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Suspension and Exclusion Rates for Aboriginal Students in Western Australia

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Abstract

This brief report highlights an apparently inflated suspension and exclusion rate for Aboriginal students in Western Australian government schools. The elevated rates for both suspension and exclusion, but especially for the more serious step of exclusion, should be reason for concern for all educators.

A number of studies have highlighted apparent biases in the rate at which minority students are being suspended and excluded from schools in the United States and the United Kingdom but there has been little examination of the issue regarding Australian education (Maag and Howell, 1992; Lloyd-Smith, 1993). Concerns are being expressed about the legality and equity of the suspension and exclusion procedures conducted in Australian education systems but little analysis has been undertaken of the actual rates for specific student populations (Bain, 1988; Slee, 1992). There also has been an appeal to the Human Rights Commission under the *Racial Discrimination Act, 1975* on behalf of four Aboriginal students excluded from Queensland schools, an appeal that was not upheld at the Federal Court level (Killen, 1989). This article examines the suspension and exclusion rates of Aboriginal students in Western Australian government schools.

The Western Australian government school structure is a centralised system of education that,

in 1993, provided education for 248,434 students in over 768 schools spread throughout a third of the Australian continent (Ministry of Education, 1993). Aboriginal students make up only 4.75% ($n = 11,800$) of the total student population and have considerably lower participation, retention and achievement rates than other students (Jones, 1994). In recognition of these facts the system has as one of its primary goals the provision of equitable educational opportunities for Aboriginal students (Ministry of Education, 1991).

The *Education Act* of Western Australia provides, for principals of government schools, the power to suspend students for disruptive behaviour. Principals can temporarily exclude students from access to educational services for periods of up to ten days. Principals are required to maintain accurate records of suspensions but there is no centrally controlled process for recording and monitoring the suspension sanction. Studies of suspension rates in the past have not isolated particular groups and little has been published about the suspension rates for Aboriginal students since the cessation of corporal punishment in government schools (Hyde and Robson, 1984). A limited study was, however, conducted in the first half of 1993 that analysed suspension records for 25 out of 29 school districts. The report prepared from the study showed that Aboriginal students had 242 suspensions amounting to 977.75 days. This represents 9.62% of all suspensions, and 10.82% of total days suspended. If the data from 25 districts is representative, the expected rate for

Aboriginal students would be approximately 5%, then the suspension rates seem extremely biased against Aboriginal students in the state. As can be seen in Figure 1, Aboriginal students appear to be

being suspended at a rate almost twice that of the total population, and are suspended for well over twice the number of days.

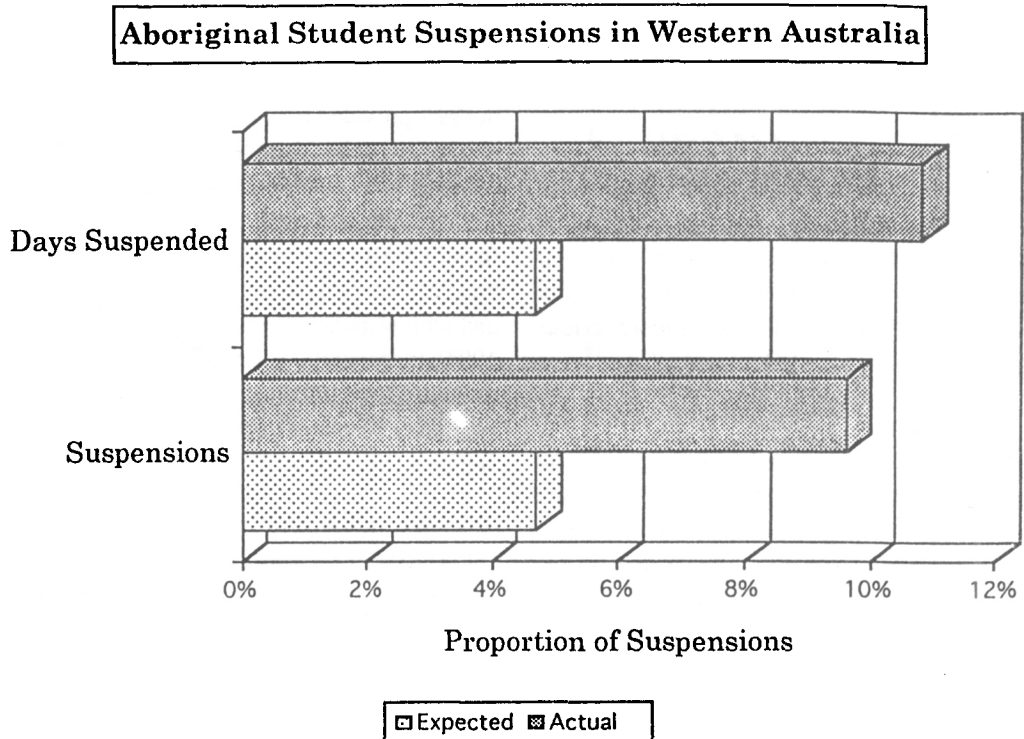


Figure 1: Comparison of expected and actual suspension rates for Aboriginal students in 1993, based on data from 25 out of 29 school districts in Western Australia.

Along with the sanction of suspension, principals in government schools may also recommend that a student be permanently excluded from school. If a student is suspended in any one year for periods totalling more than thirty days then the principal is required to recommend the student's exclusion from school. The power to exclude resides with the State Minister for Education acting on the advice of an exclusion panel. The panel consists of three persons, a community representative, an Education Department

representative and a representative of the Western Australian Council of State School Organisations (a parent group). In the case of Aboriginal students a representative of the Aboriginal community is also included on the panel. The panel considers the principal's recommendation bearing in mind evidence from the school, the student and parents/guardians, and makes a recommendation which is forwarded to the Minister of Education for a decision. In general the Minister follows the recommendations of the panel, and panels tend to recommend some form of exclusion.

As exclusions are processed through the Minister's office, data are more readily available with regard to the process and relative rates. In 1992, 35 students were recommended by principals for exclusion, nine, or 26%, of these were Aboriginal students. Thirty-three students were excluded, including the nine Aboriginal students which means that Aboriginal students made up 27% of exclusions that year, nearly six times their representation in the student population (Chi

Square of 35.24, $p < 0.001$).

In 1993, twenty-four recommendations for exclusion went before panels with twenty-three students being excluded (one decision was pending at the time of the report). Eleven of the excluded students were Aboriginal, representing 35% of exclusions (Chi Square of 91.014, $p < 0.001$). This discrepancy in the rates is clearly shown in Figure 2.

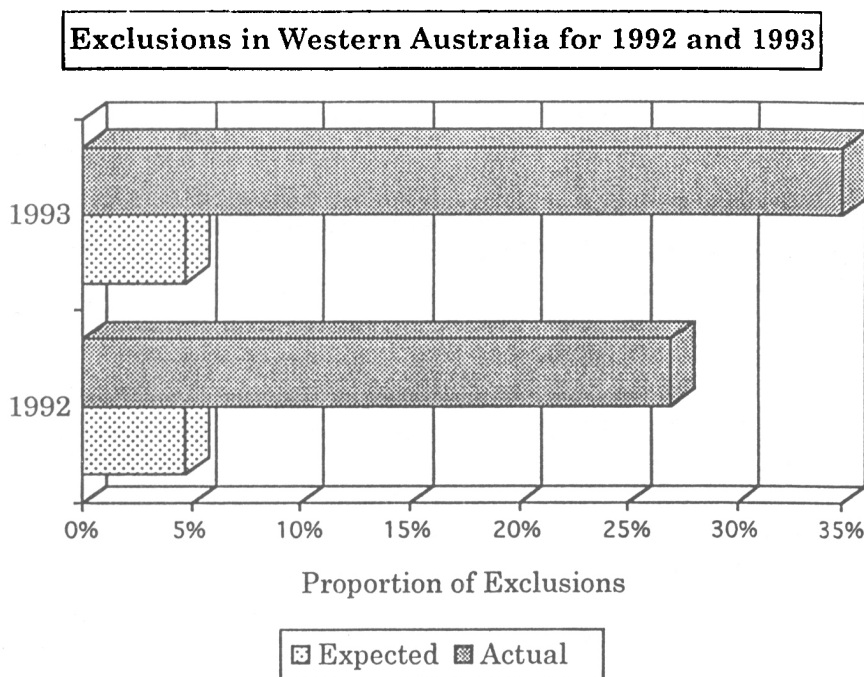


Figure 2: Comparison of expected and actual exclusion rates for Aboriginal students in the past two years in Western Australia.

In summary, the available evidence suggests that, without considering other factors, Aboriginal students are twice as likely to be suspended and more than four times as likely to be excluded from Western Australian government schools than other students. Further grounds for concern come from an audit undertaken in South Australia during 1993, that found Aboriginal children were

suspended and excluded or alternatively placed at a rate three times the average (Education Department of South Australia, 1993). Whether this apparent bias is the result of the application of the procedures themselves or from school management practices which result in the greater alienation of Aboriginal students is cause for concern.

The obligation is on state governments to examine their discipline systems to detect any inherent bias and to rectify the situation. In an article by Lloyd-Smith (1993: 19) a similar situation with regard to Afro-Caribbean students in English school was referred to as a 'form of "ethnic cleansing"'. While some readers may find that statement to be overly dramatic, the people who are four times more likely to have their children excluded from educational services may not.

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