

Episode 155 - Dr. Wendy Haight: Caregivers' Moral Narratives of Their African American Children's Out-of-School Suspensions: Implications for Effective Family-School Collaborations

[00:00:08] Welcome to in social work. The podcast series of the University of troppo School of Social Work at www.insocialwork.org. We're glad you could join us today. The purpose of social work is to engage practitioners and researchers and lifelong learning and to promote research to practice and practice to research. We're so sure Hello and welcome to in social work. My name is Charles Syms and I am your host for this episode. A report from 2006 indicates that almost three and a half million children were suspended or expelled from American schools in a March 2014 brief. The Office for Civil Rights in the United States Department of Education reports that black students are suspended or expelled at a rate three times that of white students. Removal from the educational setting can have a negative impact on a student's connection to and ultimate success in school. While there have been studies to help educators and social workers in educational settings more fully understand the effects of their removal from school. The perception and impact of circumstances on the parent or caregiver of the student has not been adequately explored. This is the subject of a study led by our podcast guest Dr. Wendy Haight of the University of Minnesota School of Social Work. Wendy Haight Ph.D. is a professor and the gamble scottmochair in child welfare and youth policy at the University of Minnesota. Dr. Haight completed her undergraduate degree in psychology at Reed College and her Ph.D. at the University of Chicago where she studied developmental cultural psychology.

[00:02:04] Her research focuses on better understanding and supporting vulnerable children and families especially those involved in public child welfare systems. Dr Haight's work includes studies focused on maltreated children who have disabilities or who become involved in delinquency legal representation of parents involved with the child welfare system. Why black children are more likely to receive out of school suspensions than their white peers. And international child welfare in this podcast Dr Haight highlights the findings of her study with low income caregivers of African-American children suspended from school. She discusses these caregivers experiences and perceptions and integrates her work from other studies to provide a more complete picture of this complex problem. Dr. Haight examines the idea of narrative and how that can provide a lens into understanding how the various players might see the suspension experienced differently. She also identifies roles and opportunities where social workers can engage in their efforts to address the problem of out of school suspension. Dr. hate ends her discussion with a look at the intersection between the child welfare and juvenile justice systems. Dr. Wendy Haight was interviewed in July of 2014 by Dr. Annette Semanchin-Jones assistant professor at the University at Buffalo School of Social Work. Hello this is Annette Semanchin-Jones at the University of Buffalo School Social Work. And today we're talking with Dr. Wendy Haight from the University of Minnesota. And we'll be talking about of school suspensions particularly with African-American children. So thank you very much for being here. Dr. Haight this is excellent to have a chance to talk with you about this topic. Can you just start by telling us a little bit about your current research in this area. OK.

[00:04:02] Well I've been collaborating with Priscilla Gibson and Ph.D. students here at the University of Minnesota for a couple of years now looking at the issue of out of school suspensions particularly as it affects African-American children primarily boys African-American children especially boys receive a disproportionate amount of out of school suspensions. And what that means is they're basically excluded from participating at school for up to a week typically three to five days and the out of school suspensions are administered by school principals or behavior Deans

for a variety of behaviors. Some of those behaviors are behaviors that are disruptive in class to teachers are disrespectful or that are dangerous. And the problem is that there's no evidence that African-American kids are more likely to behave in these ways than children from other cultural groups. And there is some evidence that when children from other cultural groups do display behavior similar to the behavior that gets African-American kids spent they aren't as harshly disciplined. So this is a real problem because we also know that there are educational achievement gaps between African-American children and children for example from European American groups. So what is the basis of that we really want to make sure that all children are receiving the opportunity to be educated. And when we look at the literature prior to our study and you were interested in the study that was published recently in social work we saw that the literature really represented the views of academic researchers and to some extent administrators in schools. But almost nothing about the perspectives of African-American families who were experiencing out of school tensions. And we know that it's very important to look at these complex social problems from multiple social vantage points because we all have our blind spots.

[00:06:36] So the first study the one that was published in social work we went and we talked to African-American caregivers mostly mothers about the out of school suspensions that their children had recently received and it was very interesting that these were framed by the African-American mothers very much using moral language that they were considered to be unfair and just that this was harmful to children to exclude them from school because not only are you not getting an education when you're not in school but these children also when they're not in school are not receiving the kind of supervision that they might otherwise receive and engage. For example in delinquent activities. So the problems just get compounded when children are excluded from school. So this was very much described in moral narratives and they were also very emotion laden. So there was a lot of emotion. Terms used in these narratives. So that was the first study. OK. So you talked a little bit about kind of how you went about exploring this issue in this particular study. Can you just say again a little bit more about who the sample was of the caregivers that they were all from an urban district. Yeah these were from primarily an urban school district public school. There were 30 caregivers with low incomes. And we basically invited them to tell their stories to describe their experiences of their children suspensions. So we had kind of an open ended kind of interview guide where we asked them to just talk about it but we also asked them probe about what happened. How did this happen.

[00:08:30] We asked them for the backstory and we often heard things about history of bullying and bullying. It was physical. So most of the children in the study were actually suspended because of fighting. But from the perspective of the caregivers much of this fighting was in fact in self defense so that these kids some of them many of them were growing up in rough neighborhoods. And these are urban schools and the caregiver felt that children needed to be able to physically protect themselves. And if someone wasn't bullying them then it was appropriate to respond in a very clear and strong and full way. And what was happening then is that within the school the bully and the perceived victim from the perspective of the parent were being treated in the same way and that they weren't. That the school really wasn't taking the context of the event that resulted in the disciplinary action into consideration. So they weren't using a common sense basically. And so we asked them about you know how did this happen. But then we also asked them about the consequences and they talked a lot about the consequences as a child not only in terms of academics. And that was certainly a major concern that they're missing school but also in terms of just a disengagement from school. This is rejection. We had a five year old who was seen going out of school suspension. So if you imagine most kindergartners bouncing happily to school and you know decided to participate in this fall boy got suspended because he was being too loud. You know c'mon that's ridiculous.

[00:10:13] But what does that do to the child's sense of belonging to the school's sense of safety in

school. So that was quite problematic. They also talked about the impact on the family that parents would have to miss work and when these are families with low income who need to work and who may have jobs where they could get fired. That was also and then just the families disengagement from the school. So a number of the caregivers in our study actually either moved their children to a different school or were seriously contemplating that which again is a disruption to a child's education. But that's how disengaged some of them felt after experiencing the out of school suspensions. And then we also asked them about what they would recommend what would be a better response. And they talked a lot about the importance of building relationships with children and with families and understanding the child. We got comments like you know if they could just talk if the principal knew my child he would know he's not a this child that he's not aggressive and that there were extenuating circumstances here. If you just talk to a teacher or if he had just known my child he would have realized that there was something more than an exchange of fisticuffs between two kids. So that was kind of their general approach to addressing this question. So you started and I know the title of this particular article that we're talking about in social work is has this term moral narratives. Is that a frame that you went in expecting to see or did it really emerge after talking to these caregivers. It really emerged. We were certainly went in sensitized by the literature on narrative.

[00:12:08] And I was very familiar with work in Taiwan on caregivers. Socialization practices in young children toddlers in terms of their behavior that relied on moral narrative. So I mean there's other people who look at moral narratives and that that was kind of in my background and in my head but that wasn't the expectation. So we all go into these projects sensitized by certain concepts that might make particular behaviors or perspectives more salient to us help us notice things. But what we really tried to do was listen to what the caregivers were telling us and really try to understand from their perspective and try to write from their perspective and not impose too much error a preconceived theoretical framework. So yes we were sensitized by those frameworks but we tried to really pretend that we were the mothers. When you're coding you've already started thinking and this a little bit. But if we're specially given this frame of really thinking about moral narratives and questions of justice within the schools what do you think are some practical implications for those practitioners policy makers when they're working with this topic of school suspensions it is a complex multilayered problem and it's going to require that the interventions and the policies also be complex and multilayered. We know that the zero tolerance policies are harmful to children and that they really modeled after the criminal justice model which I would argue was inappropriate in our schools. What are we communicating to our children. What is the hidden curriculum. When you start using criminal justice models in schools I think it's very problematic. But we started to get more ideas for the implications in some of our subsequent projects.

[00:14:25] If I could just kind of sketch that out for you a little bit. I think that helps us with implications. So the caregiver certainly had ideas that in our we had two studies which are currently under review or in the pipeline for publications so they can if people just google scholar Gibson and hate these will come up probably within the next number of months. One of the studies tried to look at kind of the multiple ecological layers that impact and are impacted by out of school suspension. So we looked at the context of the child individually the child's family school the sort of larger macro system and to do that we interviewed not just caregivers but we interviewed caregivers children who had received that of school suspension and these are middle school and high school students in this study and the educators that were involved in the suspension. And what we asked them is to talk about the suspension to describe what happened why that happened. What was the consequence of the sort of basic and then looked at the responses the perspectives from each of these different lenses to try to get a better handle on it. And that really helped because similar to the caregivers in the first study that these caregivers talked about the impact of out of school suspensions on sadly we wouldn't have known that if we only talked to two educators or if we'd only talk to children. But talking to the caregivers really illuminated that aspect of the problem for

us when we talk to the children.

[00:16:12] Their narratives really illuminated for us the impact of peer groups on the behaviors that led to the suspension but also the impact of the suspension on the child's peer group status sometimes more favorably which was another issue that is problematic. When we talk to the educators we learned about some of the more structural issues that were impeding their ability to implement what they consider to be best practices for responding to children's behavior. So they talked about overcrowded classes. They talked about teachers who were seeing 100 children a day maybe seeing each for 30 minutes in these overcrowded classrooms which made it very difficult for them to establish a relationship with the child or with the family that would promote more positive participation in their classes. And they talked about the social issues that come into the class into the school that there were in fact dangerous behaviors that are being brought into the school given the environment and the need to make sure that it was a safe environment conducive to learning for everybody. So if we hadn't talked to the educators we wouldn't have seen that aspect of the issue. So that was kind of the beauty of the kind of the mix methods approach. We also look specifically at the issue of race because we also asked people from all these different perspectives the role of race on school suspensions. And we've heard a lot and that was quite a whole tapering of self yeah I would be really curious. Could you share a little bit about what some of the themes and topics were around race yet.

[00:18:01] Well we talked I think it was and I don't have it in front of me but more than half when asked about the role of race in our school suspensions just straight out asked and they said yes and then they described some of the ways in which they view race. They talked a lot about problematic relationships between predominantly white staff middle class staff and a school which had a very large population of African-American kids from lower income families and a of understanding of cultural norms of communication and also where some of this behavior might be coming from like the importance of being able to defend oneself in a rough neighborhood. And just a lack of caring or commitment by some educators who just get so burned out by the multiple stress every day. So there was a lot of that but there were also some discussions of kind of the structural aspects of racism that impacted children's behavior and function in school and this was again it was largely from the administrators or the teachers who are saying that we don't have enough African-American role models and teachers in the schools that we do have problematic and that makes it difficult to connect with families and children. So there are many aspects but one aspect of race that is very interesting that we are currently pursuing is the kind of the so-called school to prison pipeline that largely affects African-American boys. So how does that happen. And one way that it happens of course is if you exclude the child from participating in school then they're going to be participating elsewhere and that could be with deviant peer groups and that increases the risk of delinquent behavior which then gets involved in the criminal justice system. But we looked at a number of things in this school for example there are police officers in school. There are surveillance cameras in the school.

[00:20:06] There are incidences where behavioral deans and principals call the police when they call the parents. But we looked at in the narratives we looked at the use of the criminal justice language. And we found child misbehavior being referred to as felonies or misdemeanors. So we saw administrators using the language of the criminal justice system that is appropriating that power and that position to justify a particular disciplinary actions. And we also saw parents using that language to defend their children from those actions. That is to protest it like the use of lawn lawyer and for the kids. We also saw them appropriating language from the criminal justice system to talk about feeling like they were in jail or being like prisoners. And so when you think about what's going on developmentally that you have children who are in early adolescence through are forming their self identities and some of those that self identity may include some connection with the criminal justice system maybe from the media from the peers. But the question is is the school

contributing to the development of a quote unquote or will this a criminal self identity in young black boys through the use of this kind of language may be another mechanism where young African-American boys are being socialized on a particular trajectory. And is that appropriate. And shouldn't the school be trying to steer kids off the trajectory right. So you're saying that school staff actually were using language even like felonies and misdemeanors. Yes yes. To refer to children's behaviors. This is when the criminal justice or police were not involved. This was just the internal language that they were using to describe behavior. Right.

[00:22:12] And we don't know we weren't privy to private conversations between administrators and children or parents. But what this language the in the narratives that they used in describing the out of school suspension. So they talked about felonies misdemeanors crimes. I have a list somewhere. I mean we just sort of looked at the vocabulary and it wasn't used by one or two people. It was used pretty pervasively and then also interesting is that we had principals and educators who resisted that they said I'm not a cop. Well why would you have to say I'm not a cop. It's not. We didn't think you were. So what's going on here. What kind of models are we using in terms of responding to behavioral problems in school. So that's a great example of a really concrete implication about even just the language that schools may use and how that could really potentially kind of impact this whole system in response to children's behaviors. I haven't asked you specifically what your thoughts might be on the role of social workers to. You know of course there are usually social workers within the schools themselves. But what do you see as the role of social workers. In addressing issues about a suspension in some of these themes that you've seen. We've got wonderful potential because social workers are educated to use an ecological model to see the person in the context and also to employ of perspective that seeks to empower and support individuals from vulnerable groups as opposed to punish and exclude.

[00:24:02] I think that the first implication is that we really need to find alternatives to our school suspension and that's not rocket science. It's clear that it has a variety of very negative outcomes. Well the educators have some very good ideas about how you could do that. They talk about alternative models like restorative justice models for example was one or in school suspension would be another addressing mental health issues. All of those things social workers would have an important role I think in developing those alternatives and in implementing those alternatives. I think understanding that there are multiple perspectives to any complex social human behavior. So it's not so cut and dry that you threw a punch therefore you're out of here. It's what was the context there that caregivers have a perspective. Children have a perspective administrators have a perspective do we need to silence certain narratives in order to function. I don't think so. I think if you listen to those perspectives you'll have a fuller understanding. Many of the children we studied had repeated suspensions. So that was another critique of the caregivers and also the education doesn't work. You pick a kid out of school for three days and come back they get the same problems. You didn't take care of the bully. You didn't take care of whatever issue was behind this behavior. And the caregivers critiqued the children's behavior as well. They recognize that these behaviors were not acceptable. It wasn't that they said that they were arguing that children should be allowed to fight in school. Of course not. That was a.

[00:25:41] But it was like you have to understand what the problem is before you can hope to respond to it effectively and the way to understand the problem is to consider that there is not one truth with a capital key. There's no God's eye view that there are multiple social perspectives here and if you take account of all of them as much as you can then you have a better understanding of what you can do to make it better. So that would be another one seeking some common ground with families would be another. And school social workers. I mean that can be a major part of their job being a liaison between home and school. So many of these I would say we actually did an analysis of this in terms of their narratives highly valued education as has historically been the case in African-American communities. They value education. They wanted their children to succeed in

school very much. So there's a lot of common ground there. So rather than being adversaries from the get go because that's what happens because finding caregivers experiences is traumatic. When the principal calls them and tells them to come and get their TUFFIELD they've been kicked out of school. That's traumatic for caregivers too especially when they so value education. So rather than setting up that kind of adversarial posture and again to get back to the criminal justice legal system influence here administrators talked about being liable. They talked about needing to be very consistent in the application of rules. And they talked about this in terms of protecting themselves legally. So that's part of it. But that's no way to develop collaboration and clearly we need a collaboration to make this work. So seeking out common ground with families social workers could be fabulous there.

[00:27:33] And then of course to consider the racial context and to let that be I think that when we talk with teachers sometimes there was a fair amount of defensiveness from most of them had been to like the cultural sensitivity workshops that didn't necessarily open their minds up but in some cases people were very defensive and afraid of being labeled a racist. So to be able to talk about race in a context where we think of it developmentally like we are all living in a racist society and therefore we were taught as children and what's in air water and the air around us. But as adults we have a responsibility to be aware and to critique that. And we're all at different places in our development in understanding of this hugely complicated issue of race in America. So it's not the case that somebody is a racist or not as we all are different sort of places developmentally. And if we can have an conversation without labeling one another in moralistic type terms that we might be able to think more clearly about the role of race in education particularly the exclusionary discipline. Yeah I think that's a really key point because I know it's probably not unique to education systems as well. Some of the reluctance to really have an open discussion about race and the role of race and especially when you see disproportionality isn't across systems whether it's child welfare juvenile justice education. So I think that's another important point is setting the context that people can really talk about it. So. You mentioned briefly some connections shares to some other works.

[00:29:20] And I'm just wondering what's next for you as you explore this topic. What are some projects that you might have in the works around these issues. Well we hope to continue to explore the very rich database that we have now from these narratives. And one of those projects as I mentioned is actually looking at and thinking about the extent to which schools have. Are these schools these particular schools if not all over the country. I have no idea if it's all over the country all I can talk about are these particular two schools that we studied to the extent to which a criminal justice model has been incorporated into the educational practices and to really think about how that might relate to the school to prison pipeline. How that helped kids get from the schools to the prison and if there is a socialization process that is either being reinforced at the school level in terms of the criminal identity for young black males in low income neighborhoods and if that's something we really need to think seriously about. And that is so it is so much a part of the culture that it's seeping into people's language and thinking about children's behavior. You know I think that's a real problem and we will continue with that. There are a number of other projects that are happening that are ongoing that look at kind of the intersection between child welfare and the law. So there is a program of research that we've been doing for several years and it is ongoing and we have some publications out that look at children from the child welfare system who have been abused and neglected who then cross over and become involved in the juvenile justice system.

[00:31:12] And that is problematic because entering the juvenile justice system of course introduces a whole nother set of risk to children who are already at risk in a number of areas from having experienced abuse or neglect or having been involved in the child welfare system. That is something that you really don't want to see happening and a disproportionate number of kids from the child welfare system do crossover especially again African-American kids. So we've been

involved with the Casey Family Programs and Georgetown University in examining the implementation of a practice model called the crossover practice model and five counties in Minnesota and this model tries to reduce the involvement of kids from the child welfare system in juvenile justice. And one of the ways that they work on that is through trying to get communication at a sort of administrative system level between juvenile justice and child welfare. So how do you get the two systems to be able to communicate so that when a child is picked up for example that the juvenile justice people know that this child has actually been abused or neglected child from child welfare and that can trigger a whole nother set of responses. And when kids do get it from the child welfare system do get involved in the juvenile justice system. How can you minimize that involvement again teaming between child welfare that has a whole set of services and support for families and juvenile justice. So we've been involved in a mixed methods evaluation of this the implementation of this model here in Minnesota where we've actually gone out we've done participant observations and the trainings Georgetown does the professionals in these different counties.

[00:33:16] Also we've done in-depth interviews with the professionals implementing this to talk about what the issues are how it's going. What has changed or not change about their practice and also to talk with the families. The parents and the who've gone through this model and then also to look that's the kind of the qualitative piece and the quantitative piece is to actually link some administrative datasets from social services and child welfare education in the court system to look at the sort of concrete outcomes are kids who participate in this program less likely to spend a lot of time in the system. Is there some change over time in the sort of concrete outcomes that would indicate that in fact they're not becoming as entangled in the juvenile justice system as similar kids who are involved and then go back and this is a step that we haven't done what they need are sort of ongoing and then ask the people involved to interpret what we find in terms of those quantitative. So that's an example of the intersection again of child welfare and the law. And then there's another set of studies that are evaluating again using this kind of mixed methods approach an innovative clinic at the William Mitchell law school here. It's called The Child Protection clinic. And what they're doing is trying to provide representation for parents who are involved in the child welfare system and wouldn't necessarily have quality representation available to them. And the way they do this is to use law students each law student takes on one or two cases and is supervised by an experienced attorney to provide representation.

[00:35:17] And again we're trying to look to see if there are concrete outcomes we can see like are the families reuniting more quickly. Are they having different outcomes. But then also what we've been doing now is talking with the students and the supervising attorneys and the judges and the prosecuting attorneys and the parents about this clinic. So again it's sort of the intersection of child welfare and more. Right. As you were talking I was just curious. So you talked about the potential intersection between out of school suspensions and the pipeline to juvenile justice. And then in a separate set of projects the role of child welfare and crossover youth that experience both connection with the child protection system and juvenile justice. Have those three systems come together at all in your work in the Krasa Reeve practice model. Mr. Very interesting to see how the child welfare slash social service and juvenile justice slash court systems have been able to work together and a lot of that work was just trying to make policies so that information could be shared across systems for example. But it also had a lot to do with forming relationships. A lot of this is technical. But when you actually talk to people about what the facilitating or getting in the way of these systems integration. We hear a lot about relationships that one of the strengths of crossover practice model was the joint training that people in these different systems from each county do together as a team. And so now they're talking about oh now I have someone that I can call in the other office or now I understand why they're not able to do such and such. Before I thought that they were just lazy.

[00:37:15] Now I understand they're all stupid. Will that prevent that logical behavior from happening. So a lot of it was about relationships and that's something that kind of surprised me because the model and my focus was on kind of complexities. It's been harder I think to get education to the table too. And I think that there's just a lot of time. I mean they're also so busy. And there's also historic relationships. So in one of the counties for example the relationship between child welfare and juvenile justice historically was contentious. And so in terms of preparing for these kinds of collaboration and that kind of historic and contextual knowledge was really important. And so when you're talking about education child welfare social service juvenile justice there's a history in a whole context as to how these systems have been siloed in the past or have been cooperating in the past. Great. Well I'm really excited to hear about your work with your colleagues. I think it's particularly exciting to really think about how these different systems intersect and even given all the challenges as you were just mentioning it's exciting to think that some of these practice models are really looking to work across systems so that's very exciting. Thank you very much to Dr. Wendy Haight. We really appreciate you taking the time to talk with us today about this topic. Welcome extend my pleasure. You have been listening to a discussion by Dr. Wendy Haight on her work of exploring out of school suspension of African-American children and the narrative of that experience for their caregivers. We hope that you have been enlightened.

[00:39:07] Please join us again at in social work Hi I'm Nancy Smyth professor and dean of the University at Buffalo School of Social Work. Thanks for listening to our podcast. We look forward to your continued support of the series. For more information about who we are as a school our history our programs and what we do we invite you to visit our Web site at www.socialwork.buffalo.edu.