"From little things, big things explode..."

by

Clare Stehbens and Lynette Anderson

Nulloo Yumbah

Central Queensland University

and

Associate Professor Jeannie Herbert

School of Australian Indigenous Studies

James Cook University

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Introduction

Australian Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students (hereinafter also referred to as Indigenous Australians) are over-represented in many Australian States' data on student suspensions and exclusions, particularly in relation to secondary students. Where schools have attempted strategies to redress this situation, often they are failed by a system that is under-resourced and inadequately trained to respond appropriately to these students and their communities. International statements and agreements on the rights of the child and the rights of Indigenous peoples emphasise the importance of Indigenous parents being able to choose the kind of education that is to be given to their children. At a local level these sentiments are often embodied in State and local educational policy documents. However, statistics in relation to school attendance and achievement for Indigenous students indicate that these students are not fully exercising and in some instances may even be being denied their rights to an education.

The paper to be presented today, "From little things, big things explode..." highlights the impact of continuing to explain Indigenous students’ non-attendance in and suspension and exclusion from the schooling system, within deficit notions of what it is to be "Indigenous". This relates to issues of institutionalised and personal oppression, and to the control and violence which occur both directly and indirectly as part of the daily life experiences of many Indigenous Australian students and their families within the school setting. Such matters are in tension with systemic demands for "safe" school environments and departmental behaviour management policies that are culturally inappropriate and constitute "cognitive imperialism" (Battiste, 1998).

Education has long been and continues to be one of the key weapons in the "colonisation and oppression" of Indigenous Australians (Morgan, 1998). In the present, this takes the form of competing national agendas of "Indigenous Australians being able to participate in our society to their full potential", and "Indigenous people being able to choose from the same range of futures as other Australians" (Budget 1999 Ministerial Media Release). This results in a tension between mainstream notions of equality and Indigenous aspirations of rights-based outcomes which was referred to in the national review of educational provision for Indigenous Australians (DEET, 1995). While, the present day assimilation of Aboriginal children into the mainstream education system has resulted in increased access and participation, recent reports and statistics indicate that Australian educational systems nationally are failing Indigenous peoples in terms of equitable outcomes and achievement at all levels. The realities of school participation for many Indigenous Australian students include:

- low literacy levels;
- comparatively low school retention;
- high student absenteeism;
- continuous racial harassment and oppression; and
- the over-representation of Indigenous Australian students among those students suspended or excluded from schools.

(DEET, 1995; Stanley and Hansen, 1998; Morgan, 1998).

Following upon these "realities", this paper will address, in particular, factors that may result in the suspension and exclusion of Indigenous students from schools in NSW. To do so, we will draw upon the limited data available indicating the suspension and exclusion rates of these students from secondary schools in New South Wales, as well as data gathered during the community and school visits conducted as part of the research project, "Keeping Our Kids at School". This material is intertwined with feedback from interviews with students,
parents and community and school personnel, concerning matters related to student suspensions and exclusions.

While the quantitative elements of the report may be limited because of the difficulty in obtaining such data, we have endeavoured to show, on the basis of the data which is available, something of the complexities and dilemmas for Indigenous students, their families and their schools as they seek "equitable and culturally appropriate" education for all children.

The Implications of Departmental Student Suspensions and Exclusions

Policies and Procedures for Indigenous Australian Students

The NSW Department of Education, in an effort to ensure the quality of education for all students and a safe work environment for teachers and students, has instituted a series of behavioural management actions which are to be enforced where a student's behaviour does not comply with school requirements. Such behaviour management strategies are based around schools developing appropriate strategies for their own school location. However, central to behaviour management in any school is the systemic capacity to suspend or exclude students whose behaviour is in serious breach of the school's discipline policy or is a threat to other students and staff.

i) Incidence of Suspensions and Exclusions

The NSW Department maintains through its schools and district offices a register of all students who have either been suspended or excluded from schools. Short suspension data is maintained on a school-based register and is forwarded in a term report to the district office. Long term suspensions and exclusions are reported to the district office, and expulsions are the responsibility of the Director-General of Education.

The research team was unable to gather specific statistical data for the suspension and exclusions of students in the schools it visited. However, in all schools we visited, we spoke with Aboriginal students who had either been previously suspended or knew of another Aboriginal student in the school who had been suspended or excluded. An analysis of relevant state-wide data for Terms 3 and 4, 1995 (see Table 1) indicated that although Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander (ATSI) students comprised only 3% of the total student population, they were the subject of 11% to 18% of all suspensions. The figure was even higher for long term female Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander suspensions (18%). The 1995 data also showed that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students who are suspended have a different grade profile to other students. For example, Aboriginal student suspensions are located across all grades (both primary and secondary) in far greater proportion to other students. Also, the trend among Aboriginal students is far more pronounced in primary grades and with boys in Years 7 to 9. Although statistical data was not available for other states, we understand that the figures for Western Australia, South Australia and Queensland are very similar to those above.

Table 1: Terms 3 and 4 1995: Analysis of student suspensions

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Cultural background</th>
<th>% student population</th>
<th>Male</th>
<th>Male</th>
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<tr>
<td>Suspension</td>
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Indigenous educational advocacy groups, such as the Aboriginal Education Consultative Group of NSW, both in discussions with the research team and in the February 1998 edition of its journal, Pemulwy, have clearly indicated that the disproportionate representation of Indigenous students in data on suspensions and exclusions is of critical importance to them. According to their journal, if one was to add to the official suspension and exclusion figures, details of those students who are the target of unofficial suspensions and exclusions, then the numbers of suspensions and exclusions of Aboriginal children would be doubled.

ii) The Availability of Detailed Statistics on Suspensions and Exclusions

The research team believes that the Department of Education processes in place at the time of the research for reporting and analysing data on Aboriginal suspensions and exclusions, are inadequate for understanding and responding to the importance of these issues for Aboriginal students.

Two particular aspects which were of concern are:

- the lack of explicitness in relating the cultural background of students to the particular categories of infringements on the basis of which students are either suspended or excluded; and
- the limited extent of public reporting of the data about suspensions and exclusions other than that provided in the NSW Department of Education and Training Annual Report.

At the school level, data on student suspensions is recorded in a school register on the basis of grade, gender, cultural background (Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander (ATSI), Non-English Speaking Background (NESB), or Other), and category of infringement (There are five categories of infringements for suspensions, i.e. non-violent behaviour, violent behaviour, substance abuse, property damage and theft, and other). However, when the school forwards this information to the district office, the school is required to analyse category of infringement according to gender only. This limited reporting of the data is of concern for the research team, as anecdotal reports and research discussions with students, parents and community members would appear to indicate that Indigenous students’ profile of infringements may be in a limited number of categories.

We were told of cases where students were suspended for swearing or for non-physical aggressive behaviour and other matters, which it could be argued may be related to differing ways of dealing with emotions and anger in a highly stressed institutional context. Also, according to the Pemulwy journal, and our own research, racial provocation is the source of
many suspensions particularly in the Years 7 to 9 grouping and yet this is recorded as aggressive non-violent behaviour when Aboriginal students react.

In light of what would appear to be consistently high suspension and exclusion figures for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students, another aspect of the reporting process which concerned the research team was the format of the public reporting of suspension and exclusion statistics. The Department now releases this data in its Annual Report as per day suspension and exclusion data and does not provide any analysis of the data for purposes of identifying the relationship between cultural background, grade, gender and infringement. Whilst the research team is sensitive to the issues of data misuse and manipulation against the interests of minority groups, it also has concern that this mode of reporting data may serve to obfuscate and dilute the importance of an issue to certain groups in the community.

To aggregate the data on suspensions and exclusions, as is now done in the Department of Education and Training Annual Report, can have the effect of silencing some of the more particular statistics which should be addressed, particularly if one cultural group continues to be more heavily represented in this data. We can liken this matter to the investigations of the Royal Commission of Inquiry into Aboriginal Deaths in Custody (RCIADIC). RCIADIC which found that while many Indigenous people were in prison for relatively minor infringements, the horrific price they paid for incarceration was far more than the nature of the criminal offence which placed them in prison in the first instance.

It is the opinion of the research team, that it is critical that the complexity and extent of the data on Indigenous suspensions and exclusions be investigated and made more explicit through detailed analysis, so that the systemic problems can be responded to more effectively. Again, we do not believe that what is happening in NSW is isolated. We understand that the over-representation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students in the NSW data can also be evidenced in Western Australia, South Australia and Queensland at least.

Factors Which May Contribute to the Suspension and Exclusion of Students

Some of the research which has attempted to examine the relationship between student behaviour and suspensions has focused on issues such as violence. However, while an act of "violence" may have been the immediate behaviour that resulted in a suspension, the factors that often led to the final infringement were many. A NSW Department of Education report on the implementation of suspension and exclusion procedures (Department of School Education, 1997, p. 7) suggested that the causes of this violence were often non-school based. The report asserted that in many instances there is a clear relationship between a student’s social and cultural conditions and student behaviour in school. The report suggests that suspensions related to unacceptable behaviour, were often the result of "social differences, cultural or racial disputes, or intimidation started in the community". The research team is concerned that the report’s locating of the causes of a student’s suspension back in the home and community, absolves the school from critiquing the assimilatory and exclusionary aspects of its own educational practices. BY contrast, the current research, particularly the discussions with Indigenous students and community members, indicates that they see that the factors that result in the suspension of Indigenous students, are outside of the sphere of control of Aboriginal people.

The following discussion of factors that may contribute to suspension or exclusion of Indigenous students is based on student, parent and school feedback.

i) Teacher-student communication and teacher allocation of teaching time:
Many students reported experiencing good relationships with a variety of their teachers. Central to these relationships is the nature of communication and cognitive understanding within the classroom context. In all schools visited and with all grade levels, Indigenous students spoke of their frustration at not being able to understand what was happening in the classroom and the lack of opportunities for teachers to explain and instruct them in a way which they believed was satisfactory. Some students describe their frustrations with teacher-student interaction in the classroom thus:

- We’ve got five essays to do and they were supposed to be handed in last term and we asked her "Can you just explain it and how we should write it", and she just tells us and then walks away.

- Because you can’t understand it and that’s why you can’t do it and they won’t explain it again.

- They (teachers) don’t explain it to you if you can’t understand it and because they’ve already explained it to you once, they won’t do it again. That’s when they (students) get all frustrated and angry, because you can’t understand the way they talk to you.

One Aboriginal community worker believes that much of the conflict that occurs in school between Aboriginal students and teachers is related to students’ inability to understand what is going on in their classes and the pressure on the teacher in terms of her distribution of her teaching time. Through the following real-life scenario, the community worker illustrates how this conflict can erupt, and result in a student’s suspension:

…students not understanding might bring about provocation, conflict. These kids that flunk school… A teacher would come in and have a list similar to a task sheet and she’d explain the task sheet. She’d tell the kids that this, this, this, this is what you have to do. A white kid will think, "yeah, got it". The Koori kids won’t. They won’t know what you’re talking about. So they’ll be sitting there, haven’t even attempted to start their work… going "Miss, Miss."

She’s going "Wait, Wait" because as she is handing out the tasks the white kids have put up their hands and she has to answer their enquiries. The black kids are going "Miss, Miss", jumping out of their chairs, and making noise. She turns around and growls them and is continually going on at them because their time is getting on and they haven’t put pen to paper. Now, come on! They’re starting to get wild now. Teacher turns around and says "You. You. You and you. Get out of the class. Go down and see so-and-so".

On the way out they turn around and swear. When you look at how it starts as such a simple problem… I suspect it starts from something like not understanding what the teacher is talking about.

According to an Indigenous education worker, another significant aspect of student suspensions is the frustration experienced particularly by boys in years 7 to 9 who are unable to read:

We’ve got kids in both high schools that are illiterate…how can these kids go through year 7 and year 8 and get halfway through year 9 and then find out they’re illiterate…Do you just let these kids just turn up to school and not do anything, sit around outside and do nothing? And it's not only a shame, it's sad, because these kids, once they're going in to class and they don't know
how to read or write, the first thing they're going to do is say stuff you teacher, stuff you whitefella, I'm going.

**ii) Micro controls within schools**

Within the day-to-day routine of the school there are many micro processes and practices which are accepted as being a "natural" part of the school routine for many but which create difficulties for some Indigenous students and families. Erickson (1987, p 352) describes these processes as "hegemonic practices" in that they are routine actions and unexamined beliefs and practices which come out of the dominant cultural ideology and can "entirely without malevolent intent" limit the life chances of the marginal groups. Some examples of the schools' requirements of this type which can create tensions for Indigenous students are the schools' demands for uniforms, books, punctuality, homework, etc. These often create hardship and difficulty for students because of the conflict between the demands placed on them by the school and the competing demands of their homes in terms of allocation of scarce resources, whether it be for uniforms, textbooks, school resource fees, etc. A Year 11 male student commented:

*Teachers put pressure on kids to like do this and do that, but when you've got an Aboriginal family there could be one parent or alcoholic parents or whatever, they just don't know what is needed at school...Like sometimes, parents may not have been paid that week and they may not have the money to come to school. Or they need food and so don't have money for books.*

Other students spoke of the conflict that could arise if they did not have correct classroom resources:

*You can ask teachers to lend books but only about 5% will lend them out. The teachers in the school have got heaps of stuff to do but if you get sent out for not having a book and they have spare ones. Most of them say, "You should have your books... be prepared for school". And pens too. Some come with no pens. Ask the teacher and they'll send you out for not having a pen. That's pretty stupid.*

One teacher, who works with suspended students, suggested that these micro controls are often the final trigger in the lead-up to a suspension of a student:

*I think they are the straw that breaks the camel’s back. It is also a tool that they can use to get rid of someone they really don’t want. Who they really see as upsetting the apple cart. That rule is there that they can bring in. It is so easy. They know if they say, you said that you would have it today, the kid will have a bad reaction possibly get into the verbal abuse and then there is a suspension.*

However, allied with this in some instances is the aggressiveness that some teachers believe is shown when a student does not have resources and the teacher fear that students can become even more aggressive if the she/he does not help them:

*...but in some cases, and like I said we’re fairly lenient, we’ve got kids who fly off the handle when they haven't brought a thing to school and they want a black pen and we don’t have a black pen, you’ve only got a pencil. Or they say I want a calculator, so you might give them your own personal calculator and then they’ll wreck it and the next day you won’t bring anything and they’ll go off the handle.*
While each of these stories differ in content, the similarity is control which these processes bring into the system, and the perceived threat of aggression if a student is backed into a corner because he or she feels that he or she is unable to meet the school’s demands. This aggressiveness could be seen as a reaction against the punitive measures that the student expects the school will take if he or she is not able to meet the requirements.

iii) Inter-student and racial conflict:

A common theme running through students’ descriptions of the factors that can lead to suspension was the threat and actuality of racial provocation and the schools’ inability to resolve the situations amicably for all participants. Aboriginal students generally see that the trouble emanates from the other side, but they believe that when they retaliate against such provocation, it is the Aboriginal student who will get the punishment.

An example of the type of peer conflict which can occur is described by some Year 10 male students who believe that if there is fighting between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal students in the school, then it is likely that the Aboriginal students will be the ones to be suspended:

Student: Most of the time when we have fights you (the school) get the story from the white kid and that’s it. Like they believe our race is a lot stronger than them so we’re always starting the fights, it’s fair enough if you take both sides but taking one side is wrong.

Interviewer: If a Koori kid and a gub (white) got into a blue…..

Student: The Koori kid would be the first one to be questioned and suspended and they’ll take their side.

Interviewer: …and what happens to the gub (white) kid then.

Student: Nothing - basically they were defending themselves - next time I’ll suspend you and all that.

However, such conflict is not confined to the playground. One group of Year 9 students described how a simple learning experience in the classroom could lead to peer conflict:

Interviewer: How do you feel when they talk about Aboriginal things in class?

Student A: Good, because you’re Aborigine and they’re talking about your culture.

Interviewer: Do the other kids look at you?

Student: Sometimes when they laugh because they laugh at the people and what they’re doing at that.

Interviewer: So do you say anything to those kids?

Student: You just look at them and give them a filthy look.

Interviewer: Would many kids say that or just some?
Student: Only the smarty ones. When you go to hit them or something, they run to the teacher and they're bringing you on to doing it. But you get that psyched up that you can’t...

Student: They keep coming back for more until the teacher does something about it. Then we get in more trouble and then our parents do. And then the parents don’t understand what the kids are like at school. You try to tell them but they...

iv) Student perception of victimisation:

Accompanying this belief that racially provoked peer fighting will result in selective suspension of Aboriginal students, there is a strong self-perception of being victimised on the part of some students. Students and family see that they are firmly under "the gaze" of authority because of their Aboriginality. This is evidenced in the following comments by some Year 10 and 11 boys describing what happens when they play sport in their lunch break:

- When you’re playing, they’ll stand and watch us on the side of the court. They won’t go to the other courts; they’ll just stand there and watch us. If one of us swears or something, they’ll send them straight to the office, where if someone else swears they normally don’t go to the office. (Year 11 boy)

- They more try to police us than they try to teach us, if they just basically sat down and tried to teach us, tried to do that and not so much policing (Year 10 boy)

A parent and community worker also strongly expressed this sense of victimisation and frustration at the inability of the school to assist Aboriginal students:

Because it’s always our kids on the streets, it’s always our kids chucked out of the schools. But it’s so easy for our kids to be chucked out, that’s what I don’t like. If a kid goes to class and he mucks up, because the teacher is teaching a class of 27, if there are 3 kids who are mucking up, the teacher has to by law concentrate on those 27 kids. He can't spend enough time with the other 3 so he says excuse me you’ve got to leave my class. We’ve got kids who are being chucked out of school every week here. By May we’re going to have a terrible lot of kids on the streets.

v) "Unacceptable" student behaviour and school behaviour management policies

i) Lack of congruence between what is accepted of Indigenous student behaviours in and out of school:

A common element of many of the teacher concerns about Aboriginal students' behaviour has to do with what is regarded as being unacceptable behaviour in the school setting. In some instances, Aboriginal parents see that the differences in behaviour reflect the differences in the communication patterns of Indigenous and non-Indigenous cultures:

- Another problem too with the Murri kids is that, like I know if you walk into my house and you’ve got the stereo full blast and we’re very vocal - Aboriginal people...then when they come to school they have to be quiet for all this time and what I’ve noticed with the kids they yell at each other, having a yarn across the room.
...and a child who yells across the classroom gets into trouble, so they get frustrated.

...you're expected to sit and not say anything it's really hard.

It's a part of our culture. I know I'm guilty - like I walk into a classroom and I'll see a Murri kid and I'll walk over and I'll start to yarn and the teacher is there teaching and they'll look at me and sort of....

Yet within the broad definitions of workplace violence, if a teacher perceived any of the above situations to be threatening then any of these situations could be a potential cause of student suspension.

ii) Student use of "offensive language" and "swearing":

Central to many of these concerns is the issue of offensive language and swearing. Under the NSW Summary Offences Act 1988 it is an offence to use "offensive language" within hearing of a school or public place. Most students interviewed were aware that swearing was not acceptable in the classroom setting and that to swear would result in some form of disciplinary action. However, some teachers were of the opinion that taking action against Aboriginal students for swearing would be pointless. They believe that swearing is almost "enculturated" within the students' social setting and so school conditions were adjusted to accommodate student behaviour:

• ...with my last school a lot of the stuff here just wouldn't be tolerated, abuse of teachers, generally swearing at teachers, threatening teachers. Whereas here we try and keep the kids here for as long as we can in terms of long term perspectives that hasn't always been the case though, I've been here for nearly twenty years, and it hasn't always been accepted, this acceptance of swearing just even walking around the playground that's only recent, just in the last few years.

• When I was at ______ they sort of take the approach that unless it's directed at you don't take any action because otherwise you would constantly be getting kids for swearing and stuff like that, so I don't know whether it's a reflection of society.

• I find working with Murri kids you've got to be a lot calmer, if you reacted every time a kid swore...depends in what context and that sort of thing.

The above attitude of teachers that recognises the importance of responding to local context is not necessarily seen by others within the profession to be in a teachers' personal best interests. Teachers' association legal advisers suggest to teachers that they should take a hard line against any form of student behaviour which they consider unacceptable and that not to do so is "to make a rod for your back or your colleagues over a period of time" (NSWTF, Bulletin, 1996). This hard-line approach is based around a philosophy of "You are not paid to be subjected to violence or intimidation by students, parents or anyone - don't put up with it" (NSWTF, Bulletin, 1996). However, such an approach creates a complex dilemma for those teachers who are willing to excuse some behaviours of students on the grounds of family, individual or local circumstances, but who are at the same time, keenly aware of the delicate social and legal position in which they find themselves.

From the students' perspective some students claim that swearing occurs because they do not have other means of expressing their anger:
Teachers push you to do those things. You come to school, you know from kindergarten that you’re not allowed to swear at school and they just push you into it. Well some teachers push you into it. If you can’t respond properly, then you’re going to have to respond how you want to. I know a guy who got suspended for swearing, the teachers just pushed him to that limit, so we can’t really say much to the teachers, they don’t really deserve it but the way kids think about they really do get angry.

One Aboriginal parent suggests that while some students’ behaviour may be extreme, teachers must make the effort to be more tolerant and accepting.

iii) Gender-related behaviour issues:

For some teachers, aspects of student behaviour that they find unacceptable are related to gender, in that they perceive boys as generally being more aggressive and that Aboriginal boys are resentful of what is happening around them:

- You look at your girls and they’re exceptional, but a lot of our boys especially a lot of the Aboriginal boys have real big chips on their shoulders, but the girls are great on the whole.

- Boys are more aggressive, whereas the girls take a back seat more, so I don’t know, that’s just something that I’ve noticed...this kid clicked his fingers to me today and said ‘woman’ and I just went...and he said I’m not talking to you I’m talking to the girl over there and I said I don’t care who you’re talking to, you don’t speak to any women like that, just click your fingers ‘hey woman’.

iv) An “homogenous” school environment:

Senior school staff saw student behaviour management as promoting the validity of homogenous school behaviour rules for all students in the interests of developing a “safe” school environment:

- we make sure that they all know the basic rules, understand where we’re coming from and say okay well if you fit within those rules you’ll be treated well and you’ll get these rewards.

- If you decide to buck the rules well you’ll get these punishments, and it doesn’t matter whether you’re white, black or whatever. And to a large degree I think that has been very successful.

- it’s very basically a safe place to be, where people know the rules, and if you stick by them you’ll be safe, and that applies for teachers and kids alike.

One teacher who was sensitive to the tension that school behaviour rules can create for Aboriginal students, could see no alternative:

I think sometimes that Aboriginal kids sometimes feel that they are closed in by rules but we are quite regimented. I wouldn’t say we’re particularly flexible and I think sometimes that that causes a bit of a problem for Aboriginal kids. It’s based on the need for enforcement - on the notion of consistency, of
being seen to be consistent, of being seen to be fair and square and it has become inflexible.

The issues of what is perceived to be "unacceptable" student behaviour and the accompanying school behaviour management policies, is critical for Aboriginal people. While some parents would not necessarily support actions on their children's part, such as swearing and physical assault, it may mean that some students are being unfairly targeted by culturally biased school behaviour management policies, that regard certain forms of behaviour as unacceptable in the school context, and, therefore, may place some children at a greater disadvantage than others.

Conclusion

Schools are a complex interplay of power relationships based within an interplay of social, economic, gender, and racial elements. To a large degree, schools have historically been gatekeepers in assimilating Indigenous children into the values and mores of the dominant mainstream. Those children who step outside of this assimilatory process are often labelled as deficit in social and educational terms, and are subsequently placed in programs to redress the alleged personal deficit within the child or his or her family. Integral to this gatekeeping function of the school, is the on-going colonising of Indigenous Australians through processes of cognitive imperialism (Battiste, 1998) whereby students are forced to act, behave and relate in ways which are governed by the educational system. For example, some children described what is happening in schools as a form of "policing". This is partly achieved through student behaviour management policies and programs which promote certain ways of behaving and being as being beneficial to the whole. If children do not fit these expectations then the student suspension and exclusion processes allow children to be either temporarily or permanently excluded from the educational process. Where children are thus suspended their rights to an education are severely jeopardised, and those educational outcomes which are the function of an educational system, may not be achieved by Indigenous students. Hence, in a compulsory education system, outcomes such as literacy and numeracy and social responsibility may be denied to Indigenous children, while at the same time these students are denied the opportunity of participating in education processes from within their own communities.
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