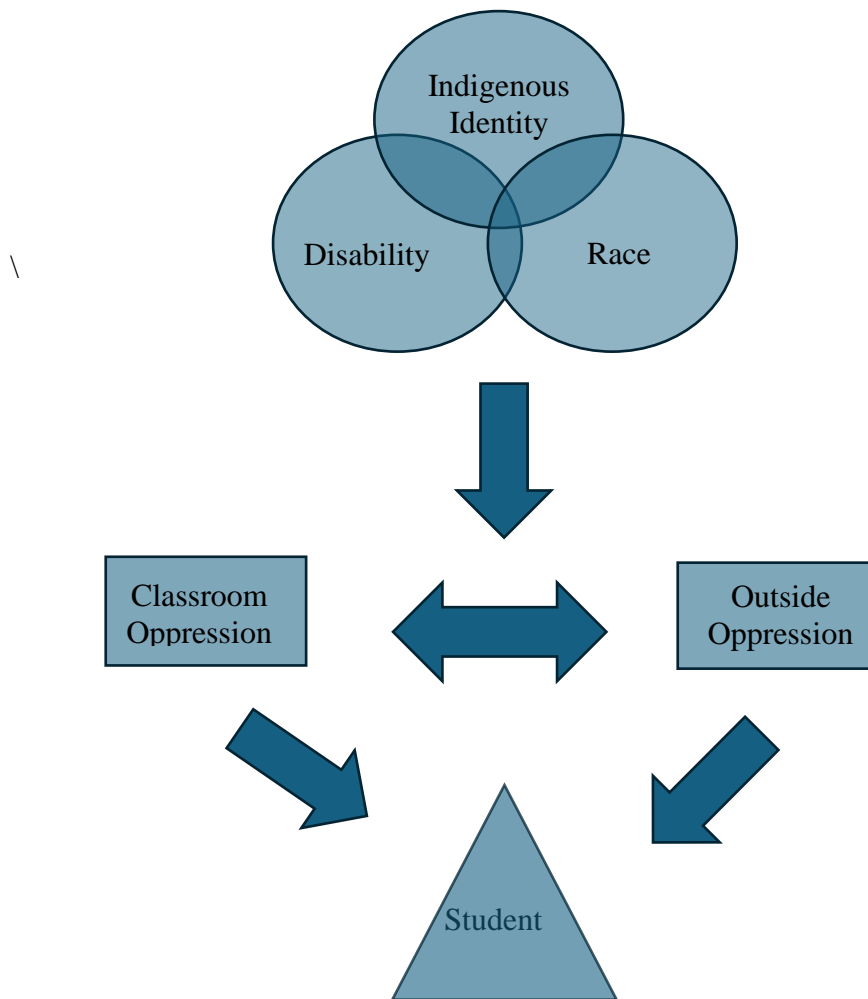
Based on the discourse and thematic coding I carried out, three major themes revealed

themselves in the data: survivance, identity, and trauma. These three major themes are expressed

and represented in different ways in formal interviews, informal conversations, classroom

observations and non-classroom observations. These are expressed through different discourses

in interviews, and manifest in different ways depending on the actor, and their proximity to and understanding of Indigeneity and disability.

These themes are heavily related to and influenced by each other, reifying and enforcing the other (Figure 1.6). Survivance is built and enforced by both identity and trauma. Trauma and survivance construct and define identity, while trauma is influenced by identity and dominated by survivance. While not all actors are conscious or cognizant of these three themes, they do express them and their relations to each other through various discourses that they utilize in their lives.

Figure 1.6 Illustration of how themes of survivance, trauma and identity influence each other.
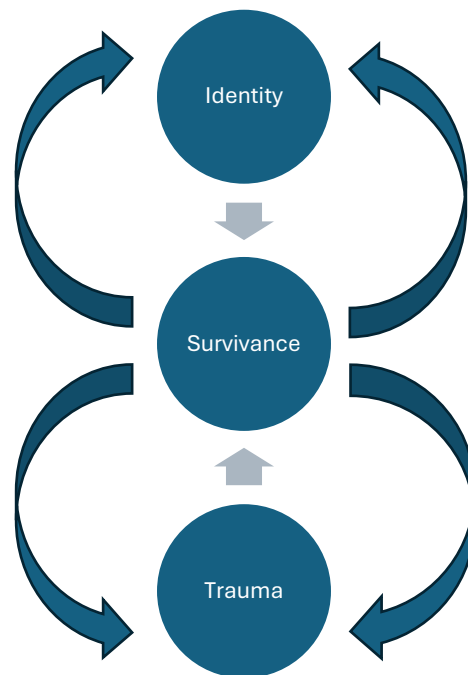
Chapter Summary

Chapter two provides a historical overview of the history of Indigenous Education in the United States. For the purposes of this dissertation, I start with describing the schools established by missionaries during the early days of colonialism and continue through to the integration of

Indigenous students into public schools and the Civil Rights Era which created the groundwork

for the establishment of Tribal schools. This chapter will also discuss the specific contexts in

Minnesota which led to the establishment of Tribal Schools and well as schools established by

urban Indigenous communities urban schools for Indigenous students. This history

contextualizes a discussion of disability as a cultural concept, how the Anishinaabe viewed and

interpreted disability historically, and how schooling influences cultural perceptions and

understanding of disability, also discussed in chapter two.

Chapter three examines how historical and generational trauma shapes the challenges the

Tribal school navigates to secure services for students. For example, distrust between Ojibwe

community members and schools is a significant issue especially for guardians who may be

older. Grandparents, who are also survivors of structural, social, and symbolic violence

associated with their own non-Indigenous education are often guardians and may resist special

education placement. This chapter describes the complexities of these challenges as they are

situated in relation to ongoing layers of experience with trauma, poverty, and structural violence.

I also discuss how the school personnel attempt to work with these individuals to build trust and

understanding so the students are better served, and their needs can be better addressed.

Chapter four discusses challenges that staff face in 1) trying to secure services for

students that have disabilities, 2) understanding the social and other contexts for these

challenges, and 3) determining whether services are needed to address disability, trauma or both,

and how best to meet these complex needs.

Chapter five details a novel arts-based methodology I used to interview students at the

Tribal school who were receiving special education services. This method helped the students

voice and advocate for their wants and needs, expressing their opinions and ideas about the

school, their teachers and the special education staff. It also gave students a way to express important parts of their individual identities as Native American special education students.

CHAPTER 2: COMPLICATED AND FRAUGHT HISTORIES: INDIGENOUS EDUCATION

AND ANISHINAABE CULTURAL CONCEPTIONS OF DISABILITY

Introduction

This chapter provides a brief historical overview of Indigenous education in the United States,

beginning with mission schools during the early days of colonization, through the pivotal

changes that occurred during the Civil Rights Era that enabled Tribes to establish their own

schools, strengthening their Tribal sovereignty. Additionally, on the history of Indigenous

education in Minnesota, I explore the development of Tribal schools and schools established by

urban Indigenous communities for Indigenous students within the state.

Furthermore, the chapter delves into the cultural construction of disability, offering

insights into how historical Anishinaabek understood and approached the concept of disability.

This discussion provides context from Anishinaabe pictographic and literacy practices for

understanding visual learning processes, and contrasts to the ways in which conventional

schooling systems have contributed to the creation of learning disabilities. Together, these topics

underscore the interplay between culture, education, and identity in Indigenous communities.

History of Indigenous Education

Indigenous Education in Pre-Civil Rights Era

To understand the historical trauma surrounding educational institutions and contemporary issues

with education in Native American communities in the US it is important to know the history of

education in the US. mission schools, which were the most prevalent form of schooling aimed at

Native Americans from the 16th century through to the 20th century. These schools were

constructed and run by missionaries and were supported with funding from Congress during the

19th century. Mission schools taught using bilingual and multilingual education to convert Native

American people and promote bible literacy (Klotz, 2021; Snyder, 2017). Some Tribal Nations strategically enrolled their children in the mission schools, with the purpose that learning the colonizers' education would allow future generations to communicate and adapt to the changing power dynamics created by the Europeans increasing and growing influence (Cassidy, 2012).

In the 1860s the federal government established day schools for Native American children (Adams, 1995). These schools were set up outside of Native American communities, and students were supposed to attend in the morning for class and return to their communities at the end of the school day. These schools primarily focused on English language instruction but would eventually teach other skills. The main purpose of day schools was to assimilate Indigenous children, with the intention that their experience would influence their families. This model, while relatively inexpensive was found to be ineffective from a colonizing perspective because the children were not assimilating to Western culture and were still largely being acculturated in Indigenous ways at home (Adams, 1995).

Richard Henry Pratt developed the model for the federal boarding school and established the Carlise Indian Industrial school in 1879 (Adams, 1995). The Carlisle school was one of the first of the boarding schools, established with the purpose of assimilating Indigenous children, and was used as a model for the other Indian boarding schools, and were funded by the federal government. Boarding schools were developed to achieve assimilative purposes by completely removing children from their communities and from the influence of their cultures (Adams, 1995; Stout, 2012; Szasz, 1999). While most children were forcibly removed from their communities, some parents and communities sent their children to these schools to learn skills or trade, or because they had been convinced it would be best for their children (Adams, 1995; Klotz, 2021; Stout, 2012), however, these goals were not often met. Some children saw attending

school as a rite of passage that took them away from home and gave them a chance to prove their bravery (Adams, 1995), but often found themselves regretting their decisions.

While experiences varied across institutions, the curriculum focused on English language learning, teaching service and manual labor skills, with academic subjects being a secondary priority (Adams, 1995). Native American language, culture and practices were severely denigrated (Adams, 1995; Klotz, 2021; Stout, 2012). The students were typically taught skills that were not particularly useful to their communities.

At the boarding schools, students were stripped of their identity by having their hair cut short; and their clothes taken away, replaced by being forced to wear a uniform. They were renamed with an Anglo name and possibly a surname if one had not been established (Adams, 1995; Stout, 2012). Students were subject to strict regimens and were disciplined for breaking school rules.

While officially the policy was to reserve corporal punishment for severe infractions, that was often not the case (Adams, 1995). Students were whipped with a harness strap, belts, boards, paddles, and yardsticks for minor and lesser infractions. Students were also beaten and treated violently by staff to the point that they were hospitalized and were bedridden for days as a result of being assaulted. Students were also subjected to cruel punishments for rule violations such as being required to cut the school lawn with scissors, boys were required to march across the school grounds in dresses, and girls were required to hold their arms out for long periods of time (Adams, 1995).

Students also died at the school from diseases that spread rapidly through the school and acts of violence committed by staff (Adams, 1995; Klotz, 2021; Stout, 2012). As a result of the trauma from attacks on their identities, being separated from their families and communities, and

enduring physical harm former students struggle with trauma from their experiences (Klotz, 2021).

Yet, the schools should not be simplified to sites of trauma, horror and victimization. As Ojibwe scholar Child (1998) discusses, the boarding schools were complex institutions that often united students in resistance to the institution, and as a result strengthened Tribal and Indigenous identities. Despite the active pressures to erase Indigenous cultures, even under the threat of violence, students actively resisted and clung to their languages and cultures. They also invented new and different ways to continue to practice their culture, express their personal identity, and resist, for example, covertly using Plains Sign Language, or through writing and expressing themselves through written word (Klotz, 2021). Through acts of resistance students strengthened and expressed pride in their Indigenous identity. (Child, 1998) argues that the experience with boarding schools is a central part of pan-Indian identity, as students were united in their shared experiences in the schools, despite their different cultural backgrounds and origins.

In Minnesota, a total of sixteen federal and mission boarding schools were created, and Native American children were also placed into boarding schools outside of Minnesota (Berg, 1989). Anishinaabe, and other Native American children in Minnesota were compelled to attending boarding and mission schools and this is an important consideration for understanding the contemporary perspectives on school I encountered while in Minnesota.

Public schools only became an option for Native American students in the 1930s, and more students attended these schools as federal boarding schools were closed during this era due to a lack of federal funding (Szasz, 1999). Following World War II, the federal government pursued a policy of termination, in an attempt to dismantle the reservation system by "terminating" the status of Native American nations as Federally Recognized Indian Tribes. This

went together with a federal relocation program aimed at moving Native Americans to urban areas. Part of the Indigenous education policy at this time was to make states responsible for educating Native American students (Grande, 2004; Szasz, 1999). Unfortunately, due to racism and issues with federal and state mandated curriculum, public schools continued to inflict trauma on Indigenous students.

Schooling as a Tool of Settler Colonialism

Outside of the boarding school era, school still acts as a tool of assimilation. It serves to discipline Indigenous students to become part of settler colonial society and undermines Indigenous identity and sovereignty (Maaka, 2019). The erasure and absence of Indigenous culture, science, history and politics within the US educational system perpetuates this process as Indigenous knowledge, perspectives, ways of knowing and culture are considered less legitimate, pseudoscientific and inferior to Western based knowledge (Deloria & Wildcat, 2001). Mandated curricula that assert Western knowledge as authoritative knowledge and affirm settler colonial values alienates Indigenous students but also creates educational voids in the ways history and science are taught, and this is detrimental to all students (Aukerman & Chambers Schuldt, 2017; Huffman, 2010).

Settler colonial state-mandated curriculum prioritizes colonial history, languages, sciences and arts over Indigenous counterparts (Huffman, 2010). Mandated curriculum acts as a form of authoritative knowledge, and as educational specialists Aukerman and Chambers Schuldt (2017) explain, eliminates diversity of thought, ways of being, and alternative world views. Mandated curriculum not only binds teachers to a curriculum that controls what they can and cannot teach, it also promotes authoritative knowledge and attempts to eliminate other knowledge and ways of knowing (Aukerman & Chambers Schuldt, 2017). Huffman (2010)

argues that the effect of this elimination is teaching Indigenous students that their own culture, history, sciences and ways of knowing are wrong and inferior.

However, Sabzalian (2019) points out that elimination or attempts at "whitewashing" Indigenous knowledge can be met with student expressions of resistance or expressions of survivance. Vizenor (2009) describes survivance as "… an active sense of presence over historical absence, the dominance of cultural simulations, and manifest manners. Native survivance is a continuance of stories." Although survivance blends survival and endurance, it is more than these experiences because survivance refuses victimization and tragedy. However, survivance is exercised when Indigenous people use the power structures that may be considered oppressive to protect and preserve Indigenous identity and culture. For example, Sabzalian (2019) argues that Native American students in public schools engage in survivance when they confront settler colonial narratives by asserting their own narratives and viewpoints or refusing to be contained by the identities established by settler colonial assumptions.

In arguing that schools and educational institutions only allow controlled and "domesticated" narratives, (Lomawaima & McCarty, 2006) demonstrate how ideas and expressions of Indigeneity that further settler colonial hegemony are perpetuated using the Safety Zone Theory (SZT). SZT discourages and may forbid any other kinds of narratives within the institution (Lomawaima & McCarty, 2006). For example, in Loewen (2018) review of American history textbooks, Indigenous people are seldom mentioned, and when they are mentioned, they are treated as obstacles to expansion or an extinct people of the past. Loewen (1995) and Knaut (1995) describe history written about Indigenous people as generally glossing over the atrocities committed against them, erasing conflicts completely, or completely removing them from the narrative. History can thus be used as a force to control the narrative of the state and society,

maintaining state order and power, and disciplining perceptions of the state, Indigenous people and their history. Often Indigenous people are only mentioned in historical contexts, establishing them as relics of the past, framed as obstacles to overcome, or tragedies decimated by Western progress, despite their active presence and survivance in the present. This approach delegitimizes Indigenous knowledge and erases Indigenous experiences and voices.

Schooling as a Source of Fear

Schools can be sites of surveillance of families, particularly mothers (Griffith & Smith, 2005; Smith, 1993). Indigenous families are often subject to policing because their family models and structures are seen as problematic by schools and in need of intervention, even though in fact, the Indigenous family model is culturally constructed and important to the functioning of families and communities (Gerstel, 2011; Jacobs, 2009). In the 1960s and 1970s, and continuing to the present, interventions have led to large numbers of children being taken from their families and placed in White families (B. Johansen, 2014; B. E. Johansen; O'Sullivan, 2016).

Public schools were modeled after what sociologist Smith (1993) refers to as the Standard North American Family (SNAF). SNAF is an ideological code that promotes the idea that the family unit should consist of a married heterosexual couple that shares a household. The man provides the economic stability for the family, and while the woman can work outside the home, her primary responsibility is to care for her husband and children. A part of that care is being involved in her child's education and schooling. Our current educational model was established around this idea and remains an important structure that is perhaps most visible to Indigenous families given the historical consciousness with which school has intervened in their families and in specifically gendered ways.

Schools are particularly problematic for Indigenous women. Sociologists Griffith and Smith (2005) describe the ways teachers and administrators rely on parents, particularly mothers, to keep the classroom running efficiently and to provide necessary school materials outside instruction. Families that are not able to do this, or are not effectively able to do this, are what Smith (1993) says would be viewed by the school as "defective families" since they are not able to conform to the SNAF model and provide the necessary education for their child, which can lead to severe consequences for families (Smith, 1993). This is especially problematic for Indigenous women who may not mother according to models established by the nuclear family, either intentionally by trying to revive traditional family practices and structures, or unintentionally such as by being or becoming a single mother (Weaver, 2009).

Non-SNAF families, such as those that revolve around extended families or female headed households, are likely to be impoverished. This may cause them to be perceived as less stable, putting children and families at risk of increasing their vulnerability to state intervention and surveillance. Gerstel (2011) points out that while lower-class White folks often belong to extended families and female headed households, minorities are mostly associated with these types of family models because they experience higher rates of poverty and marginalization, and the extended family model helps them to survive.

Cultural conflict and misunderstandings surrounding family structures have led to major issues in family assessment (O'Sullivan, 2016). The role of the extended family is often misunderstood by social workers who do family evaluations of Indigenous households and operate on the concept of SNAF (O'Sullivan, 2016; Smith, 1993). In the past, this failure to understand Indigenous family structures and values surrounding maternal roles and care has led to the theft of Native American children (O'Sullivan, 2016). During the 1960s and 1970s one out

of every four Native American families would lose one or more of their children to the American foster care system and today remain disproportionately in child welfare (O'Sullivan, 2016).

Largescale removal of Indigenous children significantly disrupts Indigenous communities and families and impacts the citizenship base for Tribal nations. In response to this large displacement of Native American children and extreme detrimental impacts on American Indian Tribes, the Indian Child Welfare Act of 1978 (ICWA) was codified into law and governs the jurisdiction over the removal of child citizens of American Indian Tribes, into custody, foster care, and adoption cases. It outlines the preferential placement of these children with Tribal families, to protect the child and keep them within their communities, as well as to protect the community since the child represents the future of the community and the continuation of the community's culture.

Unfortunately, as Ojibwe social worker Suzanne L. Cross (2006) points out, while ICWA is supposed to protect Native American children and keep them in their communities, the enforcement of ICWA varies from state to state. This is due to (1) a lack of knowledge and awareness of ICWA; (2) lack of funding for Tribes and states to implement ICWA; (3) lack of training for child welfare workers; and (4) lack of judicial belief in the doctrine. All of these factors contribute to the ongoing risk of the removal of a child from their community and their potential disenfranchisement. The community I worked with struggled with implementing ICWA due to the lack of community members available to foster children, which often resulted in children being placed in non-Indigenous homes sometimes well outside of the community.

Civil Rights Era and Changes in Indigenous Education and Special Education

During the 1960s, with the rise of the Civil Rights era, the disability rights movement fought for equal access, civil rights, and protections from discrimination (Charlton, 1998). Notably,

legislation that established the need for special education in the 1970s was not passed solely as a result of the work of disability rights activists, but because of the involvement of Black civil rights groups. Black civil rights groups highlighted the ways Black students were denied access to education as well as the scientific and cultural biases in IQ testing that saw Black students continually testing with lower scores than their White counterparts (Kauffman & Landrum, 2009). This testing was used to justify separate educational facilities and classrooms for Black and other marginalized students focused on training them to occupy lower tier jobs (Kauffman & Landrum, 2009). This experience was not unlike that of Indigenous people historically marginalized in boarding schools and segregated classrooms (Martinez-Cola, 2020).

In the wake of the *Brown v Board of Education* case, Black civil rights activists fought for the passing of legislation that ensured their right to access education (Kauffman & Landrum, 2009). Part of this initiative was their joint lobbying with grassroots disability activists which led to the passing of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973 and the Education for All Handicapped Children Act (EAHCA) of 1975. These two acts worked to ensure that disabled individuals had rights to access education and accommodation (Schweik, 2011).

At the same time, Indigenous peoples ramped up their social movements for Tribal sovereignty, including for control over their children's education. This was largely led by the American Indian Movement (AIM), a pan-Indian organization of Native American and Indigenous people established in urban communities, as well as by the concentrated efforts of Tribal governments and other grassroots organizations that made up the Red Power movement (Forbes, 1981; French, 2007; B. E. Johansen, 2013).

Prior to the civil rights era, Tribes possessed the rights to self-determination since they had inherent sovereignty, affirmed in the Constitution. However, US policies acted counter to

Tribal sovereignty. Part of this shift was passing the Indian Education Act of 1972 recognizing the unique needs of Indigenous students, and the need for additional support for Indigenous learning initiatives (Tippeconnic, 2000). Overseen by the newly created Bureau of Indian Education, this law created opportunities for funding for various Tribal entities to have greater control over the creation of programs, curriculum development, teacher training, and special projects for Native American students and their communities more in line with their community's values and needs (Tippeconnic, 2000). As a result, Tribes were able to create their own schools and colleges on their reservations and Tribally owned land.

Yet, despite the passing of Indian Education Act of 1972 as of 2019, 93% of Native American youth are enrolled in public schools, and 7% are enrolled in Bureau of Indian Education (BIE) Schools also known as Tribal schools (Rampey, Faircloth, Whorton, & Deaton, 2019). Twenty five percent of Native American students attend schools where they are part of the majority, but over half attend schools where Native American students make up less than 10% of the population. For roughly 84% of school districts traditional public school is the only option available to Native American students (Rampey et al., 2019).

In a study conducted on four reservations in the Midwest it was found that Native American students attending public schools had less positive school adjustment than their peers who attended Tribal schools (Crawford, Cheadle, & Whitbeck, 2010). It was also found that discrimination at public schools had a greater negative impact overall on the students' positive school adjustment. In the study it was suspected that the students at the Tribal schools have a more culturally responsive education and fewer issues with racism. Education specialist Hale (2002) argues that Indigenous students tend to learn best when the environment reflects their

cultural values, and Indigenous methods of learning (Hale, 2002). Tribal schools and schools that embrace Indigenous education offer Indigenous students this environment.

History of Tribal Schools in Minnesota

Tribal schools in Minnesota, along with urban Indigenous schools in Minneapolis came about during this era. The first of the Tribal schools was Bug O Nay Ge Shig which was founded after a student walk-out of the local Cass Lake Schools, and parents pulled their kids out of class ("Alternative school given name in traditional ceremonies," 1975). Native American students and parents were subjected to obscenities and harassment from the Cass Lake community during their walkout, including a pair of students reporting that a middle school teacher shouted at them before flipping his middle finger at them ("LIEC parents put thumbs down on Point Program," 1975).

The students and parents were protesting the Cass Lake district's school board refusing to implement a program proposed by the Local Indian Education Committee (LIEC) that would help Native American students improve their school performance ("LIEC parents put thumbs down on Point Program," 1975). The LIEC was a committee made of Native American community members and parents who are interested in ensuring that Native American students were being adequately served in education and the alternative program was proposed because of issues with discrimination and racism in the Cass schools. Following the walk out, a complaint was filed against Cass schools for discrimination under Minnesota's Department of Human rights, the Office of Civil Rights, and the Department of Health, Education, and Welfare ("LIEC parents put thumbs down on Point Program," 1975).

The Native American parents established an accredited program for Native American students that would eventually become the Bug O Nay Ge Shig School, named after Chief Bug O

Nay Ge Shig, a famous leader of the Leech Lake Band, one of the seven Anishinaabek nations in Minnesota. Chief Bug O Nay Ge Shig was famously known for being a major player in the US-Ojibwe conflict of 1862, and was part of the delegation of Ojibwe chiefs that renegotiated the Treaty of 1862 which would have forcibly relocated all Ojibwe, save members of the Red Lake Band, to the White Earth Reservation (Treuer, 2011). In a news article published in the Ojibwe newspaper *Ni Mi Kwa Zoo Min* it was said that the school name after Chief Bug O Nay Ge Shig was chosen "Because he fought for our land, he fought for our people, but uppermost he fought for the future of our children. And once again, his spirit is walking amongst us" ("Alternative school given name in traditional ceremonies," 1975, p. 5). The school was officially established in 1975, is recognized as a Tribal school, and is under the oversite of the Leech Lake Tribal Government and the federal Bureau of Indian Education.

In 1975 students who were members of the Mille Lacs Band did something similar and walked out of the local Onamia schools citing harassment and other issues. Ojibwe newspaper *Ni Mi Kwa Zoo Min* covered the walkout and reported that Native American students were segregated into "Low ability groups" and the school failed to establish policies to make integration of Native American students successful and positive. Moreover, the school was not employing Native American people as paid employees, there were increased racial issues, and the drop out and suspension rate of Native American students was not being addressed ("Onamia Students Make Move," 1975).

In Minneapolis-St. Paul, parent activism and AIM activists established Indigenous schools for their children. These were the Red Schoolhouse and the Heart of Earth Survival School, which were later disbanded due to internal conflicts and administrative misconduct (Davis, 2013). However, there remain other schools in Minneapolis-St. Paul and other urban

centers in Minnesota that carry on the legacy of urban Indigenous education from this earlier era (Davis, 2013). As of 2024 in Minnesota there are four Tribal schools, eight charter schools that specifically serve Native American and Indigenous children, and four magnet schools for Native American and Indigenous students.

Improving Schooling for Indigenous Students

Brayboy and Lowmaina (2018) address how structural changes in educational infrastructure can change educational outcomes. There are movements in various community settings to add Indigenous knowledge to the curriculum or hybridize education, and it is being done with success (Brayboy & Lowmaina, 2018). Due in large part to the activism and political involvement of Native American groups and nations, the state of Minnesota has developed community and culturally appropriate policies for Indigenous education. As a result, the state of Minnesota's requirements for Indian education go beyond what is required for Title VI Civil Rights Act of 1964 (*Title VI Legal Manual*, 2016)

Minnesota requires that school districts with ten or more Native American students set up and establish American Indian Parent Action Committees (AIPACS) ("124D.78 Parent and Community Participation," 2023). Qualifying schools with 20 or more Native American students, are provided with funding to enhance and build sustainable Indigenous education and programs or enhance and scale up existing programs for Native American, and other Indigenous students ("American Indian Education Aid," 2024). However, there was an issue of schools not being aware of funding opportunities available to Native American students, and additional issues with them properly counting Native American students to qualify for this funding. This funding is separate from the funding received from Title VI, which provides schools with additional funding for Native American and Alaskan Native students.

Multicultural and culturally responsive training is required for teachers in training and as part of continuing education for teachers in Minnesota ("American Indian Education," 2023). In addition, state statutes protect students' rights to religious and cultural expression at schools including the right to carry tobacco pouches or loose tobacco, wear regalia and other important symbols such as eagle feathers during graduations, and ensures that public school districts and non-public schools with a certain percentage of Native American and Indigenous students provide language and culture classes ("American Indian Education," 2023). With that being said, I know of a local public school in Minnesota with over 60% Ojibwe student enrollment that does not offer Ojibwe language classes.

Castagno and Brayboy (2008) point out in their discussion of culturally responsive schooling (CRS), that while it is the preferred pedagogical method to address the cultural needs of Indigenous students, it does not help the students if it is only adopted on a superficial level. CRS can take the form of decolonization, especially if Indigenous culture and knowledge is being embraced. However, education specialists Tuck and Yang (2012) warn that decolonization is not a metaphor, in that it should not be appropriated and used to alter but not fundamentally change settler colonial infrastructures or used to alleviate "white guilt."

An example of this can be seen in Sabzalian (2019) work where she provides descriptions of attempts made in public schools to bring in Indigenous culture, history and identity, and points out how it is often presented through settler-colonial lenses and narratives that are problematic. In a specific example, Sabzalian (2019) discusses a school wide project in which fifth grade students research Indigenous cultures and then present their findings to the rest of the student body. While this appears to make space for learning about Indigenous peoples, such a project

makes Indigenous people objects of study, exotifies them, and does not provide appropriate cultural context for important aspects of their culture (Sabzalian, 2019).

Decolonization practices are supposed to decenter settler colonial policies. As Tuck and Yang (2012) argue, for decolonization to truly unfold, settler colonialism does not benefit in the present or in the future from the process. Ultimately for education to become culturally responsive, it needs to gain a fuller and richer understanding of the cultures of the students they serve (Castagno & Brayboy, 2008). Otherwise, students will feel conflicted between their traditional or Indigenous education and standard western education (Brayboy & Lowmaina, 2018).

Lack of culturally responsive teaching and failing to understand students also impacts special education placement. In Squires (2016) study of teachers who worked at a school that served Native American students, they examined the special education pre-referrals. Squires (2016) noted that the teachers did not fully understand the concept of multiculturalism, educating students with special needs, nor did they understand the cultures of the students. In the case of these teachers, they had been supplied with no education on how to work in a multicultural classroom or how to work with special needs students either through their own teacher training programs, their professional development or continuing education programs. Squires (2016) emphasizes that for teachers to be successful in educating their students they need to be provided adequate training on multiple levels to reinforce effective multi-cultural and special education training.

This issue becomes more alarming when evidence shows that in public schools 19% of American Indian students are tracked into special education (Statistics 2024, see Figure 2.1). Special education programs can be beneficial for students who might be deficient in some areas

and can improve academic performance (Tincani, Travers, & Boutot, 2009). This is contingent on special education programs being effective in providing accommodations and accessibility to education. Otherwise, the programs can serve to be a source of discrimination and restrict access to education. As education specialist Artiles (2013) notes, special education can be a site of systematic oppression for racially marginalized students creating a defined racial hierarchy within schools, racial segregation, and restricted access to general education. Special education may also be simply ineffective and deprive students of more appropriate resources that would be more beneficial.

Figure 2.1 Graph displaying the percentage of students aged 3-21 served by Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) according to ethnicity or race reproduced from the National Center for Education Statistics.
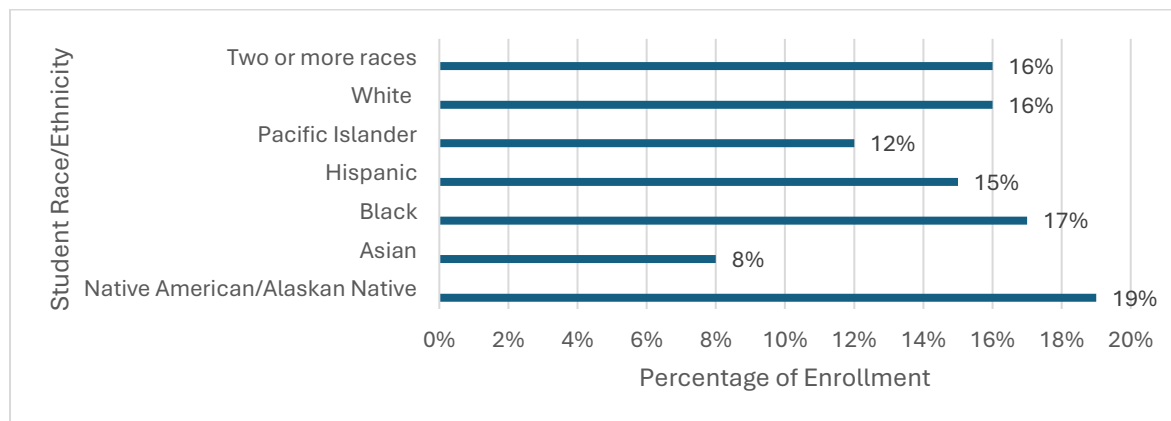
This becomes important when children are struggling with trauma in addition to, or in the absence of, a learning disability. Trauma can impact the brain in ways that leave children with the appearance of struggling with a learning disorder, and this may mask when the child is dealing with trauma. I will discuss this more in chapter three. Examining trauma when assessing Indigenous students is important due to the high likelihood they may be impacted by trauma. Indigenous students may have high rates of trauma due to issues with historical or generational

trauma caused by systematic oppression, community-based trauma, or trauma associated with low socioeconomic status (Kenney & Singh, 2016). The state of Minnesota attempts to control for Indigenous and other children being improperly placed in special education by clarifying in Emotional or Behavioral Disorder criteria that students being considered for the diagnosis (*3525.1329 Emotional or Behavioral Disorders*, 2007, p. 20):

> *…The established pattern of emotional or behavioral responses must adversely affect educational or developmental performance, including intrapersonal, academic, vocational or social skills; be significantly different from appropriate age, cultural or ethnic norms; and be more than temporary, expected responses to stressful events in the environment.*

This means that students can only qualify for this diagnosis if they exhibit problematic behaviors that are not typical to their cultural or ethnic background; or if they are acting out due to stress from specific events in their lives or coming out of a stressful environment. This language is only present in this diagnosis currently and might have been adopted in response to a large number of minority students qualifying for this diagnosis and being tracked in special education, when they would most likely benefit more from psychological help. This was suggested in workshops and presentations done by the Dreamcatcher Project, a Minnesota based organization that works with Minnesota's Department of Education, and which provides assistance to schools that are evaluating Indigenous students for special education services.

Disability and Learning Disabilities in Anishinaabe Context

Disability as a Cultural Concept

Disability is a cultural discourse and process mediated by various institutions, technologies, powers, and disciplines. McDermott and Varenne (1995) argue that disability is entirely socially

constructed and only exists in the moment that an individual struggles or is unable to perform a task that is deemed necessary for daily life. If the condition does not affect their ability to do "necessary" tasks then it is not a disability (McDermott & Varenne, 1995).

However, Lovern and Locust (2013) demonstrate that disability is more than inability. In describing the Yaqui, an Indigenous nation in the Southwestern United States and Northern Mexico, these authors note how certain impairments were not viewed as disabilities even if they prevented individuals from doing something that would be seen as important such as being able to see, hear, or move without significant difficulties. They explain that this may be so because of the commonality of severe kyphosis which is very prominent in some Yaqui communities due to genetic inheritance, making these impairments frequent. Most chronic disabilities, whether intellectual or physical, are generally not stigmatized or even recognized as disabilities within the Yaqui community because they are seen as part of human variability. The Yaqui recognized that individuals can still contribute to society in their own way (Lovern & Locust, 2013).

Anishinaabe and Historical Conceptions of Disability

There is little documented literature about disability in the Anishinaabek Nations, or what constitutes disability to the Anishinaabek. Often, disability is associated with the aging process and seen as natural rather than something to be feared or to dread. It is simply a sign that a person's roles in society are changing (Vecsey, 1983).

Anthropologists described some forms of disability such as acquired and congenital disabilities as explained through spirits and curses from humans with supernatural abilities or knowledge (Hallowell, 1976; Jenness, 1935). For example, Hallowell (1976, p. 436) writes how a father warns a young boy not to "… laugh at old people. Don't say to anyone that he is ugly. If

that person has power, he will make you ugly." Another person told Hallowell (1976, p. 436) not

to insult old people because they make your face twisted to show others what you have done.

In the case of congenital disability, the disability can be inflicted unknowingly on the

parent and passed onto the child. For example, in his memoir of his uncle with down syndrome,

Crazy Dave, Anishinaabe writer Johnston (1999) relates how Dave's mother wondered if her son

was born disabled because someone placed a curse on her husband for wronging someone, or if

she unknowingly committed a taboo while pregnant. It is also pointed out by Jenness (1935, p.

84) that a person can cause harm to their soul by doing wicked acts, such as torturing animals,

and this can cause a disability in their child.

Regardless of the causes of disability as described in these various accounts, individuals

who were disabled were not generally stigmatized within the community. Individuals contributed

to their community as they were capable. As Vennum (1988, p. 166) recounts, during the ricing

season, for example, everyone assists in the process including the elderly and the disabled.

Vennum (1988, p. 166) observed that blind Ojibwe women were very skilled at harvesting wild

rice, and he describes how one of the most reputed rice harvesters he encountered was a blind

woman. In addition, in an historical account Kohl (1956, p. 4) noted that in the family he was

being hosted, the "lame" son helped do chores around the household and aided the women in

their work. In other accounts elderly people who became infirm shifted their responsibilities to

watching children and taking on important ceremonial or spiritual roles (Hilger, 1951; Vecsey,

1983; Vennum, 1988).

Prior colonization, the concept of disability was limited to acquired and congenital

physical impairments, and actions and behaviors that were associated with insanity. Learning and

other sorts of disabilities that are not physical or emblematic of psychotic behavior have not been

documented in historical contexts. This suggests that learning and literacy related disorders were either not stigmatized or seen as an impairment within Anishinaabek communities, or that because of the cultural context a disability of this nature would not be visible, manifest, be spoken of, or only spoken of in the context of witchcraft and sorcery, as described by earlier non-Indigenous observers, or as more commonly described in Anishinaabek communities as "bad medicine"(Garro, 1990).

Learning Disabilities as a Product of Schooling

Dudley-Marling (2004) argues that learning disability (LD) is a social construction created by an educational institution, and that a student's diagnosis is performed and constructed through their interaction with other individuals. Dudley-Marling (2004, p. 483) also points out how schools in the US were created by an individualistic culture that blames the individual for their failure to meet standards established by the state. This is supported by D. K. Reid and Valle (2004) who describe special education classrooms as part of the educational institution that promotes individualism and protects the institution from criticism. They argue that this is part of the creation for the category of learning disabled, which takes underperforming students and pathologizes them with the diagnosis of LD, neglecting the possibility that the school is ineffective at educating all students.

The focus on individualization and placing the blame on students or their families for their failure to learn, conflicts with Anishinaabe understanding of child development and learning. In Anishinaabek communities' children are taught through participating and observing the natural world, and from other Anishinaabek in public and private settings (Barnes-Najor et al., 2024; Hilger, 1951; L. B. Simpson, 2017). They learn how to act by watching and imitating those older than them, and through stories and instructions (Barnes-Najor et al., 2024; Hilger,

1951). Every child's talents are nurtured, their identity and personhood is supported, and their contributions celebrated (L. B. Simpson, 2017). Failure to learn a skill or a lesson is not seen as a failing of the child or their family (L. B. Simpson, 2017). It is seen more as a reflection of where that child is in their life stages, or simply that humans have diverse abilities and there is no stigma attached to what a child is capable of or not (L. B. Simpson, 2017).

In an interview I had with a teacher, who was also a member of the community, we discussed the concept and reading and writing for Ojibwe people. The teacher said

... I always think about that, was, like Europeans had years of reading and writing, and that's a foreign concept. And [my grandpa] is like, no way they're teaching you to be human beings. They're teaching you to read, write, repeat, and not to be critical thinkers. So that's what I think about too, but I don't know the long-term effects of that. You know what I mean? Because we are only three generations out-the-bush. And then there's only been two generations that's been using reading and writing...

This teacher's grandfather was a former student at a boarding school but learned to read and write independent of schooling in his late adulthood. While this teacher learned to read and write in a school for Native American students, they wondered what the effect of learning to read and write until recently meant for the people in their community, since many members of the community were not that many "generations from the bush," and like the teacher, were maybe the second or third generation of "literate" Ojibwe.

This teacher's perspective on disabilities related to reading and writing may also align with the Anishinaabe pictographic writing system described by Schoolcraft (Angel, 2002). Schoolcraft noted that there are two writing systems one is kekeewin which is used by everyone in the Ojibwe community, and the other kekenowin and is used by priests and prophets (Angel,

2002). Pictographic writing systems are writing systems where graphemes produce iconic pictures which an individual can extrapolate meaning from if they know and understand the context of the pictograph, independent of spoken language. Both kekeewin and kekenowin are polysemous, meaning that the pictographs can have multiple meanings depending on the intent and context of the pictographs (Norder, 2018). However, in most cases the "true meaning" of the pictographs can only be known by the person who created the pictographs, and learning the meaning behind a composition can only happen if that meaning is shared.

In addition to the pictographic scripts, Oberholtzer (1995) note that collections of birch bark biting have been identified as depicting trails, trees, and tents in the patterns, and so may also have served as another unique form of communication, even as they were also a pass-time and social activity. Birch bark biting is a less commonly known and practiced art among the Anishinaabek and other Indigenous groups belonging to the same ecological area. They are made by taking thin strips or sheets of birch bark, folding it, placing it in the mouth and biting intricate patterns into it (Lachance, 2021). The tongue and lips are used to move the birch bark piece around the mouth to make different bite patterns, and sometimes the piece is refolded to make different patterns as well (Lachance, 2021).

Outside of Indigenous contexts, pictographic images are commonly used worldwide as pictographs are beneficial to populations where they have disabled, illiterate, or multilingual persons (Waidyanatha & Frommberger, 2022). This is due to the ease with which individuals can interpret pictographs regardless of whether their issues with literacy comes from a learning disability, being non-literate, or being literate in languages other than the dominant language (Waidyanatha & Frommberger, 2022). Unless they represent phonetic sounds like in the case of rebus puzzles, pictographs are not connected to spoken or written language. Provided with the

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correct context, the pictograph is easy to directly visualize, to interpret the intended meaning from, and can be mostly understood independent of language (Waidyanatha & Frommberger, 2022).

Individuals with reading disabilities, such as those with dyslexia struggle with written language due to issues with phonological awareness, meaning they struggle with the phonological construction of words; and orthographic coding, or the conventions of written language such as spelling and grammar (G. Reid, 2024). Due to the diversity of languages in phonological, orthographic and morphologic complexity, language learners from different language backgrounds may struggle depending on the language (G. Reid, 2024). For example, languages that utilize alphabetic scripts such as English, are more difficult to learn because of their "deep phonology" and an "opaque orthography," compared to languages that have "shallow phonology" and "transparent orthographies" like Spanish and Italian where spelling and writing conventions are more predictable (Tridas, 2024). Non-alphabetic languages like logographic languages such as Traditional and Simplified Chinese tend to be more difficult for students to learn due to the complex morphology and orthologies that are represented in each character (Ruan, Huo, Maurer, & McBride, 2024).

However, Anishinaabe pictographs do not represent phonemes or other aspects of spoken language, but rather provide direct visualizations of the object. Someone with a reading or writing disability may be able to understand the pictographs with little difficulty provided the meaning of the piece has already been shared. Based on this, it may provide added cultural context to Anishinaabek learning disabilities and challenges, since in a traditional context reading and writing disabilities would be largely invisible, making them products of settler colonialism.

Conclusion

The purpose of this chapter was to provide historical information related to Indigenous education in the US. In addition, cultural conceptions of disability, specifically in historical Anishinaabe contexts and in the context of education, is important to understanding the context of the following chapters in this dissertation.

Indigenous education historically has been problematic for Indigenous people. In the days before the Civil Rights Era, Indigenous education was used to assimilate Indigenous people and as an attempt of ethnocide (Adams, 1995). Outside of Indigenous Education the public schools are not much better for Indigenous people since they erase their history, language, and scientific practices, or they teach it as "backwards" and "wrong" (Huffman, 2010). Since the Civil Rights era there have been strides towards improving Indigenous education for Indigenous students in the US. Specifically in supporting Tribal entities in creating their own schools which are shown to be overall beneficial for Native American students (Crawford et al., 2010). Unfortunately, many Indigenous students have no choice but to attend public schools since they do not have access to a Tribal school, as they are uncommon (Rampey et al., 2019). The state of Minnesota does make attempts to improve Indigenous education for students attending public schools and has created laws and legislation that protect students' choice to practice their cultural heritage, gives them access to resources, and provides additional funding for Indigenous students. However, it is known that established policy is different than what is practiced in schools.

Disability is a cultural concept that is socially created and exists when an individual struggles to do a task that is considered necessary (McDermott & Varenne, 1995). In historical Anishinaabe cultural context disability is largely seen as physical disabilities, either acquired or congenital (Vecsey, 1983), and generally not stigmatized.

It is in the school that learning disability is developed and is used to explain why students may struggle academically and may be underperforming (Dudley-Marling, 2004). However, this conflicts with Anishinaabe childrearing practices and understanding of child development where children learn at their own pace and failure to learn is not seen as a failing on the child's part, but where they are at in their social development (Hilger, 1951; L. B. Simpson, 2017). Likewise, historically, the Anishinaabe most likely did not have a concept of learning disability since their written communication was very different relying on pictographs for communication, potentially making any reading or writing based disability invisible. This may effect culturally how Anishinaabek people view learning disabilities in the present context, and how they respond to school interventions to an Anishinaabek child diagnosed with a learning disability.

CHAPTER 3: "YOU'LL JUST MESS HIM UP MORE": RESISTANCE TO SPECIAL

EDUCATION SERVICES BY GRANDPARENTS AND ELDERLY CAREGIVERS

Introduction

Native American and Indigenous groups in the United States have tumultuous relations with schools and education. The education system in the US was designed to disenfranchise and destroy Native American identity and ultimately Tribal nations and sovereignty. This was done through boarding and mission schools, day schools, and mandated curriculum that controlled and presented problematic narratives of Indigenous people, history, and contemporary issues. Schools were used to surveil Native American families and label certain households as providing unsatisfactory care, contributing significantly to the mass removal of Native American children from their families and nations.

As a result, families have faced considerable disruption and historical trauma, which are often associated with contemporary challenges including mental and chronic illness, and social and economic insecurity, among others. Therefore, it not uncommon for Native American families to treat schools with suspicion and fear. This has created a difficult and complex environment to traverse within the Tribal school for staff, particularly in special education. In this chapter I will talk about Ode'imin as a Tribal school, and the staff and culture of the school. I will also specifically talk about the families that choose to enroll their children in the school and how they engage in survivance (Vizenor, 2009) and what A. Simpson (2014) defines as "refusal" in the school environment. I focus on grandparents and elderly caregivers whom, I found expressed particular resistance to having the children in their care receive special education services.

Ode'imin Tribal School

Ode'imin Tribal School was formed after the 1970s in reaction to issues with racism in the local public schools, and notably one of the symptoms of this racism was improper or unnecessary tracking into special education. This led parents to seek out alternatives to protect their children from racism and provide them with a culturally responsive education. A community member who attended the Tribal school as a student and enrolled their own children told me about how the school is unique and built for their community:

> *… it's a really small community and they can teach multiple generations. And then a lot of our elders instilled our values in what they wanted to be left and what they wanted to be taught. And I think too, what I really, really like is a lot of the language and culture that's here and then the school adapted to a lot of it. We still do feeding ceremonies, our monthly things. That's why [language teacher] always says, "Do you want me to interpret?" Or this and that because it was everybody's grandmas and grandpas that made this school…*

It was also built to help preserve and conserve their community's culture and language. In an interview with a teacher I was told:

> *From what I understand, even [the public school], who has more Ojibwe students, doesn't have a language [class]. They have a cultural class that they, I don't know if it's accurate or not, but they bead, they do beadwork and things like that. But the language is what's disappearing. Each time they lose an elder they lose an interpreter and a different way of saying things. I've run into situations where I've talked to three different staff people and they have three different pronunciations for the month of March…*

The local school districts that would serve Ode'imin students were known to have issues with racism despite the active involvement of Native American parents and students in these districts. I was told stories about how the local school districts failed to serve Native American students and did not provide them with proper education. One of the teachers complained about how the Native American students who transferred from the local school were significantly behind and questioned whether part of the issue was based in racism. I witnessed this as well when a few students transferred in. One was an exceptionally bright kindergarten student who transferred into Ode'imin halfway through the 2022 school year and struggled with the alphabet. By the end of the year before I left, he was still behind his classmates but had made significant progress and was reading "early readers."

There were also issues with Indigenous students being unfairly and disproportionately disciplined compared to other students in the public school. For example, a parent of a former student said she pulled her child from the public school when she got a call from a friend at the school and was warned that all the Indigenous students in her child's class, including her child, had been pulled out and were in the office for disciplinary measures. There was also active resistance from non-Indigenous students, parents and school personnel regarding culturally appropriate activities. Despite the majority of the students identifying as Native American, when the public school planned to have their own powwow it was actively boycotted by non-Indigenous parents and students. There were also many recorded issues with bullying of Native American students by non-Indigenous students in the public school.

However, even with the issues with racism many of the students in the Tribal community elected to attend the public school. This was the case especially after fifth grade, since the public school was better funded, had a more robust academic based curriculum, more resources for

students, and offered significantly more extracurriculars and options for students. Yet, there seemed to be a "revolving door" between the public school and Ode'imin with students switching back and forth with varying frequencies. The "revolving door" was usually related to students struggling in both environments for various reasons. At the public school, students struggled due to increased academic pressure and rigor, conflict with other students and staff, and disciplinary issues. At the Tribal school students struggled with the lack of academic and extracurricular options and opportunities available to them, issues with specific staff members, and because they were not guaranteed the resources they needed which was a major issue for special education students.

Issues with racism were not limited to the school system. There was a lot of hostility between the Tribal community and the non-Native community. Native American staff and students from Ode'imin, and staff with Native American spouses and kids reported issues of overt racism within the community such as being denied services, harassed in public, and targeted by non-Tribal police. Even White Ode'imin staff members were not exempt from experiencing racist actions. One such teacher reported how he went to a bar wearing his school shirt and got into a verbal argument with another patron who made racist comments regarding the children at the school. A White administrator reported that while she was looking for housing and conversing with a potential landlord, they told her "don't bring no [racial epitaph] home with you," when they found out who employed her.

The tensions were not recent either, with one of the Ojibwe teachers telling me about how in the 1960s and 1970s, Ojibwe community members were attacked and lynched by the non-Native community for "crimes" supposedly committed. I was also told about how community members during this time had to hide their traditional practices from non-community members

because they could be denied services and support from institutions that they depended on. Most notably, the local church which ran food and clothing drives for the Tribal community and was heavily relied on by Tribal members, would refuse services to Tribal members and families who practiced their culture.

Ode'imin provides an alternative for the community that embraces Ojibwe heritage, language, and culture. However, parents and guardians may remain suspicious of schools and can be very wary of Ode'imin and its staff. This fear is often absorbed by the students who can be untrusting and wary of the institution and those that work for it, an issue that may be exacerbated by the fact that most of Ode'imin's staff and administration are White.

When I asked one teacher whether they considered themselves to be part of the community they told me:

> *I have not been accepted by the community. A grandfather told me I shouldn't be here because I'm taking a job from a band member, and the kids will say things… But I don't blame them. I don't get mad at them. It's the environment they're brought up in. This is stuff that they hear at home.*

While this was the only time this sentiment was brought up during a formal interview, other non-Indigenous teachers also expressed frustration or cited issues dealing with untrusting or wary guardians. They also described students who expressed sentiments similar to that of their guardians. This was especially true for Indigenous students being raised by grandparents and other older relatives.

Students at the school were known to engage in various forms of resistance such as destruction of school property, misuse of school materials and property, fighting, vaping or ditching class. While I was at the school there were repeated issues with both boys and girls

destroying the restrooms. Multiple times they put holes in the walls, broke the doors and locks on the stalls, flushed random items, plugged the sinks, purposefully urinated on the floors, and so on. The restrooms were not the only facility that took a lot of abuse, but it was an area that frustrated staff and other students the most.

Ditching class was mostly an issue with the older kids, but some of the younger students engaged in "elopement" which usually involved them running or storming out the classroom. Ditching class or eloping usually happened when a student got frustrated or angry enough at whatever was going on in class that they just got up and left or simply refused to enter the class. Sometimes there was not much to frustrate or annoy the student, and they just stormed or ran out with little provocation. Some students were more apt to do this than others, and with a select few it was a chronic problem. Usually, these students would roam the halls, but some would specifically go to the principal's office or the social worker's office, places where they felt safe and could decompress.

In some cases, the students were getting into fights because they were mad at another student, or another student provoked them into a fight. In other cases, they were deliberately arranging fights between each other for the sake of fighting and potentially because it was trending on TikTok as part of a viral trend. This seemed to be an issue with girls especially. By the end of the first month of school, girls in the older grades were not allowed to go to the bathrooms unsupervised or in groups because they were arranging fights in the bathroom.

Not all the parents and guardians express negative ideas or hostility towards school, and many expressed positive sentiments about the Ode'imin school. A number of the parents of the kids I worked with were some of the first generations of students that went to Ode'imin and expressed nostalgia and fond memories of their times as students at the school. During parent

teacher conferences I overheard a few parents and aunties express excitement about seeing their former teacher. I recall one parent get excited and squeal with glee "She's here! I got to say hi!" when she realized that Evelyn, an Elder who subbed and coached sports, was still working at the school and was at the conferences. Of the six parents I interviewed all expressed the importance of the cultural and language foundations provided by Ode'imin. One mother I interviewed said the cultural education was incredibly important because there was only so much she could teach her son as an Ojibwe woman and it was important he have male role models that could guide him in male ceremonies.

In addition, all the parents I interviewed expressed appreciation of the staff's openness and willingness to help, with one saying "Oh, I love [my child's] teachers. Everyone just seems so friendly and open and willing to talk about anything that's going on, and they keep me very informed of anything that happens at school." Another parent expressed similar statement saying, "I think they're great. They definitely try their best. I think sometimes they don't have enough resources."

Quite a few of the parents worked directly with staff to address some of the problematic behaviors their children were having in class. For example, the first-grade teacher worked with the mother of a very defiant child to come up with a visual aide to help the child make better choices and improve their behavior. The mother suggested using a "red choice, green choice" method, where the student was told if they were doing something they shouldn ot that they were making a "red choice" which would lead to bad consequences. While if they were doing what they were supposed to, they were making a "green choice" and this would lead to good consequences. This had significant success. We saw significant improvement in another student's behavior after the mother threatened to take away his allowance if she got negative

reports, which worked remarkably well. Another mother worked with the principal, and other administrative and support staff, to try to get support for her children who had become destructive, defiant and angry after moving out of their grandmother's home. This may be contrary to traditional Anishinaabek child rearing practices as described by L. B. Simpson (2017), however these parents are simply trying to work with the tools and resources that are available to them in order to reach whatever goals they have for themselves and their family. In the case of this mother, her goal was healing her family and keeping everyone safe and together.

Staff and Culture at Ode'imin

Of the six administrative staff positions that were not school board positions, two of the administrators were Ojibwe. One was responsible for culture and language curriculum, and the other handled non-educational staff such as janitorial services, transportation, and secretarial staff. Of the fourteen elementary teachers at the school four of them were "Culture staff." Two of the members of the culture staff taught the Ojibwe language and culture classes full time; while the other two taught drumming for boys and helped and guided culturally specific activities such as sugar bushing, and manoomin (wild rice) harvesting. Of these two, one was split between the elementary, middle and high schools; while the other worked for a secondary organization that had them work at the school. The one that was split between the schools also led the feeding ceremonies.

Feeding ceremonies were held on the first Monday of every month at the start of school. The feeding ceremony, also called pipe and dish, consisted of the students and staff providing a tobacco offering. Following the tobacco offering, a the cultural staff member would guide a selected boy from the fifth grade in preparing the pipe before the staff member smoked the pipe and recited a story or prayer in Anishinaabemowin. Following the prayer a few select girls from

the older grades would serve food to students and staff from wooden bowls. Typically, the food consisted of manoomin (wild rice), cheesy tots, sausages and fruit.

There were also three Ojibwe teachers that served as the main class teacher or taught extracurriculars or special education. Of the support staff which consisted of paraeducators, kitchen staff, school nurse, social worker, full time substitutes, office personnel, bus drivers, IT workers, and janitors, there was a total of seventeen individuals, of whom seven were Ojibwe, and one was from another Tribal nation (see Figure 3.1)

Figure 3.1 Breakdown of School Personnel and Tribal Belonging.

	Administration	Culture Staff	Non-Culture Staff Teachers	Support Staff
Indigenous	2	4	3	8
Non-Indigenous	4	0	11	9
Total	6	0	14	17

The six Native American teachers that taught at the school were recruited differently. Three of the teachers were members of the community and had become involved in the school by starting as active parents who volunteered, became hired staff, and then eventually got the appropriate credentials to teach. One of the teachers was drawn to Ode'imin because they wanted to be a role model for other Native American students, while another one wanted to work with children in a culturally relevant setting. The other teacher was recruited through a language training program and was in the process of satisfying their Ojibwe language teaching credentials.

Of the non-Indigenous teachers working at Ode'imin only two of them had previous experience teaching at a Tribal school. Both teachers had cast a wide net when applying to jobs out of teacher's college and found themselves teaching at a Tribal school before applying to

Ode'imin. The other non-Indigenous teachers, except for one, did not purposefully seek out employment at a Tribal school. Most of the teachers had applied to schools in the area that were accepting applicants which just happened to include Ode'imin. Only one of the non-Indigenous teachers had actively sought employment at Ode'imin, and that was because they had already been employed at the school in a different position prior to earning their teaching degree and license. This person was mostly attracted to the job because they were already familiar with the school and its staff. These teachers despite not being initially interested in "Indian education" were still able to effectively navigate and work with students since the classrooms are small and they are able to form personal connections with their students, sometimes over multiple years. This helped establish relationships with families over multiple generations and across different familial branches.

The curriculum at the Tribal school was mostly based on state standards and core curriculum. One teacher described the student's education as "… 75% European education, Minnesota standards, and 25% cultural related activities and education…" Based on my observations I found this to be an accurate representation. The students' cultural education was limited to language classes and special seasonal activities such as manoomin (wild rice) harvesting and sugar bushing. The mainstream teachers who taught in the general classrooms, save for the Ojibwe teachers, were too unfamiliar with the culture to take up roles in this part of the curriculum. Despite this, the non-Ojibwe teachers and staff were generally open to learning, expressing an interest or a desire to learn more of the language and more about the culture. When I asked one of the teachers what they liked about working at the school they told me:

> *Gosh, the language and the culture, for sure. I like the pipe-and-dish aspect that we have*
>
> *every first Monday, or the first day of the month when we start out. I love that we do the*

powwows, and you can tell that the kids have such pride when we're doing them,

especially if they're drumming. We used to have a drum and dance program. That was a

huge piece, and the fact that we actually incorporate Ojibwe language into our day.

Of the non-Indigenous teachers, at least four attempted to incorporate some of the Ojibwe language, or Anishinaabemowin, they knew into the class, substituting English commands and directions for Ojibwe such as ambe (come), mahjon (lets go or go), and nabadubbin (sit). They also expressed excitement at getting the chance to learn more of the language through a program made available to the school. Learning the Ojibwe language was something an Ojibwe teacher recommended that I do. They told me that the language was important to the students and that using a few words in Ojibwe with them meant a lot to them. One of the teachers I worked with would ask the kids during reading time the Ojibwe names of animals in the story, while another would substitute the animal names they did know during stories.

They used traditional Ojibwe stories about Nanaboozhoo, a manitou trickster and cultural hero, to conduct reading and comprehension assessments for students. The teachers also read stories about Nanabhoozhoo during story time. In addition to Anishinaabemowin use and Nanaboozhoo stories, four mainstream teachers, and two non-mainstream teachers encouraged smudging. Smudging is a ceremony that is conducted to purify oneself, a space, and connect to spirit. For smudging, a medicine such as wiingashk (sweetgrass), bashkodejiibik (sage) or asema (tobacco) is burned typically in an abalone shell, and an eagle feather is used to spread the smoke from the medicine. One of the Ojibwe teachers told me how they would smudge their room and their colleague's room:

Every other day I smudge the room down. Not only is that supposed to... It physically kills

germs in the air, but it also helps clear their minds and calms them down. So at least

every other day I smudge my room down. Then I'll go smudge down [colleague's] room too.

The non-Indigenous teachers would also avoid or try to navigate culturally sensitive areas. For example, one of the teachers informed me they did not do anything with snowmen in their curriculum, because according to the school's Culture and Language Committee Ojibwe people traditionally do not believe in making snowmen because spirits and ghosts can get trapped in them (Redix & Smallwood, 2014). This same teacher told me that when they were unsure of something they would defer to the Culture and Language Committee which was made up of Native American staff and teachers. The Culture and Language Committee were active in creating a culturally responsive education, communicating what was culturally appropriate and inappropriate to the teachers, staff, and administration, as well as developing more robust cultural activities for the students. The staff who were uncertain about an activity were supposed to consult the Culture and Language Committee for advice.

There were some non-Ojibwe staff and administration that were attracted to working at the school because of their own connections to the community whether it was familial, marital, or personal. It gave them opportunities to be close to their children or their other family members. Some had children who were members of Ode'imin's Tribe, or at least part of the broader Anishinaabe nation. After enrolling their children in the school, they progressively got more involved like the Tribal members.

Stigma and Encountering Resistance at the School

Students that received services were not necessarily stigmatized by their peers or staff. These students, despite their more obvious struggles, were largely accepted by their peers. This might be because the community was supportive and that many of the children were related to each

other in some way or another. Students were also roundly admonished with regards to using discriminating language around disability. For example, one of the Ojibwe teachers recounted an incident to me with frustration. The teacher had a porcelain Ojibwe baby doll with a missing leg that she brought in to teach vocabulary, but the children made fun of the doll and referred to the "Special" doll using slurs for disabled people. This bothered the Ojibwe teacher and led to her admonishing the students and asking them if they would make fun of the doll if it was a real person and a member or their family. This led to her having a serious talk about respecting others and other people's family members. She discussed how she wanted to get the doll a wheelchair to reinforce the idea the doll was disabled and have continuing conversation with students about respecting disabled folks.

Another teacher told me when students choose to pick on or bully a student they did not do so because they see them as being "disabled" or being "SPED," which is an acronym for "special education." Instead, it was because they perceived a difference, and they saw that difference as either appealing or unappealing. This teacher also pointed out that when a student makes fun of another student for not being able to do something, it was usually because the student struggles with the same thing themselves. Another teacher in a separate interview echoed this teachers' sentiments.

The only time I witnessed students being stigmatized for being in special education by students was when the stigmatized student had a severe behavioral or social issue that was majorly disruptive and caused the other students and staff stress or anxiety. Then the fact they were in special education was used more as ammunition to target that student. This had varying effects since some of the students would proudly say "I am in special education," or "I am special education." Other students with major behavioral and social issues also experienced

similar stigmatization, but they were not targeted or associated with special education. I witnessed multiple occasions where non-special education students were having a lot of behavioral issues because of home issues. Their fellow students usually avoided them, name called, admonished, and fought with them, but did not use slurs associated with disabilities except for the words: "stupid," "dumb," "idiot" or a favorite among the older students "dumb@ss."

Special education and disabilities were stigmatized in the community, even as the parents of the students' receiving services that I interviewed recognized the need for their children to receive services. One mother said, "There were just some small things that they little bit snuck in there just so that she would get extra help. Just to keep her moving forward because she can get stuck sometimes." While a father recognized his daughter struggled a lot with reading and said he wanted his daughter to be able to read. He told me:

> *"She likes to be able to read things. I can tell she wants to be able to do it and I want her to be able to do the things that she wants. I want her to be successful in everything that she does and I know that she's going to need that to do it.*

A few of the parents also recognized that they had themselves struggled in ways similar to what their children were experiencing and were glad for the help available to this generation. During interviews I asked parents about their experiences when they first sat down to establish student services with an Individual Education Plan (IEP), the document that establishes an educational plan for the student, clarifies the services they will receive, and guarantees specific accommodations for the student. All but one parent described the process as intimidating, and said the process made them nervous, but they still agreed to go forward with services.

Elders who served as guardians were almost always grandmothers, although in a few cases, the primary caretaker was a grandfather. Some grandparents taking care of their grandchildren were very resistant to getting special education placement and services for the children in their care. Even when there were obvious issues they often balked, and it took effort and trust building by the special education staff to get the grandparents to sign off on an IEP. In some cases, the grandparents actively refused and could not be convinced that special education services were in the student's best interests.

For example, one older student failed to learn to read even after multiple interventions at various grade levels. The special education staff sent multiple requests to the student's grandmother over the course of multiple years. The grandmother either ignored or refused the requests. It got to the point that one of the special education teachers was actively going to this grandmother's house and "begging" her to establish services. However, she refused every time. It was never clear why she refused services, except that she thought this student was fine and there was nothing wrong with them. Some of the staff suspected it was an issue of denial, but the lengths that this woman went to forgo services makes me suspect there was more going on than just denial.

Instead of continuing to pester the grandmother, staff altered this student's assignments and provided extra in class support when they were able to, or during break periods. A teacher and community member who worked with this student said:

> ...I know his family denies, doesn't want help and stuff, but he still struggles, but he's like he has to be my best friend. That's why I told him, "You're my best friend, [student]." Because I sit with him. Because he just needs that. He needs that one-on-one. So I'll go through and give the general... And then he needs that one-on-one for, "What's the

weather like?" "I don't remember," and stuff like that. That's why I said he's in the top, he

needs it. But yeah, they do need it. Because they just need the reminder of being helped

and focused.

When I was working as a parapro at the school, I would sit with this student and read their assignments to them and record their answers. Sometimes this took place during regular class times or when the other students were on break and there was extra time. Other teachers found ways to accommodate this student as well. For example, older students were required to recite a speech at the end of the school year in Ojibwe. While most could simply read off a paper with their speech on it, this student could not, and so during free period he would go to the Ojibwe class and work with the language instructors on memorizing his speech and practiced reciting it multiple times before the end of the school year.

The Role of Grandmothers and Aunties

Elders in Indigenous communities are viewed as "knowledge keepers" and as necessary for the survival of Indigenous cultures and communities (Byers, 2010). In Ojibwe culture this is demonstrated in the direct translation for the word "Old woman," which is "mindimooyenh" which translates to English as the "one who holds us all together" (Kaagegaabaw, 2023). They hold their families together, along with their communities, their dodems (clans) and their nations. Women who are elders are seen as unique in their roles as knowledge keepers because of how their wisdom is shaped by being mothers (Byers, 2010). In many Indigenous cultures there is a recognition that the mother sustains their infants and children in the same way that the Earth sustains all life, and this comparison is celebrated (Byers, 2010).

In the community where I carried out my research, many of the children lived with their grandmothers, which is not uncommon in Indigenous communities. Native American

grandparents were three times more likely to be the primary caretaker for their grandchildren

than any other racial group (Suzanne L Cross, Day, & Byers, 2010). Of the cases I was aware of,

the grandparents had assumed custody due to one or both parents passing away, becoming

incarcerated, struggling with substance abuse, being found unfit to parent, or simply being too

young. One of the teachers at the school questioned whether the lack of parental involvement in

their children's lives was a source of some of the student's behavioral issues.

> *Scientifically, I don't know. But if I had to... In my mind I'm thinking there's a whole*
>
> *generation that grew up that didn't have parent skills I swear. So, their kids didn't get*
>
> *that. There's a lot of young kids who are living with their grandparents now so I think*
>
> *they missed that part. I think parents dropped the ball the last generation so they're*
>
> *just...playing catch up, and I don't think they had a role model to watch.*

In Byers' (2010) study of this topic, they found that Native American grandmothers

assume care of their grandchildren when there is a significant hardship in the child's life, and

they are motivated to protect their grandchildren from institutional settings like foster care or

residential homes, as well as to provide strong cultural foundations for them (Byers, 2010).

Suzanne L Cross et al. (2010) further emphasize the role that historical trauma from the boarding

school legacy plays on grandparents' decision to assume care of their grandchildren, and how

important intergenerational roles and relationships are in care. There was evidence for this

motivation in the community as well. Specifically, I am reminded of a grandmother, who despite

already caring for five of her grandchildren, decided to foster a family member when other

family members refused to take care of the child. If she had not assumed care of the child, they

would have been most likely placed in a residential facility due to their age and behavioral

issues. The staff at the school hailed the grandmother as a saint for her willingness to take on so many children.

Building Trust and Understanding with the Community

To my knowledge none of the non-grandparents were as adamant in refusing services as some of the grandparents. Some of the parents or younger guardians may have needed extra convincing and more assurance but were not strictly opposed to special education services or extra services. Likewise, most grandparents who were not amenable to special education services could be persuaded. For example, there was one grandparent who was adamantly refusing services for her grandchild despite severe behavior and social emotional issues. They thought special education staff would just "Mess him up more." To build trust and demonstrate respect when staff made house visits to talk to her, they brought food with them for her and her family to demonstrate respect to her as an elder, and to provide her with resources they knew she needed since her household was known to be food insecure. In addition, staff made a point to send her grandchildren home with food, and one teacher recruited his own mother who grew up with this grandparent to talk to her on the teacher's behalf. This involvement allowed them to design a behavioral plan that was based on the Seven Grandfather Teachings, a fundamental pedagogy in Ojibwe culture.

There are more examples of school staff reaching out and establishing trust with grandparents in this way to ensure students the best possible educational experience. Prior to an IEP meeting, one grandmother was actively denying that their grandchild, who was in the second grade, had severe deficits. This was despite the child struggling with writing their name, and not remembering most of the alphabet. The staff came together during the meeting and spent a lot of time talking to the grandmother about this student and their struggles and how much special

education services were enabling the student to learn. At the end of the meeting the grandmother was able to take a step back and admit that this child's issues were more severe, and that they could benefit from extra help.

Elders, and some of the other guardians, became more agreeable when the staff reached out and made extra efforts to demonstrate that they cared, suggesting that the issue is one of trust and understanding. This sentiment was echoed by some of the staff. One teacher told me in a moment of frustration that a grandmother was "Afraid the big bad tribal school is going to take her grandkids away," after getting off the phone with them. I believe grandparents have experienced more trauma regarding schools and are more wary of them due to their lived experiences. It makes sense that they would be hesitant to engage with the school, and particularly when it involves special education which has been used to segregate and provide students of ethnic minorities, especially Indigenous students, with a subpar education.

Analysis

Looking at Oppression in DisCrit and Critical Indigenous Theory

In disability critical race theory (DisCrit) the intersection of race and disability status is examined and used to understand how students may experience oppression in and outside of the classroom, as well as how outside oppression may influence the oppression that happens within the school. In applying DisCrit to Ode'imin and looking additionally at how Indigenous identity may affect Indigenous students in addition to disability status, the situation at Ode'imin can be better understood. Further, DisCrit in combination with critical Indigenous theory allows for deeper understanding of the relations between the Tribal community and the non-Tribal community.

There is a lot of tension between the Tribal community and the mostly White non-Tribal community. There are issues with racism, fear, and lack of knowledge that exacerbate these tensions. The racism in the non-Tribal community is further exacerbated by issues regarding Tribal sovereignty and current events that have strengthened land claims for the Tribal community. Some residents misunderstand this expansion and strengthening of Tribal sovereignty as a power grab by the Tribal community and view it as a threat to their own dominance and control over the area. The legal affirmation of Tribal jurisdiction also means Tribal police have an increased presence in areas that were previously seen as being "outside the reservation."

The issue of fishing rights is a particularly major tension due to recent fishing restrictions that have impacted the non-Tribal community's livelihood and tourism industry. The Tribe's fishing rights are codified in their treaty with the United States and therefore are not subject to state regulation, breeding further resentment among the non-Indigenous population. There were several non-Tribal community members who were vocal about their resentment, and did not understand that exercising Treaty rights is not about Tribal members getting special treatment because of their blood quantum and enrollment status.

Resentment and hate are expressed in different environments and institutions that make up the non-Tribal community, notably the local public school. As discussed earlier, Indigenous students dealt with racism from the school staff, students and other parents who were involved in the school, exposing them to traumatic events and causing Indigenous students significant psychological stress. The racism in the school also impacts disciplinary measures taken against Indigenous students, effecting school enrollment, dropout rates, and special education referrals.

In Indigenous communities there is a wariness regarding special education because it has been used as a tool to deny Indigenous children access to education, and resources to improve their lives. The community is very much aware of how special education is used to segregate Indigenous children. This was part of the reason that Ode'imin was established in the first place, because discriminatory practices saw Indigenous children disproportionately referred to special education services.

Even though Ode'imin is a Tribal school, it is still a school, and it is still run mostly by White people, some of whom are part of the non-Tribal community while others are not. Given the broader context, there is fear and suspicion regarding the White actors, especially among older folks who have experienced more discrimination across their lifetime and witnessed more horrific and violent events. As a result, they are less apt to accept the recommendations of an IEP or special education services.

Stigma related to disabilities was reported within the community, however, I did not see or witness much stigma related to disability at the school. The adults I spoke to said there was stigma in the Tribal community that was particularly related to fetal alcohol spectrum disorder (FASD) and other congenital disabilities caused by being exposed to illicit substances prenatally, which I will discuss further in chapter four.

Survivance and Refusal

Survivance is actively continuing to exist and endure, despite settler colonial attempts at erasure (Vizenor, 2009). Survivance is enacted when Indigenous people use the power structures that may be considered oppressive to protect and preserve Indigenous identity and culture. In this case the Tribal community developed a Tribal school, an institution that comes from the Settler Colonial state but affirms Indigenous sovereignty and culture. Ode'imin itself is thus a

representation of survivance. While it is an institution originating in settler colonialism, and dominated by settler curriculum standards and requirements, it exists to serve the Tribal community and works to continue the transmission of cultural knowledge to the next generation.

Ode'imin is also an expression of what A. Simpson (2014) would describe as "refusal." A. Simpson (2014) states that refusal is the act of rejecting the authority of the settler colonial state through the promotion of Indigenous sovereignty. Ode'imin Tribal School was started by families that were "fed up" with the public school's active racism and the alternative they created is an expression of the community's sovereignty, cultural values, and their own history.

Refusal serves to interrupt settler colonialism and to preserve sovereignty and communities. It takes on many forms and can be used to challenge ideas around power, science, and history and to preserve Indigenous knowledge and histories. The enduring presence of Ode'imin allows families to express refusal. It gives families the ability to opt out of a settler-colonial public school and attend a school that affirms their community's sovereignty and seeks to preserve and conserve its culture through education. The public school, which has very limited cultural programming and struggles with hostility and racism, cannot further the Tribal community's sovereignty or effectively preserve its culture. If anything, the public school would act as an agent against Tribal sovereignty and Indigenous culture, by limiting cultural and Tribal education and perpetuating an environment that exposes Indigenous students to racism.

Ode'imin is not unlike the survival schools in Minneapolis and St. Paul that were developed by the American Indian Movement (AIM), with which the goal was to protect Indigenous students from racism and discrimination in the Twin Cities school districts, and to facilitate a culturally appropriate education that promoted Indigenous culture and sovereignty (Davis, 2013). Like the survival schools, Ode'imin came about from a desire to protect, resist,

and revitalize the community, and to give the community's children and families a place where they could be safe, and protected from additional psychological stress and traumatic events caused by being subjected to racism.

In addition to the school being a space of survivance and refusal, the families and students embodied survivance and refusal in their stance on the importance of cultural education provided by the school, and the foundation this provides for their children. Likewise, the students are engaging in survivance by partaking in cultural activities and growing their cultural and linguistic knowledge. In learning to do specific cultural activities, which settler-colonial institutions fought to eliminate and prevent their practice, the students are ensuring that this knowledge continues to survive and endure in the present, and into the future.

Their language and culture activities have been the target of systematic destruction by settler colonial powers. The boarding schools and other educational institutions sought to erase Anishinaabemowin. Yet it continues to exist and persevere, partially because of educational programs that are teaching the next generation of Anishinaabemowin speakers and ensuring that the language continues to survive and endure into the future.

The hesitancy of many grandparents to engage with Ode'imin staff and administrators when special education services are suggested might also be read as refusal. Since special education services have been historically used to prevent Indigenous students from accessing a proper education, the grandparents' refusal of services stems from their broader refusal of the settler colonial systems which underlay special education services. In refusing special education services the grandparents are attempting to protect their grandchildren or other children in their care from potential discrimination by settler-colonial powers that could potentially cause the child harm by denying them an adequate education or cause further emotional and social issues.

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Furthermore, the grandparents' refusal of services is an active denial of settler-colonial authoritative knowledge-making that targets the children for whom they have responsibility, and it interrupts the power of the institution and state by questioning it's authority. In doing so, they express their own political power as guardians, but also as members of the Ojibwe community who have inherent rights and powers within the institution. They are also using this influence to push forward and advocate more culturally appropriate ways of working with the community's children and advocating for culturally based approaches. For example, the grandmother who requested that the Seven Grandfather Teachings be used to teach her grandchild social and emotional lessons, is advocating for the involvement and incorporation of their culture in her grandchild's education.

The grandparents are not the only ones who express refusal. The students engage in refusal by rejecting staff's authoritative power over them through various actions. Sometimes this is represented as literal refusals, other times it is through violence or destruction of personal or school property. Engaging in resistant activities was potentially a response to accumulating trauma as they aged or developed more awareness of the systems that affected and hurt them. It is also possible that, as they aged, they became more socialized to have an oppositional identity towards school and view it as part of the "enemy" culture (Li, 2008). Originally this idea was used by Willis (1977) to explain working class students' opposition to schooling. The students in Willis (1977) study viewed school as an enemy institution, not unlike how their working-class parents, who were often unionized, viewed their employers.

The theory can be somewhat applicable in this case, given the negative history between Indigenous people and schools. Indigenous peoples' relationships with school are fraught with trauma, racism, and disenfranchisement. Furthermore, boarding schools unwittingly developed a

culture of resistance within Indigenous communities that has become deeply engrained in pan-Indigenous culture and perpetuated in Indigenous peoples' ongoing relationships with public schools (Child, 1998).

However, Willis (1977) does not engage in issues of settler colonial power and Indigenous identity, making the theory not quite adequate for interpreting the student's resistance at Ode'imin. Whereas Simpson's (2014) refusal and Vizenor's concept of survivance is more appropriate in this situation since these theories explore Indigenous identity in response to settler-colonial powers and institutions. The students at Od'imin are engaging in both survivance and refusal. While their refusal serves to interrupt power, namely the power of the school as an institution and the staff as agents of that institution. They are expanding and, in some ways, testing their power through their refusal, and challenging the power that the institution and its agents has over them. The students are also expressing survivance since they are not merely surviving in the situation, but are expressing agency and demonstrating endurance through their various acts of resistance and rebellion.

I would argue the students are engaging in refusal and survivance as a reaction to the events that are unfolding in their lives which are ultimately influenced by historical and modern settler-colonial powers. In the case of the students' refusal and survivance are rooted in accumulating trauma in their lives, as well as their socialization in resistance to settler-colonial structures of power, which also impacts their lives in numerous ways beyond the walls of the school.

Trust, Understanding, and Culture

Trust, understanding, and culture are expressed independently of each other, but they are also intertwined. The school staff worked hard to establish trusting relationships with the families

they served to overcome the resistance and fear that some individuals had. It was understood by staff and administration that trust needed to be built and understanding needed to be established with the families to have sustainable relationships. This was done in a variety of ways from food drops, to utilizing community relationships, and demonstrating genuine care for the students.

The staff also attempts to establish mutual understanding with the families they work with. In working with the students, they create meaningful and authentic relationships with the students, leading to them developing an understanding of the student's life and background. In creating and establishing these authentic relationships based on understanding they are able to gain understanding of the students' family, community, and their culture. This understanding can be used to better navigate family and community situations, and to demonstrate respect for the culture and its norms.

Another way that trust was established was by engaging in Ojibwe culture and language. The purpose of the school is to preserve and conserve the community's culture, but not everyone in the school belongs to that community or even the Ojibwe nation. Most of the mainstream teachers are non-Indigenous, as is the administration. However, by making active genuine efforts to engage in the students' and families' culture and language in appropriate ways, they establish trust. They also develop and show an understanding of Ojibwe culture and the culture of the students and the community.

In the history of Indigenous people and schooling, there has not always been a positive relationship between schools and Indigenous culture and language. Even in contemporary times the relationship is still fraught and represents an ongoing experience of historical trauma that threatens Indigenous sovereignty and identity. Ode'imin is supposed to be a place where the culture can be safely expressed without fear of misunderstanding or prejudice and provide the

students with a safe space to express and develop their Indigenous identities. When staff and administration actively participate in the culture and encourage cultural expressions of identity, they contribute to that culturally positive environment.

The non-mainstream staff are not engaging in Ojibwe culture and language on their own. The school has a Language and Culture Committee that actively guides and educates the non-Indigenous staff. This committee, which is made up of community members and other Ojibwe people, make attempts at engaging in culture more genuine and effective. This, in turn, makes the school more legitimate as an institution to the community, makes trust possible, and helps the staff develop a true understanding of Ojibwe culture. While I never heard the word "decolonization" from teachers or staff members, the Language and Culture Committee make it possible for the school to decolonize and center Ojibwe culture and practices. As Tuck and Yang (2012) state, for decolonization to happen, Indigenous culture needs to be engaged beyond the surface level and needs to actively involve Indigenous people in the process. As Castagno and Brayboy (2008) point out, a deep and full understanding of the culture is necessary to provide a culturally responsive education. Otherwise, Indigenous culture is only adopted at the surface level as a symbolic act, which can be problematic and potentially detrimental to Indigenous students.

Conclusion

Due to historical and contemporary issues surrounding education in Native American communities, family members are wary and untrusting of schools, even their local Tribal school. This wariness is particularly pronounced among older community members that have lived and seen more injustices from the educational system. This includes having children forcibly taken away during the boarding school era or being placed in non-Indigenous foster families prior to

the establishment of ICWA (O'Sullivan, 2016; Stout, 2012). Children are also subjected to racism in the public schools and denied educational opportunities by being tracked into special education (Artiles, 2013; "Onamia Students Make Move," 1975). This may result in families resisting and avoiding special education placement for their children, even when the child would probably benefit from the services. Their resistance is a form of survivance, and stems from the desire to protect their most vulnerable family members (Byers, 2010; A. Simpson, 2014; Vizenor, 2009).

The staff is aware of the mistrust and attempts to build trust with the families and communities and develop a mutual understanding. This is done by building relationships with families over multiple generations, actively working with the families to help their students, engaging with Ojibwe culture and language. With more resistant families, or families that are resistant to special education services, the staff make home visits which may include food drops and find ways that they can make receiving services less intimidating, such as including cultural education in IEPs. By addressing these historical and cultural barriers, staff work to create an educational environment that respects and supports Native American students and their families.

CHAPTER 4: UNDERSTANDING TRAUMA: CARING FOR EACH CHILD AND

DEVELOPING A SENSE OF COMMUNITY THROUGH CARING

Introduction

Disability is a cultural discourse and process that is mediated by various institutions, technologies, powers, and disciplines. In the case of learning disabilities, schools are institutions where students are constructed as having disabilities. They are identified as disabled to account for their lack of educational success, as defined by the school as an institution and the state. At the Tribal school where I conducted ethnographic research, this was not the case. It was recognized by the staff that the students' academic struggles were due to historical, cultural, and contemporary issues involving trauma and unfulfilled needs that impacted students and their academic achievements and not necessarily disability. As a result, a lot of emphasis was placed on meeting student needs, community building, and celebrating the students' successes. Students still qualified for special education services but typically these students struggled more with academics compared to their peers at the school, as well as having to face additional emotional, social, and behavioral issues. In this chapter I will discuss the effects that trauma has on education and how it complicates determining the services a child needs, and how the staff and administration at the Tribal school understood the needs of their students. I will also discuss how a student's special education diagnoses directly impact, or peripherally inform, the services or interventions a child receives.

Effects of Trauma on Education

It would generally be expected that special education students would test lower than their non-special education counterparts in core areas such as reading and mathematics. However, at the Tribal school some of the students that were receiving special education students performed just

as well as their peers, if not occasionally better. Despite not having learning disabilities or qualifying for services, there were many students that struggled academically, and tested well below grade level. In my interviews with the mainstream classroom teachers, five out of seven said their students were "smart" and "more than capable." I had multiple conversations with teachers where they expressed frustration with their students because they knew they could do the work, that they could learn and do well in school, but that experiences the students had outside of their control posed significant barriers to them.

While I was at the school, I observed that there were a lot of students who faced housing and food insecurity as well as issues with their personal safety. Most, if not all the students, had been exposed to traumatic events either through primary or secondary experiences related to intergenerational trauma and issues that affected their community. While I did not gather specific Adverse Childhood Experience (ACE) data, I was aware that many experienced ACE events. ACEs scores are now commonly considered in Indigenous community settings and linked to school performance (Kenney & Singh, 2016). The ACEs score was developed and used to measure the specific number of types of adverse childhood events a person experiences between the ages of 0-17 compared to the development of behavioral and physical health issues later in life. The original categories of exposure include physical, sexual, or verbal abuse; physical and emotional neglect; witnessing a family member experience mental illness, addiction, imprisonment, or abuse; or losing a primary caregiver to death, prison, divorce or separation (Gray, Jump, & Smithson, 2023). Critics have expanded the ACEs tool to include racism, bullying, community violence, natural disasters, food insecurity, homelessness and other events that expose children to violence or put them at risk (Brewer-Smyth, 2022).

I was aware of the adverse childhood events potentially faced by Ode'imin students including food insecurity, housing issues, family instability, and community instability. These are intersected with school response and learning impacts, which in turn contextualizes the conceptualization and approaches to disability for students.

Food security was a major issue for community members. Within the borders of the reservation there were two grocery stores, and both were extremely expensive. While I was there, inflation also raised the price of groceries even more. I recall a teacher complaining about how a dozen eggs at the local store cost ten dollars. As a result, most community members would get their groceries from the local dollar stores or gas stations. The dollar stores and gas stations were also expensive and carried almost exclusively pre-packaged food. The community members that were able to would travel an hour away to the closest city to buy their groceries at Walmart, where even with the travel expenses, it was cheaper than shopping at local stores. Many families rely on the local food pantries, food distribution events, or community-based food drives.

The Tribal casino provides discounted rates at their restaurants and many families relied on these for hot meals for their families. The school provided free breakfast and lunch to students, and those who stayed in the afterschool program got snacks. In the past the school had a program that would send dinner and weekend meals home with the children for their families, but this program ended in 2020 when it was disrupted by Covid-19.

Because of current or past issues with food security, some students would engage in food hoarding or binge eating. One student, who was known to come from a very food-insecure home, got in trouble for taking extra milk and storing it in his backpack. When he was caught, staff made a point to load up his and his siblings' backpacks with food that they had brought from their own homes. One young student was known to collect leftovers from the other students

during mealtimes and attempt to eat as much as possible before going back to class. Some of this behavior was deterred when this student was allowed to put the food in their backpack, or when school staff saved her food for the end of the day despite school policy against this. I was told Bureau of Indian Education policy only allows food provided by schools to be distributed to students at designated mealtimes, and so the excess could not be collected and redistributed at the end of the day for families in need. This was monitored through a system that ensured food not consumed at the school was accounted for and disposed of. However, I was not able to find any source that confirms that this is a BIE policy.

There were a significant number of students that were technically homeless and resided in the Tribe's shelter and casino hotel where Tribal members were provided temporary and sometimes long-term residence. While the hotel was generally safe, the shelter was known to be dangerous. There were issues with violence, drug and alcohol usage, and other illegal activities. Students that stayed at the shelter reported stories of domestic violence, of people being attacked outside their rooms, being drunk and high, with some people passing out in the snow. While I sat in the "quiet room" with a student who had to be sequestered for acting up, he told me about living in the shelter. He complained about the loud noise and told me that there were people there who were tired and slept outside in snow at night, describing one man who fell asleep in a snowbank. A few teachers and community members confirmed that people passing out in the snow outside the shelter was a common occurrence and that it also happened with regularity outside the high school in the winter since it's not far from a known drug house.

Housing and living situations were also complicated if the Tribal or County welfare office became involved, especially if the intervention included removal of the children from the living situation and alternative placement. As mentioned in the previous chapter, it is common

for grandparents to take care of their grandkids when their parents are unable to. Unfortunately, not all kids have living grandparents or grandparents that can step up and take care of them since they already are taking care of other family members. There were several children that I worked with at the school who were frequently shuffled around from foster home to foster home. Notably, one set of siblings had six different foster home placements within roughly a year, while another set had at least two to three separate placements within the length of the school year.

Despite the Indian Child Welfare Act (ICWA) outlining the preferential placement of Native American children within their communities, this community struggled with foster care placements for their members. While many family members would step up and become registered foster parents specifically to take in their relatives' children, the need for placement outnumbered the available foster parents, and children from the Tribal community were often placed in non-Indigenous foster homes outside of the community. It was not unusual for a child to be placed outside of the county, and sometimes over an hour away, separating the children from their friends, community, family, and ultimately their culture and nation. Their loss was felt by community members, notably the other students who were not just their friends and peers, but often their family members. During my time at the school, I recall one set of siblings placed outside of the community after the passing of their guardian. They were placed in a separate county located hours away from the community. The next week after these children left for their new home, a few of their classmates told me they were sad and they missed them. In trying to comfort one boy, I worked with, I suggested that he would see his friends again and maybe they would visit. The boy looked me straight in the face and said, "[They're] never coming back," with finality. Other children expressed similar sentiments.

Students' physical and safety needs are also affected by wider community events. When the safety needs of the community are not met this can translate into community-based trauma that affects everyone that is part of that community. For example, the year before I arrived at the school, a child was hit by a car and killed. This rocked the school and the whole community, and a year after students and staff alike continued to mourn their loss. One student told me a very detailed account of the child's death although he had not directly witnessed it, possibly to cope with his grief. Similar forms of community-based trauma occurred when there were unexpected deaths in the community from violent events, overdoses, car accidents, sudden unexpected illnesses, and disappearances.

The community took part in the Red Dress Project in which red dresses symbolizing the missing women from their community were hung on the fence that lined the highway leading to the casino. The students in the elementary school also did projects in their Ojibwe classes for the Red Dress Project. Notably, they decorated red handprints and hung them outside their classroom. Talking to one of the Ojibwe teachers, she told me about how important the Red Dress Project was to her, having lost several family members and friends from the community with little to no explanation as to what happened to them, some of them very recently. She was able to name the owners of all the dresses that were hung up on the side of the highway.

Traditionally, Ojibwe people believe that a person's soul exists independently of their body, and when the body dies the soul continues to exist (Dennis & Washington, 2018). Traditional Ojibwe people see death as a normal part of the cycle of life, and do not see death as the end. They believe that after a person dies their soul goes onto the spirit world, where they will meet others who have passed, and will be there to greet their surviving loved ones when they pass on. Ojibwe people still grieve the loss of their family members and loved ones, but they

may take comfort in their continued existence in the spirit world. In Dennis and Washington (2018) study, they noted that in Ojibwe communities, the death of a community member is collectively grieved by the community. The death of community members through acts of violence against women, overdoses, violent events, sudden illnesses were grieved by the whole community, not just by the families of the deceased.

Koplow (2021) notes that one of the outcomes of community trauma is that it is widely acknowledged, and that it has the potential to bring more support to the victims, as opposed to individual traumas which tend to be hidden or denied by others causing increased emotional isolation (Koplow, 2021). When community members passed or there was a missing community member alert from the Tribe, the school was informed so that we knew what to expect. This was not just because a death of a community member could mean a lot of school absences or sleep deprived students who spent three or four days at a funeral, it also would mean that our students would be coming in with a lot of emotions.

As a result of trauma, children find different coping methods and ways to express their emotions. Students at Ode'imin often coped with the situation by being defiant, usurping authority, engaging in violence, or having loud emotional outbursts. Many of these behaviors could be classified as resistive or expressions of resistance according to scholarly literature and the staff that worked with the students.

Usually when a generally well-behaved student started to act up the teachers started to ask what was going on at their home. Sometimes they already knew and expected the student to lash out. This was demonstrated to me when a fourth-grade student and their little sibling lost their mother to an overdose. The staff was informed about this ahead of time, and I was warned that we could expect to see a lot more "behaviors." According to Stevenson (2017), an

educational specialist who focuses primarily on teaching professionals how to best help children cope with and process death in their lives, it is typical for a death to affect a student's performance at school and result in problem behavior and withdrawal from life. They may also copy behaviors of the deceased (Stevenson, 2017). In the case of the siblings who lost their mother, teachers noticed that the behavior of one had gotten worse in a lot of ways and that he was distracted and overwhelmed. This student was specifically overwhelmed with having to take on the responsibility of caring for and looking after their younger siblings.

Another student who was in kindergarten had a lot of emotional meltdowns after their mother passed. One outburst I witnessed involved the student getting upset that they did not get the food they wanted. This escalated into a full tantrum that ended with them lying on the floor, sobbing and crying for their mother. I calmed him down by taking him for a walk and talking about her. We talked about how she loved him even if she could not be with him, and that she probably missed him a lot which seemed to help calm him down. In other conversations I had with this student about his mother he talked about how he missed her and how he wanted to be with her. Their older sibling said he was having an especially hard time because he was not allowed at the funeral because he was "too little." Not only was this student struggling with the trauma of losing a parent unexpectantly, but he was also struggling to deal with the emotions that came with the grief of losing a parent. Based on this knowledge, it is not a surprise that he struggled with emotional regulation and behavioral issues after his mother's death.

There were several other students who developed similar behavioral issues after deaths in the family, experiencing a traumatic event, or being retraumatized by specific incidences. When talking to a teacher about a student who was usually a sweet child about how they were acting angry and defiantly, I asked if they knew what was going on. The teacher told me it was because

they had court ordered visitation with their mother, and according to the foster parents the child acts up and gets very angry after seeing their mother. One of the staff suggested that the issue was the child missed their mother and wanted to provide a picture for them. The student's teacher shut this down and clarified that the issue was the opposite, and that the child was very angry with their mother and struggled with his emotions because of her.

The issues surrounding housing insecurities, food insecurity, and other issues involving child welfare result in trauma as these generate familial and personal uncertainty and fear related to survival. The lack of certainty around satisfying basic needs and being preoccupied with individual and familial survival makes it difficult for children to do well in school academically, and harder to establish the higher needs that lead to self-actualization.

The school and the Tribe, as demonstrated in some of these examples, worked to meet some of the students' basic needs. The teachers, outside of the examples, worked hard to create individual relationships with students and tried to create a sense of safety and care for their students. As one teacher said, "What's important right now is that they feel safe, that they feel loved, that they feel they want to do their best they can for you… Academics sometimes has to play second." This sentiment was expressed by four out of the seven mainstream teachers during their interviews but was demonstrated on multiple occasions by all teachers during participant observation or informal conversations. These efforts did help students and families and eliminated some of the stresses that made it difficult or stressful to participate in school, as well as fostering an inclusive environment for the students.

These efforts may have also established a means through which some of the higher needs of students were met by creating an environment of belonging. The school and Tribe both worked to inclusively care for each child and to develop a sense of community through caring.

This space helped show the children that they were genuinely loved by people attempting to keep them safe and help build up their self-esteem. Students who came from the same if not a similar background were united, allowing them to develop a camaraderie and find acceptance and understanding among each other. This helped students with and without disabilities meet their potential or goals in different areas, whether it was academics, social and emotional learning, or making friends and developing community. As a result of meeting these goals the students became more self-actualized.

This is illustrated in the case of a boy in the second-grade classroom. There was a boy who had just started at the school and was completely withdrawn from the other kids having apparently never attended school. This student would actively avoid and stay away from the other students, and he avoided staff. Due to being so far behind academically he was "unofficially" put in special education to get him caught up. He was not eligible for these services according to assessment criteria, because he had never been in school prior. After a few months of one-on-one and small group work, he started to interact with the students' making friends with other children in and outside of his class. He became particularly close to the children in his special education class, and he improved enough that he started helping and aiding some of them. At the end of the year, he was no longer shy, and instead he was happy, active, bubbly, and affectionate with other children and the staff.

Lastly, I observed that the specific attention to and stigma associated with alcohol and drug use during pregnancy has had a chilling impact on how disabilities and needs are understood. The fear of FASD and the possible effects of opioids and other narcotics on fetus development was being echoed around the community where I carried out my research. During an interview with a teacher, they told me:

We have a lot of drugs on the reservation. I'm not going to lie. The first year that I was

here, I lost two parents, and I lost three kids, because they had to be moved into [social

services]... They had to be moved because of their parents passing away. Then one

year… we had 16 overdoses in one day.

The opioid epidemic has been particularly detrimental in Native American communities who

suffer the highest opioid mortality rate, and the second highest rate of opioid use disorder (OUD)

compared to other racial groups (Siddiqui & Urman, 2022; Whelshula et al., 2021). The

community I worked in was no different.

Special education staff questioned how many children that we serviced had issues with

neonatal opioid withdrawal syndrome (NOWS), prenatal opioid exposure (POE) or fetal alcohol

syndrome disorder (FASD) due to issues with drug and alcohol usage in the community. The

results of the research on NOWS and POE are mixed but show that children with NOWS are

more likely to have lower IQs, have developmental delays, require special education services,

and have lower attention spans than children with POE who did not develop NOWS and

unexposed children. Children with FASD may have issues with intellectual and learning

disabilities, trouble with memory, issues with attention span, and poor judgement issues (Spohr,

2018).

Of the children who received special education services only one student was diagnosed

with FASD. There was another student suspected of having severe FASD due to her

symptomology and distinct facial features associated with FASD, but she did not have this

diagnosis. According to special education staff, for a FASD diagnosis to be made and known to

the school, the mother needs to admit to consuming alcohol while the child was in utero. This

rarely happened due to the stigma surrounding alcohol usage during pregnancy and FASD.

Technically a physician can diagnose FASD when it is unknown if a child had prenatal exposure to alcohol, but for this to happen a parent or guardian would have to be willing to have the child assessed. I was aware of one student who was in foster care who was being evaluated for FASD while under the care of their guardians. The student's biological mother consistently struggled with drug and alcohol addiction, but was unable or refused to verify whether the student had alcohol exposure in utero. I was also aware of a parent that questioned whether his child had FASD, but he could not confirm the diagnosis because the mother had not admitted to drinking while pregnant.

Not all mothers were closed-mouthed about their experiences with substance use during pregnancy. There was one mother I interviewed who said she had used drugs while she was pregnant and believed this was the reason for her child's disability. When I asked her why she thought her child struggled she remorsefully said, "Because of all that crap I put in my body when I was pregnant with him." However, her child was not diagnosed with FASD, POE, NOWS or any other type of prenatal disorder caused by exposure to specific substances.

I recall one of the special education staff walking into the resource room and throwing up their hands asking "Do all of these kids have FAS?" after working with a group of second graders that all struggled with memory, focusing, thinking through problems, and other issues. This prompted a discussion about the history of some of the kids in the group with the other special education staff, and a conversation about how it was suspected that most of the kids being serviced in that group likely struggled with FASD or were affected prenatally by drug misuse.

Based on this conversation, other conversations I had with special education staff in a group and in one-on-one conversation, I found the symptoms that usually aroused suspicion were

short- and long-term memory issues, an inability to retain information, and severe learning deficits, alongside staff having knowledge that the student's mother struggled with substance abuse issues. Staff were aware of these struggles because they were shared with them by community members, or they were based on their own experiences working with the parents. The same symptoms of FASD, POE, and NOWS can also be indicative of trauma. According to literature on the effects of trauma on children's neurobiology, trauma negatively affects the brain. Children who have undergone significant childhood trauma have different brain structures than other children, and this impacts their motor skills, memory, social and emotional development, and even physical development. In a study conducted on youth who experienced significant childhood traumas it was found that the children had significantly less dark matter and physically smaller brains than those that experienced less trauma (Dye, 2018).

It has also been noted that research done on POE and NOWS fails to recognize other variables that may affect child development such as medical complications at birth and during pregnancy, nutrition during pregnancy, quality of prenatal care, socioeconomic status, maternal trauma and other variables known to effect child development (Conradt et al., 2019). Of these issues listed, most if not all would be major issues for the mothers of the children in the community due to high rates of poverty, lack of employment opportunities on the reservation, unstable housing and food access, maternal trauma, and family and community instability.

Complications with Diagnosis

Despite strong concerns that there were more students dealing with FASD, POE, NOWS or a similar disorder, a diagnosis would unlikely have affected a student's individual education plan (IEP) or how the staff worked with them. As confirmed by one teacher, diagnosis did not seem to matter:

I'm not knowledgeable in these areas and aside from certain disabilities, I'm not sure if there's anything in the IEPs that can help me with them. I trust the special ed staff to be knowledgeable and to be able to work with the kids in an appropriate way. Not all kids have IEPs. If a kid is struggling, you help them.

This is not to say that the IEPS are useless, or that they are not helpful in determining the best ways to help students. One of the teachers who was a mainstream teacher and had special education certification told me how they use IEPs to develop teaching methods for their special education students.

First of all, I look at their IEPs and then I evaluate their reading processes, their thought processes. Are they able to get from A to B to C, or do they get stuck? And using what I know from my special ed training, sometimes you have to try two or three things. I don't want to say trial and error because it's not, it's more thought out. I mean, what I do is more thought out instead of just trying this and trying that. It's a process of elimination.

This teacher went on to provide an example of a specific student that struggled emotionally and behaviorally.

Now, today when we're working on math, he sat right beside me, so I was touching him and reassuring him. And that is a process to make him feel like, which he is, smart, to make him feel that he is doing a good job. And because that frustration level for him just, sometimes when he comes in his frustration level is [gestured to indicate high] so when he comes here, I know that that's already there, so I have to de-escalate before he even gets in the room. So, it's more of personality in tune with how the kids are, and it takes a while. It takes me a good month to get to know who does what and what their little triggers are, and what is a de-escalation [for them] and that kind of thing.

This teacher, because they had the skill set, was able to interpret the student's IEP to help the student, but also had to have additional personal knowledge of that student in order to best work with them. Most of the children receiving special education services had "soft diagnoses," which are specific diagnoses that are listed in the *DSM V* and have established criteria, but the criteria are very generalized and not very specific, such as "Learning Disabled" (American Psychiatric Association. & American Psychiatric Association. DSM-5 Task Force., 2013; Tincani et al., 2009). This is unlike certain disorders, which are considered a "hard diagnosis" because the criteria are more specific and are not as easily generalized onto a population like Autism Spectrum Disorder (Tincani et al., 2009). Though some students were suspected of having "hard diagnoses" like dyslexia, autism spectrum disorder, and FASD, they still were officially diagnosed with soft diagnosis.

However, due to the unique identities of the students they worked with, and because the classes were small with between ten to nineteen students, staff were able to become close with the students. They were able to learn their weaknesses and strengths and identify potential issues. As a result, they would develop interventions with the special education staff to deal with the symptoms that the student was expressing in the classroom, regardless of what the actual IEP diagnosis was.

In some cases, this resulted in special education staff adopting methods for addressing specific hard diagnosis best practices and using them with students. For example, one student, was strongly suspected of being dyslexic by both the special education teacher and their mainstream teachers. When I discussed this with the special education teacher, they told me they were working on modifying some specific methods for dyslexic students to use with that student, to help improve their reading ability, even though he did not have an official diagnosis.

In interviewing the teachers and staff I found that the school had a robust system for identifying and targeting students for special education services, based on standards established by Minnesota's Department of Education policy known as the Total Special Education System (TSES). The teachers were instructed to document behaviors or observed phenomena in the Native American Student Information System (NASIS), a centralized system used to track Native American student data. They were also instructed to document the interventions they undertook to rectify the issue in NASIS, and to make recommendations to have the student hearing and vision tested. After a period of documentation, vision and hearing screenings, and unsuccessful interventions, cases would go before the school's Child Study Team who would review the case and make suggested interventions. If the interventions suggested were unsuccessful, and all other qualifications were met, the student would be observed and evaluated by the school's special education team which included a special education teacher, a school psychologist, the social worker, and other members of the special education team.

The actual diagnosis came from the school psychologist who was hired on contract by the school's administration, and who serviced quite a few other districts in the state as well. There were concerns raised about this individual because of how they conducted their assessments and observations of the students. I remember the other special education staff complaining about how she would walk up to a student without introducing herself, stand as close as she possibly could to the students, and stare down at them unflinchingly. The whole ordeal was very awkward to watch and personally made me feel uncomfortable when I observed it. We questioned how her results could even be considered accurate or reliable. Aside from the strange observation methods, staff questioned the overall accuracy of the diagnosis she gave students, with one para

advocating that they encourage a student's parent to have them evaluated by an outside psychiatrist since the diagnosis did not match up with the behavior we saw from that child.

General competency of this individual school psychologist aside, special ed staff and members of the Child Study Team told me it can still be difficult to understand what is going on, and whether the issue with the student is an issue of trauma or disability. This is especially the case since most of the disabled students also struggled with trauma. For example, there was a student with a severe speech impediment. When they started school, they could say "No," "uh-huh" and "nuh-uh," and was otherwise non-verbal. He also had severe behavioral issues, and it was unclear if the behavioral issues came from being non-verbal and unable to communicate, having a developmental disability which impacted his ability to communicate, or if it was the result of trauma, or isolation.

It was common for the younger students to lack socialization, especially those who were living with grandparents who may have been stricter about isolating due to fears and concerns about Covid-19. It has become more common nationwide for students starting school to be nonverbal or have major communication issues since Covid-19. Though, with this particular student, we also wondered if the behavior and lack of speech may have been the result of abuse since they had an older sibling who was non-verbal for years before they started to communicate in whispers and would rarely speak in full voice. The special education staff and school social worker were both trying to work with the non-verbal student to better understand the issue and how to best help. By the end of the school year the student's behavioral issues had improved greatly and their speech impediment improved a lot making me suspect that the issues were probably mostly related to trauma and isolation.

Building on the knowledge of previous teachers, and the fact that staff were very congenial, helped with identifying precise student issues. This was pointed out by five of the seven mainstream teachers in their formal interviews who noted how especially friendly and genial the staff were with each other, and how that was not necessarily common at other schools. I witnessed the camaraderie on multiple occasions as well when the teachers joined each other after school to vent about students or to share amusing stories with each other. Occasionally they would migrate into each other's classrooms to ask for advice, favors, or just to chat. At the teachers' conference, kindergarten, first grade and second grade teachers got together and talked about improving test scores in foundational areas for students and how to best work with specific students.

Some of the staff who were not mainstream teachers, such as the language and culture staff, did not have access to the student's IEP, or their NASIS file. Instead, they worked with the students one-on-one. Sometimes they benefited from having extensive knowledge about the student or experience with other students to gauge how to best work with them. They also benefited from talking to the special education coordinator and working with them when they were available. The special education coordinator tried to involve the language and culture staff more in the IEP process. The staff member I worked with was happy to do this and expressed a desire to support and show up for the students. The coordinator also tried to find solutions to student behaviors with the culture staff. Unfortunately, the priority was in core areas such as reading, writing, math, and SEL so the language and culture staff did not get as much support as they probably needed despite the Ojibwe language being an important part of the curriculum. Following Christmas break I worked in the Ojibwe classroom for four months to help with student behaviors. After four months I was pulled out of the classroom because they needed me

to fill a vacancy at the middle and high school and provide support for students in science and social studies classes.

Trauma or Disability?

In light of the context I have just described, a lot of effort was made to determine if students were struggling with a learning disability, a psychological issue, or something else. Depending on the issue that was affecting the student there were resources that could be utilized to address the issue appropriately and effectively. Based on what I saw at the school I believe the staff were able to differentiate between children who needed special education services and those who needed other services, primarily because the school's staff were very knowledgeable about their students, the community, and the families the students came from. There were four teachers, one support staff, and one administrator, who had worked at the school for over twenty years, and it was not uncommon for the teachers to not only have had all the children from one family, but also the parents of their current students as former students.

That said, staff who had not been there as long or were not related to the community were still knowledgeable and aware of what was going on with their students. A few of the staff grew up around or in the community having lived most of their lives on the reservation, or very close to it. A few staff members were community members or were related to community members through marriage or family ties and knew the students and understood community issues. There were also Ojibwe staff members who were not necessarily community members. However, they had enough of a shared background with the students that they were able to relate to them very well. One teacher who was Ojibwe but not a member of the community stated:

> *Me personally, I honestly believe I have a really good relationship with the kids because I can relate to them. I know their culture. I've been here, I came from their culture. I know*

their grandmas, their grandpas, their aunties, their uncles, because I've grown up with

them. I think that connection helps me with my relationship with my students, and I

believe I have a really good relationship with them.

Young students expressed affection and admiration for this teacher and a desire to be like them, while older students actively sought this person out for conversations and help. This extended to other Native American teachers as well, who may or may not have been Ojibwe.

When a student was targeted for special education services at the elementary school level, they struggled significantly more than their classmates and exhibited behavioral and emotional issues beyond what was typically seen by their fellow classmates. In addition, they often had a lot of documentation to support ongoing academic, behavioral and emotional issues. As one teacher said:

…Usually these students are so consistently in the system, this system, [Ode'imin's

system], that anything that needs to be identified has already been identified. Because

they're here as kindergarten students, first graders, second graders, third graders, and

when they come to my room, they're usually identified already.

Since the general student body was underperforming, these students were exceptionally underperforming. I was told during my first week at the school that the students receiving special education services were "low," meaning they were especially low functioning as opposed to high functioning. In the first-grade classrooms, I observed that it was common for students to struggle with early readers and basic kindergarten level books, but five out of seven of the special education students struggled with basic letter recognition. Of those special education students, almost all still struggled with recognizing ten to fifteen letters consistently by the end of the year.

Only one student made significant strides with his letters and was able to read at a level comparable to his classmates by the end of the year.

This was not because of a lack of effort or competence on behalf of the special education staff or the mainstream teachers. I worked with these students myself and was surprised at their inability to retain information. This group, as mentioned earlier, was suspected of having some form of FASD, POE, NOWS or some other substance related disorder, or as I also noted may have these difficulties as a result of other social conditions. Their impairments were severe and because of the severity of the issues they would be unlikely to reach the same level of academic achievement of their classmates, even with intensive interventions. When I started, one of the teachers pointed out a student and said that that student was unlikely to ever learn to read, and at the time I thought they were being unfair. However, after working with the student I realized that the teacher was most likely right due to the severity of the student's impaired memory and low comprehension.

This does not mean that the student is incapable of learning, it just means that they should be taught differently than their peers and learn how to navigate the world with their disability. The staff already does this by teaching students that struggle heavily with reading and writing how to use "Speech to text" technology, where the student speaks and the technology transcribes what they say, or the technology reads the text to the student. They also help the students to develop techniques that work for them and their disability. For example, one of the teachers encouraged one of her students to draw their notes instead of writing them, because the student struggled so severely with reading and writing and could not read their own notes if written but could interpret their own drawings.

Misaligned Education

Staff and teachers expressed concerns that the community did not value education and parents did not encourage students to view education as important, which I discussed previously in chapter three. One staff member commented on how they always have a lot of parents show up for the school's annual powwow at the beginning of the year but that these same parents did not attend parent teacher conferences. The educational history experienced by many, especially for the older generation, helps explain why they would not place a lot of emphasis on school and education. Many families are simply trying to survive and meet their basic needs, which can be a major challenge. The negative history and relationship with schools, and the curriculum the school is required to adhere to may not necessarily match the needs and values of the community.

All the parents I interviewed stressed the importance of the cultural curriculum of the Tribal school, and how important it was for their children to have a culturally based education. This was echoed in informal conversations that I had with other parents, and members of staff who sent their own children to the school. While most stated it was important that their children learn important skills such as reading, writing and math they emphasized the importance of the student's cultural education.

The school provided cultural education to the students through their Ojibwe language classes, school activities based in cultural events such as powwows, sugar bushing, and celebrating a community holiday dedicated to an important person from the community. Something the school did to encourage attendance at the conferences was provide a hot meal, specifically popular frybread tacos, which are commonly served at powwows and community events. Reportedly this helped increase turn out and was successful again for the second semester

conference when they did "walking tacos" which consists of adding seasoned taco meat and taco toppings to a single serving bag of Doritos.

While the school provided a cultural curriculum, they had to adhere to standards and requirements set by the federal government and the state of Minnesota to be accredited. These requirements are built based on the educational ideals and values of the settler colonial state and are not the same as the students' or the students' community values. At the elementary school level, the focus was on learning to read, write, do grade-appropriate mathematics and provide some social and emotional learning lessons. These lessons were taught by the teachers but they also used required programs such as Smarty Ants, a gamified interactive program that reinforced spelling and reading skills for younger students; achieve3000 is another reading program for older kids that also included science and social science lessons; and IXL a math program is another program that was used and reinforces mathematics skills. Overall, I do not think too many parents took issue with this. However, I believe they saw less value in what the students were being taught as they advanced through the grade levels, when they believed the knowledge became less practical or useful for occupations they would find in the community. This was especially the case when it came to middle school and high school education, where students were taught science and social studies based on state and federal standards, and did not include much in the way of Indigenous people's contributions or knowledge on the topics. Thus, it does not reflect their actual educational needs and goals, as one of the teachers who was a member of the Ojibwe nation put it:

> *And typically, in a Native American school, students are a little bit behind because of that*
>
> *reason, because there's the relevancy. The relevancy of their culture is important to this*

community, and so they don't really focus on the European education because it's not

their way of life.

Very few of the students at the school were at state proficiency standards. Issues with trauma, finding the curriculum irrelevant, and cultural and historical conflict with settler-colonial institutions results in students' tendency to struggle academically.

The effect of this is that students who may be referred for special education interventions at a public school or a school that is ignorant of Native American education issues, are not referred at the Tribal school. This frequently came up when students transferred to the local public school, and the public school would reach out to see what special education services they were receiving from the Tribal school. Talking with a special education teacher at the school, they jokingly told me that the public schools must wonder what is going on at Ode'imin, because when a student transferred from the Tribal school to the public school they would show very obvious deficits that would immediately get them flagged for special education intervention, but at Ode'imin they would most likely not be targeted for intervention, especially if they were an older student. This was brought up in an interview with another special education teacher:

Okay, here's the problem. So, in the last year we've had a bunch of kids move. And the

minute they move, they start meddling with the definition for special education, because

our average is so much lower than what the other average usually is.

Students who receive services and interventions struggle more severely than their fellow students and often have behavioral issues that accompany the disability. Since a lot of the students struggle, only those with the most severe issues are targeted for services.

What are their unique needs? How do we meet them where they are at?

A common theme that came up during my research was the concept of unique needs. The staff and administration conceptualized their students as being "unlike other students." By this, they meant that both the particular circumstances of each students' life such as their home life and family situation were unique; but also, that their background as Ojibwe made them unique specifically because they were profoundly affected by issues related to historical trauma, poverty, racism and various traumatic events. This was further impacted by the uniqueness of Ode'imin School itself, which is a Tribal school and does not operate like a public, charter, or private school. The school centers Ojibwe culture, being small, trauma informed and community centered. This creates an environment that is very distinct and particular to the community it serves.

The staff worked intensely on meeting the "unique needs" of their students, which combined individual needs as well as the cultural and psychological needs of the student. Because the school was small, and classrooms were proportionally small, staff could learn in depth about the individual needs of students. When discussing individual needs the staff would refer to specific methods or "tricks" they used to help a student with academics, how they would boost a specific student's self-worth or self-esteem, or specific boundaries or disciplines that a student needed. They strived to develop a personal relationship with each student and work with them as individuals to help them in ways that were specifically meaningful to each student. This was regardless of whether the student had an IEP, was receiving counseling, or was being targeted for intervention. Since it was recognized that all students, regardless of where they were at, needed extra assistance and help, the assistance they received varied depending on what they knew about the student.

The term "unique needs" was largely used when referring to students' broader cultural and psychological needs in general. This was differentiated from what was believed to be the needs of non-Indigenous students. It was understood that the students had a unique cultural background and benefitted from having cultural programming that was specific to their cultural identity. This included activities such as drumming classes, working in the sugar bush, gathering medicines, and harvesting wild rice. It was also understood that because of the socio-historical background of the students' community, and the impacts of this background on their families, specific interventions such as trauma informed education, trauma informed care, community building programs, and additional SEL education were all of benefit to the student body as a whole.

In addition to "unique needs," a similar discourse was commonly used with the phrase "meet them where they are at." This phrase was frequently invoked directly and indirectly in formal interviews and informal conversations, so much that I began to think of it as the school's unofficial motto. Unlike "unique needs," "meet them where they are at" was applied very specifically to academics, social and emotional learning, and to behavior. It meant that while you could have expectations and goals for students, they needed to be addressed on their level and not based on milestones where it was thought they should be. The use of the phrase by administrators and other staff was a reminder to acknowledge that the students had "unique needs" and that their definitions of success and progress needed to be measured differently, and that different methods needed to be used to help them.

Though occasionally it was used as a reminder to be gentle with oneself, and served to remind staff that even though students were not meeting milestones or goals it did not mean they were ineffective, but rather that definitions of success and effectiveness needed to be

reevaluated. I recall one teacher getting frustrated with their student's exam scores and wanted to know where they were going wrong with them since they felt like they were failing their students. Another staff member responded by telling the teacher that it was okay and that we needed "To meet them where they are at." This might be an expression of radical acceptance, a concept that emerged from the therapy method known as dialectical behavioral training (DBT). Radical acceptance teaches people to accept situations that are outside of their control. I do not know if the teachers ever received professional development or trainings that focused on DBT or radical acceptance, or if "Meet them where they are at" is an organic expression of radical acceptance that is developing independent of its original source.

Analysis

Examining Disability using DisCrit

Disability is a lived reality within this study and it is also a discourse. Using a Foucauldian discourse analysis, specially guided by Foucault's (1970) Order of Discourse we can see how the discourse of disability is mediated by multiple areas in the context of Ode'imin Tribal school. At Ode'imin, the discourse of disability is established by the institution known as special education and mediated by associated disciplines which in this context is made up of the special education staff. The discourse of disability is also mediated by established special education doctrine. This is made up of Federal and Minnesota special education statutes and mandates. These three areas formally mediate the discourse of disability within the walls of Ode'imin using authoritative knowledge recognized by the settler colonial state. However, the cultural discourse of disability has less authoritative influences that also construct the discourse of disability within Ode'imin and this further complicates how it is understood and talked about. The cultural discourse is influenced by the culture, perceptions and understandings of the Tribal community itself.

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The cultural discourse of disability is also influenced by Indigenous identity. Staff have suggested that many of the students at the school would likely be targeted for special education services due to behavioral and academic issues. In the context of disability critical race theory or DisCrit, race and disability are tightly intertwined. Historically, race was often constructed as a disability, and disability is highly racialized (Artiles, 2013; Migliarini & Annamma, 2020). These historical constructions have carried over into the present leading to ethnic and racial minorities being perceived by educational institutions as disabled, when they underperform academically and are targeted for special education interventions. This occurs even though racial minorities are not underperforming because they are disabled, but because they are affected by historical marginalization that has resulted in largescale systematic oppression and reduced socio-economic success. This is what ultimately affects student performance.

DisCrit is once again complicated by the presence of Indigenous identity in this situation. Migliarini and Annamma (2020) state that in order for staff and administration to minimize and combat the institutional oppression of disabled students of racial minorities they need to have a critical understanding of how race, disability and the intersection of these identities impact students. At Ode'imin it's not just enough to understand how disability and race impact the students, but also how Indigenous identity figures into the equation as well, as seen in figure 4.1. The staff and administration at Ode'imin can do this with some success. Staff and administration are aware of issues that impact their students as Indigenous people and racial minorities, and because they have this understanding, they are less likely to interpret their students' struggles and issues as disabilities. Since the staff can understand the culture and community of the students not only are they able to reduce the oppression that the students face as Indigenous students and students of color, but they are also able to reduce additional oppression by avoiding

unnecessary special education placement and get the students resources that would benefit them better.

I often heard at the school "Our students are different" or "our students aren't like other students." This is because, there is a recognition that the students at Ode'imin are different because of their Native American identity and cannot be compared to other non-Indigenous students. The students at Ode'imin come from a community that faces largescale systematic oppression and struggle socioeconomically. Many of the students share the same struggles, traumas and struggles. Unfortunately, many of these issues result in a lot of the students having huge needs that are difficult to address in the classroom.

Figure 4.1 Illustration of Indigenous identity intersecting with race and disability influencing both classroom oppression and oppression outside of school.
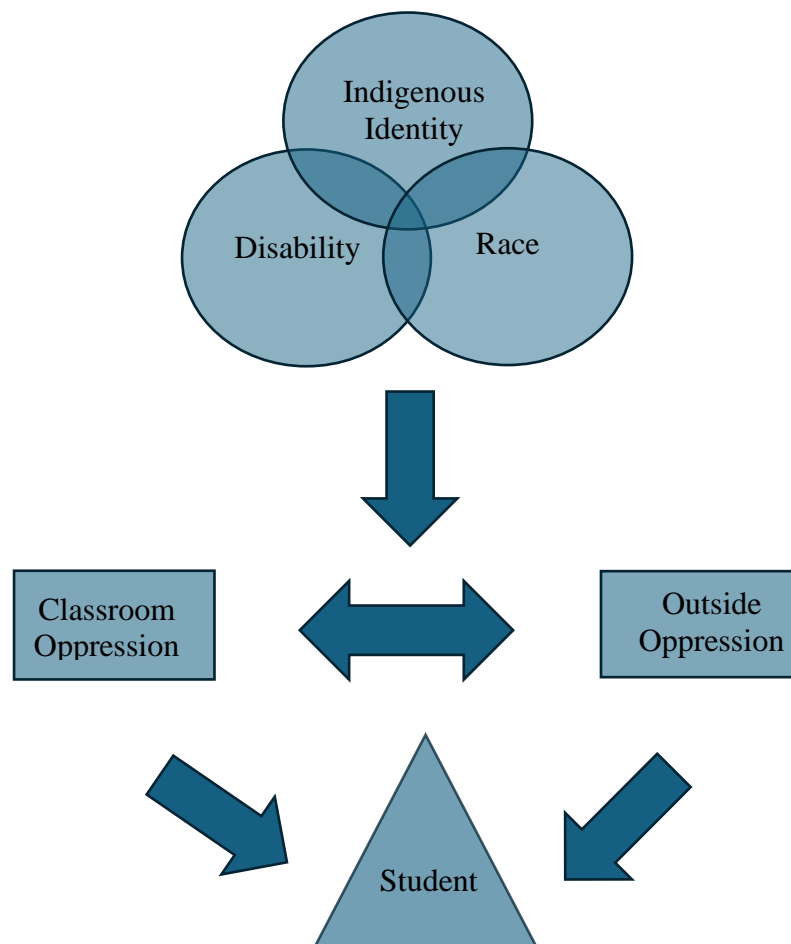
Based on their experience from working at the school and being in proximity to the Native community it is understood by the staff and administration that their students and their families have been profoundly affected by traumatic events, some of which are historical events that specifically affected Native Americans and continue to affect them in the present. The staff and administrators understand the students are marginalized and face unique challenges that are not typical of non-Indigenous students. In addition, they understand and are aware that the area that the students are growing up in is hostile to their identity and their community, both on the bases of the students not being White but also having a Tribal identity. As a result, they are sympathetic to their students' struggles and are understanding of the barriers that the students come up against. They are also savvy and experienced enough with dealing in trauma to recognize student behaviors, resistance, and classroom struggles as traumatic reactions.

Possibly, because of this understanding, students that were targeted for special education interventions were especially "low functioning." These students were noticeably impaired and struggled more academically, socially and emotionally compared to their peers who were still also struggling academically, socially and emotionally. However, the deficits the students struggled with were much more extreme than their counterparts, suggesting additional issues compounded with marginalization.

There is a possibility that the students at Ode'imin could be underestimated and that expectations for the students are set low because of the struggles the students are expected to face. However, having worked with the students myself and seeing what they are capable of, I do not believe this is the case. Based on my observations and seeing the overall growth of the students over the course of the year, I believe that the priorities for staff are simply different.

According to Neal (2021) part of helping students succeed is helping students address their needs; a child cannot succeed if their needs are not met. This includes basic needs such as food, water, shelter and feelings of safety, as well as more complex and higher needs such as belonging, and self-esteem (Neal, 2021). The Ode'imin school and its staff understand this and try to meet the needs of the students as best they can and try to build positive relationships with the students based on trust and understanding. Until that happens the students struggle with or resist learning. As previously quoted by a teacher, "Sometimes academics has to come second."

I experienced this myself when working with students, especially older students in third through fifth grade. When working with them one-on-one or in small groups some students refused to engage, shut down, or became very passive. It was not until I proved to them that I was a safe adult by listening to them without judgement, or providing help, encouragement, and praise that they started listening to me and became more engaged in whatever activity I was doing with them. Once they felt safe and accepted me, it seemed to just be a matter of providing them with the tools and the materials and they would work hard and do well. As a somewhat involved bystander it was incredible to watch the progress that students made throughout the year not just in terms of academic skills and achievement, but socially and emotionally as well.

Trauma and Symptoms

Something that was largely understood by the staff and administration was how prevalent trauma was in the students' lives. In the context of the Tribal school, trauma is almost always used to refer to psychological trauma, which is a discourse that is mediated and defined by authoritative psychological doctrines and institutions. Trauma is a very pervasive theme within this study. Is it also a discourse that takes on ontological dimensions within Ode'imin.

As stated earlier at the Tribal school it can be difficult to determine if a student is struggling with trauma or a disability and trauma. Since trauma has similar symptoms to that of various learning disabilities and in some ways trauma itself can be seen as disabling due to how severely it affects the students academically, socially and emotionally. However, at the Ode'imin school attempts are made to make a practical distinction between trauma and disability, since students who are only struggling with trauma and not disability benefit from specific interventions associated with counseling and psychology, not necessarily special education services. In addition, there are different funding and resource programs that the school accesses for students based on the students' diagnoses and needs.

Yet, despite the distinction, in the context of the classroom the students that are struggling with trauma are not differentiated from the students that are struggling with a disability. As one teacher told me, "If it works for special education, it works for everyone." The students are treated in largely the same way, with mainstream and special education staff responding to the unique needs of each student based on their personal interaction, NASIS, other teachers, and symptoms the student is expressing. This leads to the creation of truly individualized designed educational practices that benefit specific students and can easily be adapted to fit the specific educational needs of other individual students. These methods are successful in addressing the specific student's behaviors and symptoms regardless of whether the student has an IEP or not. Their understanding is developed through their complex knowledge of each student.

Conclusion

Disability within the walls of Ode'imin is a complicated discourse. Typically, schools are where students are constructed as having disabilities as a means through which to protect the institution

from failure. This is not the case at Ode'imin. Due to trauma resulting from many different aspects of the students' lives such as historical, familial, or community trauma; or simply having their needs go unmet; students struggle to learn and exhibit symptoms of having a learning disability.

At the Tribal school it is understood that these students do not necessarily have learning disabilities but are struggling in other areas and need other resources. The Tribe and the staff work with the students to "meet them where they are at" and try to develop a sense of community within the school to make it a safe place for students by providing some of their basic and emotional needs. Instead of targeting the students for special education, staff work individually with students to see how to best help them and utilize knowledge of the community and families to inform their process.

Students that were targeted for special education services struggled more severely than their peers, and tended to struggle emotionally, socially, or behaviorally in addition to academically. Like their peers many of these students also struggled with trauma which may have exacerbated their learning disabilities. Yet, they also benefitted from the community building within the school and having their basic and emotional needs met. This helped improve their learning and helped them build relationships with their peers.

CHAPTER 5: ILLUSTRATING THEIR LIVES: USING ART ELICITATION METHODS TO

INTERVIEW INDIGENOUS SPECIAL EDUCATION STUDENTS

Introduction

I developed a novel method for interviewing Indigenous special education students during my field research at an Ojibwe elementary Tribal school in Minnesota. This involved art elicitation during interviews based on art produced by the children. The method is loosely rooted in Anishinaabe Symbol Based Reflections (ASBR), initially developed for use with adults, and which involves making art in response to a focused research question (Lavallée 2009). The method was successful in most of the student interviews, revealing information and details that would have unlikely come out in a traditional interview, and helped establish trust between the participant and the interviewer. Likewise, the method was useful in exploring individual student identity and isolating relevant themes, and discourses. As this chapter describes, these included cultural and familial identity, survivance, and the value of community and service.

Background

Visual Methods and Anthropology

Visual methodologies are wide-ranging and encompass multiple uses of tools such as video ethnography, Photo Voice, GIS mapping, and cognitive mapping (van den Scott, 2018). How media is utilized to develop a visual method varies depending on the type of information the researcher is attempting to gather. In anthropology, photography and film have been used in field work to document people and their activities since the early days of the discipline. Ethnographers often use cameras as a form of documentation; photographic documentation was a primary method utilized by anthropologists doing what was known as "salvage ethnography" in the late 19th century and into the early 20th century (Thomas, 2000). During this era, anthropologists

believed they should document as much as they could about Indigenous peoples because it was believed to be inevitable that they and their cultures were "vanishing" (Thomas, 2000). Indigenous people at this time were not "vanishing"; they were subject to genocidal and ethnocidal practices carried out by the United States government, including, but not limited to, mission and boarding schools which were created to "civilize" Indigenous people, as described in chapter one.

Criticizing the discipline for an overreliance on spoken narratives, which she argued resulted in anthropology being too much of a "science of words," Mead (1995: 5) referred to cameras as instruments that can "Refine and expand the areas of accurate observation" (10) and preserve visual and sound materials for later analysis in detail. In addition to using visual methods to record data in the field, visual media can be utilized in the process of elicitation, where it can serve to prime participants during interviews, spur conversations, spark memories, and provide extra data that the participant may struggle to verbalize. Photos, drawings, physical objects, video and audio recordings, or maps may be used for elicitation purposes (Schensul & LeCompte, 2013).

In 1925 it was Mead that introduced visual elicitation to anthropology by using photo stills to elicit responses from Samoan children (El Guindi, 2004). She did this as part of her psychological assessments of the children, as psychological anthropology grew as a sub-field (Mead, 1961). However, in Bali, Mead and Bateson utilized image elicitation to confirm what was taking place on film with their participants, rather than for eliciting new ethnographic data (Jacknis, 1988).

It is John Collier, Jr., who is best known for formally developing visual anthropological methodology. He utilized a photographic survey method to help his research team come to a

consensus on the categories used for their study, and photo elicitation during interviews (Collier, 1957). Collier noted that in interviews where photos were used, participants had sharper memories and prodded latent memory. Participants' responses provided more detail and were more comprehensive. He also found that using images in his interviews kept participants interested and retained their attention for longer periods (Collier, 1957).

One of the added benefits of photo elicitation is that it changes the power dynamic or the hierarchy between the researcher and the participant, transforming the participant into a person of knowledge or an expert, rather than an object of interrogation (Pauwels, 2015). Collier noted that using photographs reduced the awkwardness of interviews, since eye contact did not need to be maintained, silences could be covered up by looking at the photograph, and photographs helped lessen the feeling of being interrogated during the interview (Banks, 2001 [Collier, 1986]).

Geffroy (1990) found benefit in using photographs while interviewing elderly participants. The participants struggled with explanation and recalling details, and it was an overall frustrating experience. During one interview a woman was struggling with recalling information and used old photos to explain details about life in the village. Not only was the information the woman was able to recall important data, but the emotions she expressed and the way she handled the photographs and spoke about the subject matter was also important data for Geffroy (1990). Image elicitation may therefore be helpful for recall with populations that may struggle cognitively due to age or other reasons but also generates other data that would not be gleaned otherwise.

Schensul and LeCompte (2013) also discuss how drawing can be a useful elicitation method. For example, having participants draw stories, develop maps, or create timelines for

themselves, or their community helped participants think more deeply about concepts, revealed participants' thought processes, and helped express thoughts and feelings in a way that would not be possible in other mediums.

Image elicitation may seem like a straightforward methodology; however, the researcher needs to keep in mind several issues. While they can provoke powerful and thoughtful responses from participants, visual materials can also distort or disrupt the research process by being inappropriate, not well suited to the respondent, or used to facilitate a problematic narrative. Different media and materials will have different effectiveness, and produce different reactions in participants, and these reactions can be somewhat unpredictable (Pauwel, 2015). El Guindi (2004) noted that in her work with the Zapotec people, a participant pointed out details in a slideshow that were seemingly minute, and the anthropologist may not have noticed them herself. These small details that were easily overlooked in the pictures had significant ritualistic significance for the Zapotec.

With this background in mind, I developed a method for interviewing Indigenous students with documented disabilities that were receiving special education services. The method utilizes art as an elicitation method, but also to encourage them to talk and communicate with me. Drawing and art elicitation is a popular method in interviewing children. However, as Bloom and colleague's (2020) review, eliciting voice from children with communication disorders, only one drawing method was discussed. They state that this drawing method is successful in eliciting responses from students that struggle with communication or communication-based disabilities since it is engaging for students, helps supplement verbal communication, and allows for self-expression, provided the children have the motor coordination to draw, and that they have enough language processing ability to tell you what they are drawing (Bloom et al., 2020).

Method

Overcoming Power Imbalance

One of the issues that potentially affects a child's level of comfort in an interview is the power imbalance that exists between them and the interviewer (Martin, 2019). In my case there were potentially two things that affected the children: one was that I was an adult that worked in the classroom and operated in a position of authority, and the other was that I am a "Chinokomon" or White person. There were a few things that helped me bridge the gap and blur the differences between our respective roles.

First, there was some confusion among the students about whether I was actually an adult because I am very short at 5'0. A few students asked me if I was a kid, and then asked me why I was so short. Several students in the third grade and higher were on the tall side with most being as tall as me or taller. The children liked walking up to me and saying "I'm almost as tall as you," or "I'm as tall as you." There were also a lot of jokes about me being as short as I was, and it helped that I also joked about my size as well. Part of the confusion about whether I was a student may have also been because I appeared younger than the rest of the staff, who are in their forties and fifties, with two regular employees being in their thirties. I was 28 years old when I entered the school and was the youngest non-student in the school.

I was also serving in a helping role more than in a disciplinary role and this endeared me to students. When I did take on a disciplinarian role it was usually to yell "Bhizaan (quiet)" at the class, to take a child out of the class for a "cool down walk," or to warn that I may need to report some behavior to a teacher. I spent a lot of time working one on one with students, which they appreciated because it got them praise from their teachers when the quality of their work improved, and it got them extra attention from another adult.

I also spent a lot of time talking with the students, and I found that being very open and

honest with them helped me to earn their trust. I answered their personal questions to the best of

my ability and was honest when I could not answer their questions, or if it made me

uncomfortable to do so. Likewise, when they talked to me in the classroom, I utilized a lot of

active listening skills such as asking questions, showing and expressing empathy and sympathy,

paraphrasing what they said back to them, and using body language to show that I was

completely attentive to them.

My race was never brought up by the students, except by one or two of the older

elementary students. However, most students seemed to be very aware of the differences

between Chinokomon (White people) and Native Americans but were often hesitant to talk about

the differences or acknowledge those differences to their White teachers, fearing accusations of

racism or inappropriateness. To try and alleviate any discomfort or unease the students may have

had with my race I used the advice given to me by one of the teachers who was Ojibwe, and that

was to use Anishinaabemowin, the Ojibwe language. I tried to utilize the language as much as I

was able to in the school setting. This led to an interesting effect. Because I was new to the

language, I would often mispronounce words, which the students and some teachers often found

hilarious. I suspect that my attempts to use and learn Anishinaabemowin endeared me somewhat

to the students, but also made me more approachable, possibly by putting the child into a place

of authority or knowledge and switching our roles.

The Students

Of the students receiving special education services, 25 were receiving "pull out services," where

they are taken out of class for supplemental instruction, and in classroom assistance or "push in

services." Of those 25 students I was able to interview seven students. Of these seven students,

all of them were receiving speech services for various speech related issues. I also believe some of them were receiving occupational therapy, but it was difficult to know who was receiving those specific services. Since the occupational therapist only came one day a week and focused on in class observations, or small group observations, and because I did not have access to IEPs, I do not know who the focus of those observations were.

I recruited students for interviews in a few ways. I initially tried to give students envelopes with a flyer and permission slips for their parents and guardians, with the promise that a signed permission slip would get them their choice of a puffy sticker. Their special education teacher also helped by talking to them about the project, telling them about learning responsibility and promising stickers herself. This method yielded low results and only two students returned their permission slip. Another student got her slip signed when she found out that one of the "thank you gift" choices I was providing were squishmellows, a hot item for the students. Three of the participants identified as girls and four identified as boys. The students had varied diagnoses: one student was diagnosed with fetal alcohol syndrome spectrum disorder (FASD), two were learning disabled (LD), one had other health impairment (OHI), two were diagnosed with autism spectrum disorder (ASD), and one with emotional behavioral disorder (EBD).

All the students that I interviewed struggled with reading and writing more than their fellow students and were receiving services to help improve their ability to read and write at a basic level. One of the students, due to the severity of their disability was accommodated with either "speech to text" technology or dictation accommodations. This means they were able to use technology that would record their voice and transcribe what they were saying, or it would be automatically read to them; or a staff member would either read the text to them or dictate

their responses. For this reason, I had to read the consent forms to all the students. It is also why having them do art instead of writing their answers to the prompts was used as a methodology for these students.

Of the students receiving special education services I was able to interview one of the six first graders; three of four second graders; one of three third graders; and two of four fifth graders. I purposefully did not interview kindergarten students because many of them were younger than five, and I did not have a separate research protocol developed for children that young.

For the purpose of anonymity, I gave each of the students a pseudonym based on something that they expressed fondness for during our interviews, or during our time together in the classroom. The fifth graders are called Cora and Ogimaakwe, Cora because she told me that her favorite movie was Coraline, and Ogimaakwe because it means woman leader and she liked to take charge. The third grader I will refer to as Waabooz for her love of rabbits. The second graders are Peter, who told me Spiderman or Peter Parker was his favorite superhero, Ranger who wanted to be a police officer and Army soldier, and Chase who told me his favorite character was Chase from Paw Patrol. The first grader is called Tony after his favorite superhero Tony Stark or Iron Man.

While I will discuss the art that all the children did and different things that came up in their interviews, I will focus on three students: Peter, Tony and Wabooz. This is simply to provide a more focused results section, and to convey more information through these specific case studies.

Show Me

During the first part of our interview session, I gave the student a sheet of construction paper and crayons and asked them to draw me a picture of something that was most important to them. This is partially inspired by the Draw(me) and Tell method where children are asked to draw themselves and talk about what they drew to understand how a child sees and views themselves (Martin, 2019). Instead of drawing themselves however, I asked them to draw what was important to them to better understand their values. Like Draw(me) and Tell, the aim of this method was to create a child-centered activity that would engage them, keep them interested and focused, and allow them to talk about things that were important to them in their own way (Martin, 2019). The students were also being active participants in this process, acting as experts in their own lives and experiences, and having some control of the process. While I guided them, I asked questions and provided prompts. They chose how they answered the questions or if to answer them at all. Of the seven students I interviewed, three drew pictures of themselves with their families, one drew a picture of their dog, one drew a picture of themselves as a rabbit, another drew a picture of a giraffe, and one drew a game of tic tac toe. I took pictures of each of the art pieces so they could take their art home with them (See appendix A). Cora was the exception, and drew her Grandma and mother, and wanted to take the picture home to finish. Unfortunately, she forgot to bring it back after she was done. After this happened, I made a point to take pictures of their work at the end of our interview even if the piece was not done.

While they were drawing, I asked them questions from my interview guide about their experiences at school, with their teachers, and classmates. Studies have shown interviewing a child while drawing increases the amount of verbal information a child gives during the interview (Woolford, Patterson, Macleod, Hobbs, & Hayne, 2015). All but one student gave me

permission to record our session with a voice recorder. Regardless of whether I was using the voice recorder I wrote down notes. I did this because a few of the students had mild speech impediments, spoke softly, or in one case a child was missing their two front teeth, and the notes would help me if the recordings were hard to understand. When they finished, I asked them specific questions about what they drew and why they drew what they did. Most were able to articulate why what they drew was important to them. I would usually send them back to class with plans to resume the interview another day after thirty minutes to keep their attention.

Students who drew their family members expressed family as being important to them because they loved the family member or because that family member took a lot of care of them. Tony drew a picture of their mother and brothers. Chase drew only his mother, and Cora drew a picture of her mother and grandma. Waabooz drew herself as a bunny, and did so because her family raised rabbits and she loved them. She also said she identified with bunnies. Peter drew his dog and her puppy, and did so because he said his dog helped the puppy survive, the only one of her litter to have lived.

Within a few minutes of starting our interview, Ranger drew a tic-tac-toe board, then threw down his pencil after the pencil lead broke and laid his head down. Ranger struggled with emotional regulation and became frustrated easily, especially if he stayed up late the night before, which I suspected was what happened prior to our interview. After a few minutes of him being frustrated I was able to interview him without having him do the elicitation exercises. Ogimaakwe asked me if she could draw a giraffe because it was her favorite animal. I told her she could since it was her favorite animal, and because I did not want to press her too much, and risk her shutting down. She was already wary of me, and I was worried that pushing her into doing something she did not want to do might risk a negative reaction.

Symbol Creation

The next time I met with each student, I asked them to make a symbol. Lavallée's (2009) method is a participatory action research method inspired specifically by photovoice and developed with Anishinaabek people to be used in a focus group for adults. In Lavallée's method, Anishinaabe symbol-based reflection (ASBR) first uses sharing circles, a traditional Indigenous practice, to facilitate focus groups. After the first sharing circle participants are asked to create a symbol that represents their feelings about a specific program before they meet again in the next sharing circle. I adapted ASBR for interviews with children between the ages of six and eleven. This method specifically utilizes the symbol creation aspect of ASBR where participants create symbols through artwork to supplement information given during the focus groups, or interviews. For many Indigenous people, and the Anishinaabe are no exceptions, they believe when a person makes something they imbue it with their energy (Lavallée, 2009). Creating art and symbols therefore is a spiritual process that is unique to each person. "They describe the meaning that is beyond words" (Lavallée, 2009, p 30).

I started out by bringing out my craft box which was a fishing tacklebox filled with different crafting supplies like sequins, pony beads, colored pipe cleaners, colored popsicle sticks, colored straws, embroidery floss, colored turkey feathers, glue, scissors, etc. After showing them the craft box, I would ask the student to make a symbol of something that represented them. Sometimes they needed a bit of prompting when it came to thinking of symbols, and I would list things that a student might use to represent them like something like a superhero logo, an animal, something they really liked etc. and that they were familiar with and could easily resonate with, or something they would put on a medallion. Beaded medallions were commonly worn by some of the kids I worked with, often made or commissioned for them

by family members. Typically, they represented the dodem (clan) of the student or other important symbols such as a medicine wheel or ode'imin (strawberries aka heart berries).

While they worked on their symbol craft, I would continue to ask them questions about their experience at school and ask them questions about what they were making. This is a departure from Lavallée's (2009) method since she gave her participants money for supplies and a few weeks to complete their projects on their own.

The students came up with some very different and abstract items. There was also a lot of variability in what they made, and like with the Show Me activity, I also took pictures of their art (Appendix B). Tony drew Iron Man's hand using his own hand and decorating it with different colored sequins. Peter decorated a piece of construction paper with green things from the craft box because green was his favorite color. Chase made a blue bear out of pipe cleaner after running through some ideas of things he could make and decided on a bear because they were big and strong like him. Ranger did not complete this half of the project since he struggled during the first part of the project, however he was okay with me interviewing him. Cora made a "Badge" from beads and pipe cleaners based on Coraline which is her favorite movie. Waabooz made a bracelet for her friend with pipe cleaner, beads, and turkey feathers. Ogimaakwe asked to draw another picture of a giraffe. When I asked her why a giraffe, she said that it was because they were cool, but did not elaborate.

While the items they created may not, on their own, tell us that much about the students, the answers that they gave provided context to understand the importance of what the students created, and how they related to each student. Understanding the cultural context was also important to interpret what they made. I turn now to a discussion of this and other information I learned through this methodology supported by information I gathered through participant

observations, and interactions and interviews I had with family members. Specially, I will focus on three case studies, but I will also discuss the interviews from the other students to provide further context to the case studies.

Case Studies

Peter

Peter was a boy in the second grade, he was diagnosed with autism spectrum disorder and was receiving special education services for math, reading, speech, occupational therapy, and he was receiving social and emotional learning services as well. Despite qualifying for services, he did quite well academically and was making significant strides with improving his math and reading. However, self-expression, emotional regulation, and communication were still struggles for him. Despite having older siblings, Peter often took on the role of caretaker and minder for his younger brother and sister, who struggled more than he did in terms of emotional regulation and communication. He saw them as his responsibility and tried to help them and look after them while at school. Peter also told me that he was the one that kept his cousins from fighting and acted as a peacekeeper.

He may have been struggling with trauma. During our interview he told me that his mother had been previously incarcerated and expressed fear about losing her or being separated from her. He also complained about the living situation at one of his parents, saying it was loud, overcrowded and dirty due to the presence of a lot of dogs that were not house trained. At one point during the semester, staff were concerned as to whether he was being bullied by another adult or older kid that was living at the parent's home because he was becoming withdrawn, sullen, and was complaining about people being mean to him.

Despite these issues Peter and his siblings appeared to be well cared for. His mother was in regular communication with teachers and staff, and she was always responsive when it came to paperwork or meetings. Peter's father was also involved in his life. Peter's father lived with Peter's grandmother and had partial custody and saw him every other weekend when he went to stay with him, or sometimes he would keep them for extended periods of time. The time spent with his father was a bit of a struggle for Peter and his siblings since his father enjoyed spoiling them when he had them, letting them stay up late until three or four in the morning to play video games and watch scary movies. After their father had them for the weekend Peter and his siblings would come to school sleep-deprived, very grumpy and largely non-functioning.

Peter's situation was fairly common. Of the seven students I interviewed four had parents that were either divorced, separated or never married with one parent having sole or primary custody. One of the students, Tony, had a deceased father and lived with his single mother. One student, Cora, lived with her mother and grandmother, and the status of her father was unknown. One student came from a married household and that was Chase. Overall, many of the students lived with a single parent, their grandparents, or sometimes a single parent and a grandparent together.

During the first part of our interview Peter told me a lot about his extended family, and about different things that happened to them or things they saw or did. When I asked him about best friends, he identified two younger girls as his best friends. When I asked why, he explained "Oh, and they're my cousins too," and I confirmed with him that they were his friends because they were his cousins. When asked for specifics he told me that one of his cousins was his best friend because "… she comes to my house." When I asked about the other one, he said she was his best friend because "… I go to Grandma's house. That's where her parents live, her parents

don't have a home…" It was common for extended family members to live together due to housing shortages, as I describe in chapter two.

However, families that were not cohabitating were also very close as some of my students discussed in their interviews, and this was also something I noticed in observations and informal conversations with students, as well as in interviews with other students. When I asked Wabooz what she wanted her teacher to know she said, "I wish she knew I just want to hang out with my friends and cousins." Other students also talked about their cousins and other extended family members such as aunts, uncles and grandparents and how they were especially close or just spent a lot of time talking about them.

The kinship network of Ode'imin's Tribe was extensive and very intertwined. One of the teachers described the Tribe's family tree as "Wreath shaped," with all of the community members being related and tied to each other in some way, such as through marriage, having kids together, or being adopted. When I attempted to understand each student's lineage, some got frustrated with the conversation. This was because most of the students knew they were related to each other, but they did not always know or understand how they were related.

As stated earlier for his Show Me part of the project Peter chose to draw his dog and a surviving puppy with green eyes that she helped raise. He explicitly pointed out how the puppy had green eyes and was very enthusiastic about it, telling me multiple times she was born with green eyes and how cool it was that she had green eyes. As stated before, he implied that the puppy was the sole survivor of her litter and expressed concern for her saying "Yeah. I don't know it's going to survive or not because them other dogs are dying." While pointing to a picture of the puppy and another dog he said, "That's a little puppy and this is Nika…She raised her as a baby…Now she can walk."

While Peter could not articulate why it was important to him that the puppy was a survivor, I suspect that it might have been because the puppy's continued existence was a story of survival, because despite everything that the puppy went through it was able to survive even when its siblings did not. It might also be telling that for his symbol project he decorated a piece of paper with green things because green was his favorite color, much like the puppy's eyes.

Another time during this part of the interview Peter told me "I like a spirit…I like them when they're nice." At first, I thought he was talking about ghosts and asked if he meant Casper the Friendly Ghost, but the word ghost had a different meaning for him. He told me "I don't like bad ghosts because I had a lot of ghosts." He told me that he believed his mother's house had been visited by a ghost and that his father had seen ghosts outside his own home. He also watched a lot of horror movies with his siblings and cousins.

Peter seemed to make a clear distinction between the word ghost and spirit. Upon reflection I realized that when he said the word spirit, he was probably referring to manitou. Manitou, or manitouk if plural, are beings that are "other than human people" that are living, intelligent and can be benevolent, though not always (Johnston, 1995; L. B. Simpson, 2017). Anishinaabek learn from manitouk and are guided by them through life. They are different than ghosts or jibay, which can be maleficent even if the jibay does not have evil intent. Peter's reference to liking spirits was perhaps rooted in the relationships with spiritual beings unique to his cultural background, while his dislike of "bad ghosts" came from community stories about jibey (ghosts) from his father, but also from what he witnessed in watching horror movies.

Peter and his siblings were not the only students that watched horror movies. When I asked Cora about the badge she created and how it represented her she told me, "Well, it resembles my character and who I am…Well, they're like creepy stuff, like the movie

Coraline…Well, it resembles my creativity." A lot of the students at the school regardless of age seemed to enjoy horror movies and games. Many were fans of the movie based on the Stephen King book *IT*, about a killer clown that targets children, and the game "Rainbow Friends" on Roblox which is a horror-based hide and seek internet game. For children, they may embrace the horror genre because it allows for them to experience fear in a safe and controlled way where they can have control over the experience, or they enjoy the confidence and self-esteem that comes from facing scary things (Gilmore & Campbell, 2008; McCort, 2016). They also provide a framework for understanding complex world topics in ways that they can understand (McCort, 2016). The students were not alone with their love of horror, many of the adults in their life also enjoyed horror as did the community in general. I was told by a teacher in an interview "For some reason, the [Tribe] loves Halloween. It's like their holiday of choice."

Wabooz

Wabooz was a third-grade student officially diagnosed with "other health impairment" (OHI) since she had been formerly diagnosed by her pediatrician with attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD). However, staff seriously suspected that there may have been other issues at play such as dyslexia or fetal alcohol spectrum disorder. Waabooz struggled with reading and writing, short- and long-term memory, and seemed to struggle with mental processing. She regularly forgot my name and the name of her special education teacher who she had been working with for years. She was receiving services for math, reading, writing, and speech. Unlike other students in special education she did not need occupational therapy or social emotional learning services. To my knowledge she did not make strides in her reading and writing ability, and her special education teacher was focusing more on teaching her to use

adaptive technologies to read and write. However, she seemed to do well in math provided there were visual illustrations to represent concepts.

I did not know much about Wabooz's life outside of school, and it was difficult to talk to her because she became easily confused or she would simply not remember. She also would distract herself during conversations and forget what she was talking about. I did know from meeting her family at school conference night and from her teacher that she was the youngest of her siblings, they were all girls, and they lived with her father almost full time, staying occasionally with their mother on the weekends. Her father was invested in her education and wanted her to learn to read, write, and do everything that she wanted to do. However, he also struggled in much the same way that she did, and he recognized this. One of his other daughters also struggled significantly while they were in school and was eventually diagnosed with autism spectrum disorder. Wabooz rarely spoke of her mother, but she did talk about her siblings, cousins, and her father.

Waabooz expressed her Indigenous identity the most explicitly of all the students by drawing tipis on her Show Me art, although Ojibwe people traditionally lived in wigwams, while tipis are usually associated with Lakota and Dakota people. The students were taught about traditional dwellings at the school and one of the teachers did a special lesson where the kids did a "compare and contrast" between tipis and wigwams. Wabooz would have done the same lesson with this teacher and had the same cultural education as the other students. However, she struggles with retaining information and mental processing so she may not have remembered even if told multiple times. When I asked her why she drew tipis she said, "I do not know." After a brief conversation about what the inside of a tipi was like, I asked her if being Ojibwe was important to her, and she replied "Kind of…I like Indians, kind of, actually…But I'm not

that good at making the words, what they try to say…All I know is gaawiin (no)." I followed up and asked if she wanted to get better at learning Ojibwe and she responded "Yes…Because [student] and [student] and [student] can do it, except me." Based on this knowledge, it made sense that she was struggling to learn a second language, even if she wanted to, due to her learning disabilities.

Waabooz drew herself as a rabbit when I asked her to do the "Show me" part of the interview. She told me she drew herself as a rabbit because she liked rabbits because her family raised them. They raised the rabbits as pets, and not as livestock as some of the farmers in the area did. When I asked her if they raised the rabbits to eat them, she was horrified at the concept. I asked her why she saw herself as a rabbit, and she told me "They're so fluffy and cute…" In a study done on children and how they interpreted animals as symbols, Myers (2002) found that young kids and girls of most ages tended to identify more positively with rabbits because they are friendly, cute, and soft.

Waabooz in our interview expressed annoyance and frustration with one of her special education peers, she referred to him as "annoying," "a brat" and "a child." When I did small groups with her and this other student, I witnessed her getting after him and putting herself in charge of his behavior. She told him to put something back that he was not supposed to have, to stop a behavior, or backed up a teacher when he did something he was not supposed to. Waabooz did not tell on him or tattle, she would chide him and admonish him herself. Outside of Waabooz, on at least one occasion I remember both Ranger and Peter yelling at a student who was misbehaving telling the student, "You need to stop that!" and "We're going to tell your grandma if you don't behave!"

Ogimaakwe said that she liked looking after little kids, and looked after her younger cousins, as well as helping with her newborn nephew. She told me she wanted to be an early education teacher when she grew up because she liked little children. This girl had a reputation of looking out for younger children and was made a bus monitor to help with the younger students. There was also one incident where a kindergartener, who was known to have behavioral problems, was having a tantrum in the cafeteria and a student told me "You should get Ogimaakwe; she is his cousin, she speaks his language." Other students agreed and said that she was good at handling him.

Outside of these students, it was not uncommon to see students provide care for their younger siblings or their cousins. When a student was having a meltdown or a hard time, sometimes the student's older sibling would go to them for comfort or go out of their way to fix the problem for them. Occasionally when a student was having a meltdown or throwing a tantrum, staff would ask the older sibling to help their sibling if it was convenient.

When I asked Waabooz to make her symbol she surprised me by making a bracelet of beads and turkey feathers for her friend in class. Waabooz was becoming close to another girl in class who was being targeted for special education services but did not qualify. This suggested to me that friendship with this girl, and maybe in general, was important to her. They had a lot of in common although they were not family, and thus exhibited how children tend to make friends or develop friendships with others that they share similar behaviors, temperaments, or interests (Monks & Rix, 2024).

I saw this with other special education students. Some of the special education students were quite close to each other, especially in the upper grade levels. There were two boys in the fourth-grade class that were quite close and seemed bonded by their behavioral issues, feeding

off each other, and spreading chaos. Another set of boys in special education were also friends, but they were significantly calmer and seemed to enjoy talking to the each other, often assisting each other in classroom tasks.

Child development experts describe friendship as a reciprocal relationship between children, and is often based on a child "liking" another child, or having a shared commonality and understanding (Carter, 2023; Monks & Rix, 2024). Friendships are also important to children in terms of wholistic wellbeing and development (Carter, 2023). Maintaining and developing friendships allow for expressions of agency, the improvement of emotional intelligence, and a better framework to understand social relationships (Carter, 2023). I included interview questions about friendships. Of the students I interviewed, all but one identified having a best friend or a few friends that they were particularly fond of for individual reasons. For example, Peter identified one child as his best friend (that was not a cousin) and said he liked his best friend because "He can run really fast." While Ogimakwe liked her best friend because she was "cool," but did not want to elaborate on that. Waabooz said she liked her best friend because "[She] makes me laugh."

Tony

Tony was the youngest student I interviewed. He was a first-grade student and was officially diagnosed as being learning disabled (LD). He was receiving services for math, reading, social emotional learning, and speech. He was one of the students that made a lot of strides while he was receiving services and made significant gains in reading and math. He was also improving significantly in social and emotional learning. He is one of the students that I would expect to be phased out of special education in the coming years.

Tony lived with his mother and brothers. Based on what I know about his family situation his older brothers helped take care of him as well. Previously he had lived with his grandmother, and she had temporary custody of him and his siblings while his mother was in prison. It did not seem like Tony remembered his mother going to prison, or he may not have even realized that was what happened. He did remember living with his grandmother but he did not seem to understand or remember why that was. He also lost his father recently enough to remember him and be able to talk about him, but I do not think he knew why his father passed away. Aside from the death of his father he also mourned the loss of a student that was killed by a truck that was mentioned in another chapter. The girl who died had been in his grade level, and since they shared a last name I suspect they were related in some way. He expressed missing her throughout the year and spent time at her memorial, a bench painted in rainbow colors, and would sit by himself on the bench with his head down.

In the Show Me part of the project, Tony drew a picture of his mother and his brothers. Because he liked his mother a lot, he made her purple because that was his favorite color. He made a point to draw his eldest brother in blue because that was his brother's favorite color. He expressed fondness for his eldest brother because as he said, "He is the biggest in my house." Tony looked up to his brothers, but the oldest brother who was in high school, seemed to be his favorite. Based on interactions with the siblings, including the eldest, I suspect that the eldest brother was in charge of the brothers and was the primary male role model in their lives. I know from talking with Tony outside of the interview that his brothers helped in his care, along with his grandma who he saw frequently.

Tony was the only student that said that he had friends in his special education cohort. Over the course of the year Tony got really close with his special education cohort and they

developed deep friendships. At the beginning of the school year Tony was quiet, shy and did not socialize or play with his other classmates very much. The first week of school he sat on the bench at recess and did not play. In working and playing with his special education cohort he started to come out his shell, making individual friendships that led him to playing and socializing with other students.

Of the other students I interviewed, four said they were friends with at least some of the other children in their special education group. When asked why they were not friends with specific students in their special education group, four of the students said it was because they had behavioral problems and upset their teachers. One student said they were not friends with one of their fellow special education students because that student had a bad attitude, was mean, or they did not like being around them.

The two that said they were not friends with their special education cohort gave different reasons. One said the other children were alright but they were "troublemakers," and one said they were not friends. When I asked the student who identified her peers as "troublemakers" if she liked doing things with them she replied, "Well, I would say not as much, but I do like sharing with Ogimaakwe my hand sanitizer." The girls were fond of aromatic products, especially scented hand sanitizers and lotions.

Ranger said they did not have any friends at all, and expressed frustration at making friends even though he said he wanted to make friends. He explained, "No one don't like me because... No one just don't like me… Because no one don't like me. Only cousins." Ranger struggled a lot emotionally and socially and tended to lean on his siblings for social and emotional support. I hinted to his special education teacher that he might want to learn how to make friends and pointed out some things I noticed in observing him in his interactions with

other students. The special education teacher confirmed similar observations and said that they could "definitely work" on that with him, spending more time on social, emotional learning and developing relationship building skills.

Tony, chose to do an art piece inspired by Iron Man for his symbol. Iron Man was his favorite superhero. He told me Iron Man was his favorite because his Iron Man suit could do cool things, was smart and because he was a hero and helped people. When I asked him how he was like Iron Man he told me "He helps people… [I help] my mom, my dad. Wait, I don't have a dad anymore. He died." He also told me he helped his grandma, and that he wanted to be a cop when he grew up to help people.

Tribal officers in the community tried hard to show children that they were "good" and were there to help and keep people safe. They would frequently come to the school, hand out treats and "swag" to the kids, and talk to them about being safe and staying out of trouble. This was an important public relations effort put on by the police department, since many of the kids were naturally afraid of the police due to past negative interactions between family members and police on and off the reservation.

The students at the school really enjoyed providing help and service to their teachers, staff and others. It helped a lot with behaviors when students were given tasks or responsibilities that resulted in them giving help and aid regardless of whether it was cleaning the lunchroom, sharpening pencils for a teacher, or being a bus monitor. The teacher of one of the older classes capitalized on this and worked with the kindergarten teacher to have the older students, including special education students, mentor and look after the younger ones by partnering an older student with a kindergarten buddy. Part of this was to help build the school community, help reduce the younger students' anxieties and fears and deter bullying from the older students. It also helped

cut down behaviors, at least with the older children, and it gave the kindergarteners older role models to look up to and a friend.

Analysis

Family and Identity

Family is viewed in the mainstream by the Standard North American Family (SNAF) discourse with a male head being the primary source of income and a female providing emotional labor and home maintenance (Smith, 1993). Many of these students do not have families that ascribe to the SNAF model of a nuclear male dominated household. Instead, in Anishinaabe discourse the word "family" has a different meaning as a collective and holistic unit where each member has an important place and role within the collective (Absolon, 2022; Hand, 2006). Family is especially important in caring for children as each member plays a critical role in child rearing and development, especially during times of disruption, and if children are placed in foster care (Hand, 2006). This includes siblings, who may be the only constant in a child's life as they transition to other extended family or foster homes in the event of disruption. At school I saw that sibling ties were very strong, especially among students that had to be placed outside of their immediate family, as was the case with Tony and his siblings.

Ojibwe communities and families may practice collective care, and may also be motivated by collective responsibility, which extends to children (Hand, 2006). Hand (2006) points out that children aid in Anishinaabek households, and this is not only a traditional way of living but is necessary for survival in the harsh Great Lakes environment. It is also a practice that came out of the boarding school era, where children were expected to look after and mind their younger siblings and family members (Child, 1998).

It is not uncommon for Ojibwe children to occupy care roles for their younger siblings and cousins. When I originally witnessed this behavior, I interpreted it as parentification based on my own personal experiences. According to Borchet and colleagues (2020, 2982) "Parentification occurs when children provide caregiving for family members that typically exceeds their capacity and developmental stage." It is usually linked to poor outcomes for the parentified child who suffers from a loss of age appropriate activities and opportunities, and lose out on their own childhood development (Borchet, Lewandowska-Walter, Połomski, Peplińska, & Hooper, 2020).

However, in the situations I witnessed it might be inappropriate to call it parentification. According to family psychology and attachment theory, parentification often manifests as a role reversal where children take care of family members but do not receive care themselves (Borchet et al., 2020). There were quite a few students that assisted in care of family members but were also still given care themselves. For example, Ogimaakwe helped care for her baby nephew. She helped hold him, feed him and would watch him if her sister or mother needed to leave the room. However, she was always supervised by an adult, and they would step in when she started to struggle, needed help, or just needed a break. In this instance she was not parentified, because while she was taking care of her nephew, she was not expected to care for her nephew at her own expense, and she was still being cared for by her mother. She also loved it because she got to spend time with her nephew and be an aunt to him. I think it made her feel more grown up and mature, and the extra responsibility made her feel more confident.

This is not to say that there were not examples of parentification. There were definite and obvious examples of students who were struggling with parentification at the school. I knew of one student who was not only caring for her younger sisters but also her mother who would

occasionally keep her home from school to look after her. However, students that are providing care are not necessarily doing so because of parentification, but because that is the role they see and construct for themselves in their families. They are taking on care roles because they understand that they have a responsibility to help and contribute to their family and community in whatever way they are able (Hand, 2006). With some of the students I worked with they saw this as part of their role as an older sibling or cousin. This is also an expression of survivance, as the students are not just assisting in their family's ability to survive but are also perpetuating Indigenous family systems and childcare models. In adhering to these Indigenous family systems and childcare models they are able to endure systemic and institutional violence that affects them.

Peter's puppy in his Show Me part of the interview illustrates this well. As stated earlier, the puppy's story is important to him because of how it managed to survive with the help of his other dog, Maika. While Peter may not know the term survivance, by telling me the story of his puppy he is sharing a story of survivance. The fact that Maika helped enable the puppy's survival may represent an aspect of the survivance narrative since Maika provided care for the puppy and helped strengthen its chances of survival, despite also being a dog in a similarly fraught position. I think to a certain extent he saw himself as being like Maika, as he also took care of and helped his less capable siblings, especially since he feared his family's stability after his mother was formerly incarcerated. His puppy is more important to him than just a pet, she is a symbol to him, and why he decorated the page with green items, because it is his favorite color and like his puppy's eyes.

As discussed in chapter three, Indigenous family models and childcare practices are different than SNAF and as a result they may by targeted by social services for interventions.

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They may be seen as "defective," "problematic" or "unstable." However, these Indigenous family models and childcare practices are examples of survivance. They are practices that emerged out of historical circumstances and have not only allowed families to survive into the future but to endure in the face of institutional, systemic, and racially based violence. Children play an important role in the perpetuation of Indigenous family models and childcare practices because they are an integral and active participant in the perpetuation of these practices. They also recognize it and see it as naturally part of their role in enabling the family to survive and stay together.

Visual Method and Communication

Overall, this method was successful in interviewing the students. Without developing a methodology that engaged them in an activity the students would likely have shared and spoken much less. I know this from having experience working with the students. If I used a traditional style of interviewing the experience would have been boring for them and they would have been less cooperative and may not have wanted to participate at all. As stated earlier, in interviews where children are engaged in an activity such as making art they are not only more likely to say more but are engaged in the interview and provide more detailed answers.

Of the students I interviewed, five out of the seven students struggled with communication due to various speech impediments and issues related to their impairments and disabilities. Their art allowed them to communicate things that might be difficult for the children to vocalize or communicate without being able to create some sort of visual media that assists in their ability to explain things about themselves. The art also helped hold their attention and focus for the interview. This was a general issue with some of the students I interviewed, but especially Wabooz who, despite her best efforts, was easily distracted. When working with

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Wabooz one-on-one it could be a real struggle to get her to focus on doing her work, and it was more difficult to try to have a conversation with her without having her doodle or draw.

The other two students that did not have speech issues and did not seem to struggle with communication were Ogimaakwe and Cora, the two older girls. The issue with these girls was getting them to open up and talk to adults. I knew from previous experience in working with both Cora and Ogimaakwe they could both be quite guarded and cagey when it came to adult authority figures. Cora was quicker to open up to me and was more willing to show me some trust as we got to know each other prior to the interview. The interview coupled with the art projects allowed her to open up more, solidified our relationship, and made her open up to me more outside of out interview. She even drew me a series of pictures featuring me as different fruits (she really liked fruit).

Ogimaakwe was much more challenging. When I first met her, she refused to speak to me or even look in my direction. Even after she got more familiar with me she was still guarded by the time we did our interview. However, while she might not have talked and cooperated as much as I would have liked, she still talked to me about her life and answered my questions and was more open with me than she had ever been prior. She also briefly connected with me when I talked to her about her giraffe which led to a conversation about pets, and I got her to talk about her beloved dog.

Aside from getting the students to talk more, the art that they produced during the interview is a source of data itself. Their creations are polysemous giving the children the opportunity to provide their own interpretation and shared meanings. Both the Show Me and the Symbol Creation part allowed the students to do this, expressing complex themes and ideas that they might not necessarily know how to communicate or vocalize. For example, Wabooz on her

Show Me drew tipis in the background of her self-portrait and used the illustration to talk about her frustration in learning Anishinaabemowin and her inability to remember the words despite being Ojibwe like her classmates who were more successful at learning the language.

The symbol creation prompt is Indigenous-based and allowed the children a chance to express their identities and show me who they were, while the Show Me prompt also allowed for identity expression with the students identifying things and values that were important to them. The symbol creation was more direct in addressing identity. The symbol creation prompt produced a lot of variety in the responses and interpretations of the prompt. The students provided a lot of different types of art that illustrated the very different ways the students saw themselves, highlighting a diversity in identity, values and expression.

Study Limits

The analysis I have presented here is limited by the small number of students I was able to recruit. Even if the students wanted to participate, many struggled with remembering to give their parents the permission slip. This may have been due to age, impaired memory due to trauma, symptomatic of their disabilities, or a combination of factors. I also suspect that there were parents and guardians that did not want their children to be interviewed because they were suspicious of me, as a new face at the school, and as a chinokomon.

Another limitation I had was the students' varied ability to answer interview questions. The student with FASD struggled with giving me opinion-based answers or telling me things about themselves like their favorite class or what their favorite subject was. There were a few other students that struggled with opinion-based questions. However, we were able to overcome this issue by talking through it and assuring the student that I just wanted to know what they thought, and that there were no wrong answers. However, the student with FASD perhaps struggled the

most because of the severity of their condition. We were still able to work through this, but I had to alter the questions by simplifying them and making them less open-ended. For example, instead of: "What is your favorite subject?" I would ask "Do you like math? Do you like reading?" And so on. Something else that worked was "Would you rather…" questions like "Would you rather be with your mainstream teacher or your special education teacher?"

The timing of when I carried out the method might have affected how well it worked as well. One student refused to be recorded and gave me limited answers. Over time they did warm up to me, especially after the special education coordinator started scheduling me to work in their class and I started taking them on sensory breaks. Having the extra time to talk with them helped our relationship a lot. I might have waited until this trust was established before carrying out this method, or I would recommend repeating it across a period of time of getting to know the children.

I was surprised by Ranger. Ranger drew a picture of tic tac toe game in the first few minutes of the conversation before getting really frustrated and throwing the crayons down. Ranger struggled quite a bit with emotional regulation and got frustrated very easily. One time in class he got upset and slammed his head down on his desk because he wrote a letter backwards on a handout. I was surprised by his reaction simply because he showed a love of drawing and drew a lot of pictures in class, often of elaborate scenes depicting police officers and military soldiers, so I figured he would have liked the art aspect of the project.

To accommodate Ranger and to salvage our interview I just asked him questions and did not encourage him to draw so I did not upset him more. This worked out fine, but it was a struggle to ask him questions without him getting upset because he was already in a bad mood,

which was not uncommon with him. We managed though and he answered most of my questions.

Conclusion

While there are limitations to this method, overall, it was effective in engaging the students and generating rich data. Through the interview and the art they produced in their Show Me and Symbol Creation they revealed aspects of their identity, things they valued, and themes that were important in their lives, particularly the importance of family, friendship, and helping others. These themes that the students expressed are important aspects of their identity as Indigenous students and should be considered when working with children from this community.

Since the study is small it is difficult to generalize the data to other students in other Indigenous communities, and this method may not be successful with all Indigenous students. Establishing trust and familiarity is an important part of making this method successful. Students may be distrusting of outsiders and will be more reluctant to share due to past bad actors and issues with contemporary and historical trauma. Therefore, it is important to establish a rapport with them before engaging in this methodology. Indigenous special education students are an often-overlooked population, and more research should be done with this population to improve educational outcomes and experiences for these students. However, it should be done with these students, not <u>on</u> the students, and this method may be useful in this regard.

CHAPTER 6: CONCLUSION

This dissertation sought to examine intersections between Anishinaabek culture and special education programs at a Tribal school in Minnesota, and by doing so explores a major gap in the literature surrounding special education, disability and Indigeneity. I used ethnographic methods, specifically participant observation, formal interviews, and a novel method for interviewing Indigenous children with emotional, learning, or behavioral challenges. I explored how parents, guardians and teachers determine if students need special education classes or services; why students are placed in special education and the outcomes of receiving services. I also observed what aids and accommodations are recommended for students in special education, and how these are used by the students. Based on my observations and interviews certain themes were uncovered. These themes have been analyzed using disability critical race theory (DisCrit) and critical Indigenous theory to make sense of what was being revealed through the research.

In the second chapter I provided historical background in Indigenous education in order to situate the relationship of the community and school in my research with settler colonial education. I started with the mission schools that were established to convert Indigenous people to Christianity, before moving onto a discussion of day and boarding schools which were meant to be assimilatory vehicles of ethnocide, but also unintentionally provided a context for the development of a pan-Indian culture of resistance (Child, 1998). Following the boarding school era, students started to attend public schools, however, settler colonial education remained problematic due to the whitewashing of US history, and the devaluation of Indigenous people, their language, their science and their art (Huffman, 2010; Sabzalian, 2019). I also discussed the Civil Rights Era that affirmed Tribes' creation of their own Tribal schools, and other education-based rights of Indigenous people (Tippeconnic, 2000). This background is particularly relevant

in Minnesota where the earliest of these schools were established, including Ode'imin school, and where strides have been made in Indigenous education that are specific to Minnesota.

Since the dissertation focuses on the Anishinaabe, specifically the Ojibwe, there is an exploration of historical and cultural conceptions of disability within the Anishinaabek cultural complex. While there is little in the written record about cultural conceptions of disability, what is available describes the understanding of disability as both acquired or congenital and typically limited to physical or physically based disabilities. Acquired disability might be seen as natural and usually associated with the aging process (Vecsey, 1983), while congenital disability could be seen as the result of supernatural phenomena (Hallowell, 1976; Jenness, 1935). Regardless of how the disability came to be, disabled people were not necessarily stigmatized.

It is likely that disabilities associated with learning, reading, and writing were not introduced to the Anishinaabek before they were exposed to the settler colonial educational system. Dudley-Marling (2004) argues that the diagnosis of learning disability is a social construction created by educational institutions to explain why students do not succeed at learning and centers the blame on the student. This is antithetical to traditional Anishinaabe learning practices where children are expected learn at their own pace, and failure to learn is not a failure of the student, just an indication they are not ready to learn (Hilger, 1951; L. B. Simpson, 2017).

I found grandparents were resistant to special education services for their grandchildren or other children in their care. Indigenous families have dealt with historical and modern oppression and marginalization, and schooling is a major source of historical trauma, especially when special education has been used to segregate Indigenous students and deprive them of an adequate education.

Even though Ode'imin is a Tribal school that was created specifically for the students of the Tribe and, I argue, is itself a vehicle of survivance and refusal, families can still be wary, which is especially the case with grandparents who have experienced more school-related trauma in their lives than younger Tribal members. They may also worry about the interference of social services and further breakdown of the family. Therefore, they may resist special education services for the children in their care or refuse to cooperate with the school as an expression of survivance and refusal. Staff and administration are aware of this issue and may work to overcome this wariness and fear by establishing trusting relationships with the families they serve. This is done by developing a cultural understanding of Ojibwe culture that extends beyond the surface level, as well as demonstrating a legitimate relationship and genuine care for the students that they serve.

I devoted a chapter to exploring trauma and how it complicates special education diagnosis at the Tribal school. Most, if not all the students, had been exposed to traumatic events either through primary or secondary experiences related to intergenerational trauma and contemporary community issues. The lack of certainty around satisfying basic needs and being preoccupied with survival makes it difficult for children to do well in school academically or be socially and emotionally well-adjusted (Neal, 2021).

As a result of trauma, children find different coping methods and ways to express their emotions. Students at Ode'imin often coped by being defiant, usurping authority, engaging in violence, or having loud emotional outbursts. Many of these behaviors could be classified as resistance. Aside from aggressive behavior students dealing with trauma may also present with having impaired memory, difficulty processing information, problems with language development and learning delays to name a few (Dye, 2018). Many of these symptoms,

including resistive behavior, are also the same symptoms that define various learning disabilities and are notable symptoms of emotional behavioral disorder.

A lot of effort was made to determine if students were struggling with a learning disability, a psychological issue, or both since most of the special education students also struggled with trauma. Students that were targeted for special education services were "low functioning," and struggled much more severely than their peers setting them apart from students that were also already struggling.

Depending on the issues that were affecting the student, there were resources that could be utilized to address them appropriately and effectively. It helped that staff were able to become close with the students and learn their vulnerabilities and strengths. As a result, they would develop interventions with the special education staff and the school's social worker to deal with the symptoms that the student was expressing in the classroom, regardless of whether or not the student had an Individualized Education Plan (IEP) or what it said if they did.

Through the lens of DisCrit analysis, mainstream education often identifies marginalized students as disabled due to academic and behavioral challenges (Migliarini & Annamma, 2020). Yet to a certain extent the staff and administration at Ode'imin understand how disability, race and Indigenous identities intersect and impact their students. As a result, they are better able to understand their students, which allows them to avoid unnecessary special education placement and to instead provide more appropriate services. They additionally have intimate understandings and conceptions of trauma and how these are experienced by the students. This ethnography of their work thus highlights the complexities of disability and adds more dimensions to how it may be understood in relation to identity and the intersection of racism, poverty, and colonization as systems of oppression.

I developed the visual elicitation method used in this research for a variety of reasons. The literature shows that when engaging children in an activity during an interview children will remain more attentive and communicate more (Woolford et al., 2015). I also utilized this method because doing art with children who are struggling with trauma helps them open up more, and engaging them in a child centered activity, makes them more comfortable and reduces the barrier between the interviewer and interviewee (Martin, 2019). Using art in interviews is also effective with students with communicative disorders since the art they create helps them to share ideas that they may struggle to communicate if they are trying to convey information orally (Bloom, Critten, Johnson, & Wood, 2020). Of the students I interviewed at least four struggled with communication and required some speech therapy.

The "Show Me" method is a classic interview method for children. My purpose in adapting Lavallée (2009) Anishinaabe Symbol Based reflections (ASBR) was to engage students in a holistic activity that promoted personal reflection and allowed them to express their identity in a creative and culturally-appropriate way. I specifically focused on three students to discuss the results of the project: Wabooz, Tony and Peter. The methodology of engaging students in an activity, particularly through art, was successful in facilitating communication during interviews. Conventional interviews would have likely resulted in less engagement and participation. Many students, especially those with speech impairments or communication challenges, found it easier to express themselves through visual media. The art helped maintain their attention and allowed them to communicate complex ideas they might struggle to vocalize. Older students like Ogimaakwe and Cora, while not facing speech difficulties, were initially hesitant to open up to adults. However, the interview process, coupled with art activities, helped build trust and encouraged more openness.

Beyond aiding verbal communication, the students' artwork became a valuable source of data, allowing them to express personal and cultural identities. The "Show Me" and "Symbol Creation" prompts enabled them to convey emotions, frustrations, and self-perceptions in a meaningful way. This method highlighted the diversity in how students saw themselves, reinforcing the importance of culturally relevant and interactive research approaches.

In conclusion, this study provides information that can be developed into several future directions, and applications that could be used to benefit the community. This research may help improve educational outcomes and experiences of Ojibwe children receiving special education services in all schools including public, private, and charter schools. This dissertation highlights historical and contemporary issues in Indigenous education that affect families with children and may explain why certain families may be reluctant to engage in special education services for their children. This seemed to be especially the case when children were under the care of a grandparent of elderly family members, making it necessary to create relationships and understanding with the families based on genuine trust, respect and cultural understanding. Future research might explore this in more depth or in broader settings in order to learn more about the ways in which grandparents' and elders' experiences and knowledge may improve the way students are evaluated for special education services.

In addition, this dissertation points out how the prevalence of trauma in the lives of Indigenous children complicates the process of diagnosing disability and may act as a barrier to getting children the services they need. This is information that teachers, clinicians, and others working with Indigenous children need to be aware of when attempting to develop interventions and secure services for them. This is especially the case when securing special education services

for a child struggling with only trauma, as special education alone will unlikely improve the situation for the child.

Interviews with the children receiving special education services revealed valuable information about important values for them which are culturally based and should be considered when working with Indigenous children. The information obtained from these interviews are specific to the children of this particular community, however, this interview method could be useful to bring the values of the students of other Ojibwe or Anishinaabek communities into view, and it may engage students to open up and talk more about themselves in a comfortable way.

This dissertation, along with any other publications generated from this research will be disseminated to Ode'imin, and their Tribe's education department. I will also share this work with the Dreamcatcher Project of Minnesota, an organization that works with Minnesota's Department of Education to train staff to work with special educators to observe Indigenous students and ensure that culture and linguistic perspectives are considered when evaluating a student for special education services. This dissertation highlights areas of interest that may be of use to them and their agenda.

Moving forward, the knowledge gleaned in this research will create applications and working solutions that benefit the students, families, and community of Ode'imin, with the hope that this research could be used to broadly benefit other children who may be part of Ode'imin's Tribal community, Ojibwe children in Minnesota, or Anishinaabek children in general. I would like to work with the administration, the Culture and Language team, and the special education staff to use the information to create materials that would be beneficial and useful to Ode'imin's children, families, staff, and others who could benefit from this research. Overall, this study

provides more information and insight into an understudied area, and more research could be done to create applications to improve educational outcomes for Indigenous students. Further research into special education and Indigenous students should be done, because despite this dissertation, it is still woefully understudied and understood. More research like mine is needed to improve special education services and identification of Indigenous students within and outside the Ojibwe nation.

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APPENDIX A: STUDENTS' "SHOW ME" ILLUSTRATIONS

Figure A.1 Tony's Illustration of His Family.
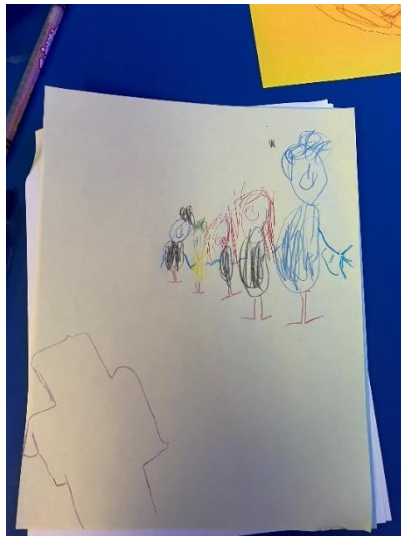
Description of Figure A.1: Blue figure is eldest brother, the long-haired figure next to the blue figure is the mother, and the three remaining figures are Tony, and his other two brothers. At the corner of the page is a tracing Tony did of a toy.

Figure A.2 Chase's Illustration of His Mother.
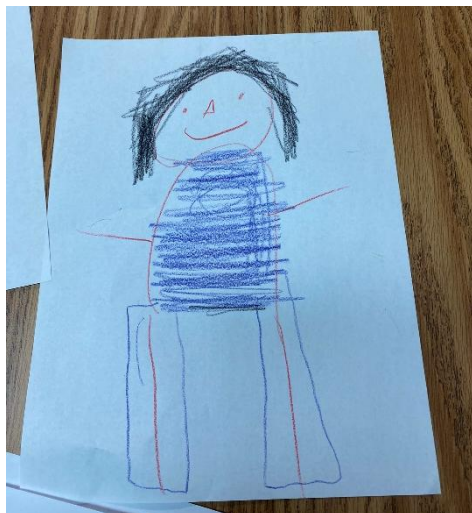
Description of A.2 Picture of a stick figure with short black hair and smiley face drawn in red crayon. The body is colored purple.

Figure A.3 Ogimaakwe's Illustration of a Giraffe.

Description of Figure A.3: Outline of a light brown giraffe with dark brown spots in crayon and colored pencil.

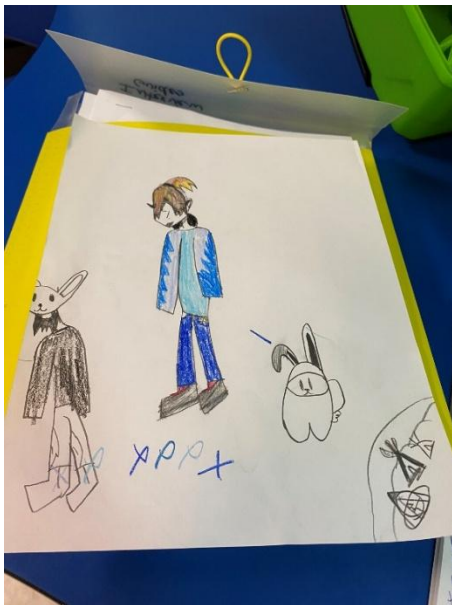**Figure A.4 Wabooz's Illustration of Herself as a Rabbit.**

Figure A.4 (cont'd)

Description of Figure A.4: A human girl illustrated with color pencil dressed in blue, a rabbit illustrated in a style similar to the Among Us video game, a girl illustrated in black with a rabbit head and short black hair, and in the corner are three tipis illustrated in pencil.

Figure A.5 Peter's Illustration of Two Dogs.

Description of Figure A.5: There are two dogs, one brown and one grey with green eyes, both are illustrated in crayon. There are eight brown dots at the top of the page that represent the other dogs from the grey dog's litter.

Figure A.6 Ranger's Tic Tac Toe Game.
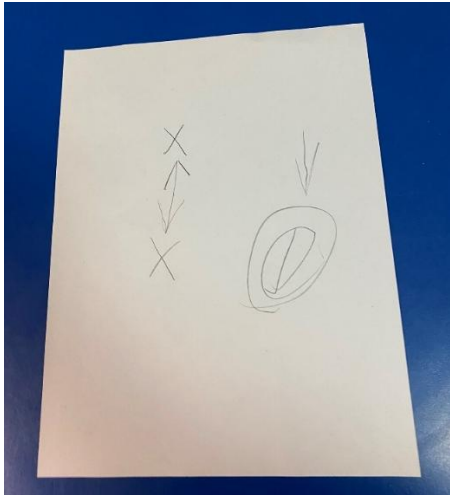
Description of Figure A.6: X's and O's with arrows depicting a tic tac toe game he played with
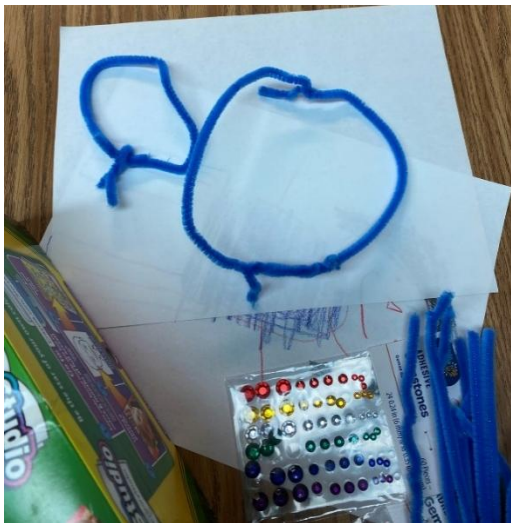
his brother.

Figure B.1: Figure B1 Tony's Illustration of Iron Man's Power Glove.

Description of Figure B.1: Tony traced his hand, colored it red with a purple center to represent the beam, and then decorated it with different colored sequins and gems.

Figure B.2 Chase's Blue Bear.

Description of Figure B.2: A bear represented by two different sized circles made by two blue pipe cleaners.

Figure B. 3 Cora's Badge.

Description of B.3: Cora's badge is made of different colored and shaped buttons threaded on a

green pipe cleaner.

Figure B.4 Wabooz's friendship bracelet made for a friend.


Figure B.4 (cont'd)

Description of Figure B.4: The friendship bracelet consists of purple and white pony beads

threaded on a pink pipe cleaner and a blue turkey feather tied into it.

Figure B.5 Peter's collage depicting his favorite color, green.

Description of Figure B.5: Peter used a white construction paper with a green pompom of different sizes, green turkey feather, green-yellow sequins, green, yellow and black pony beads, and a yellow popsicle stick.

Figure B.6 Ogimaakwe's Giraffe.
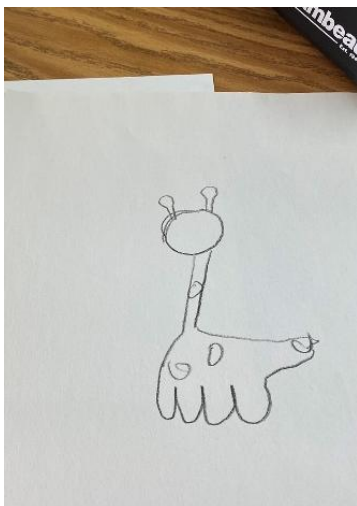
Description of Figure B.6: Outline of a giraffe made with crayon and not colored in.