Out of the too hard basket: Promoting student's safety in cooperative education

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There is general agreement in the literature on the essential role of university field educators and agency-based staff in preparing students for witnessing and experiencing violence during workplace-based placements and supporting them when it takes place. Models for promoting student's safety as well as their recovery from violent incidents while in the field usually emphasize the responsibilities of these individuals. Subsequently, frameworks aimed at reducing and responding to violence towards students in cooperative education typically focus on a narrow range of strategies that include university faculty policy and procedures, on-campus teaching modules, training for university field educators, and consultation with agencies regarding their safety policies, procedures and training. Such approaches fail to take into account reports that university and agency field educators are often under-resourced, overworked and subject to violence themselves or do not see addressing student's safety in the field as their responsibility. Suggested measures also generally overlook the critical role of other key stakeholders. This paper argues that efforts aimed at addressing violence in work-integrated learning should be designed on models of violence prevention that move away from the individualized responses and recognise as fundamental, integrated, collaborative and coordinated institutional arrangements. There is a need to develop a national framework in which the responsibilities of tertiary institutions, governments, professional associations and employers to adequately govern, resource and equip academic and industry field education staff, so they are in a position to meet their pedagogical, legal and ethical obligations towards students, are paramount. *(Asia-Pacific Journal of Cooperative Education, 2010, 11(2), 39-46)*

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INTRODUCTION

Accounts of violence against university students on workplace based placements have sporadically appeared in the literature for almost 20 years (Knight, 1999; Mama, 2001; Tully, Kropf & Price, 1993). And similarly to the way that disclosures of abuse can be met with inappropriate responses, these reports typically individualize the problem by focusing on what university field educators and agency-based supervisors can do to prevent and respond to violence. This is not to deny these people have important roles to play in addressing students exposure to violence. However, reducing the risk of victimization and ensuring appropriate support is available to students when it takes place requires more than a narrow focus on specific individuals. This article argues comprehensive institutional arrangements are a critical component often missing from models aimed at dealing with violence against students on placement. Drawing on good practice in violence prevention, the case is made for developing a broad and holistic approach that takes into account the roles of all stakeholders and is built on a foundation of effective governance and adequate resources. Moreover, there is a need for a national framework on managing the risk of violence in cooperative education that engages university administrators, governments, professional associations and industries.

Addressing the victimization of students doing internships is important for a number of legal, moral and pedagogical reasons and these align with the interests of universities, governments and employers. In other words, there are good reasons for these stakeholders to have an active role in strengthening efforts to manage risk in work placements and adequately prepare students for exposure to violence. Students have a right to be free from violence while on practicum and ensuring the safety of students aligns with university and government policy and legislation on occupational health and safety, human rights and equal opportunity, work integrated learning as well as criminal law (Department of Education, Employment & Workplace Relations, 2009; WorkSafe Victoria, 2006). Providing safe workplaces reduces the risks of injuries and other harmful burdens of violence which could be costly for universities, governments and employers. In other words, legal action by students who are abused, and associated medical costs and other liabilities, can be avoided if the risk of

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victimization is reduced and incidents of violence are appropriately managed (Maidment, 2003). The duty of care to prepare students for exposure to violence on placement and to respond appropriately when it takes place extends to clients, who inadvertently may be detrimentally affected as a result of a victimized student's impaired work performance (Stanley & Goddard, 2002). Students can also learn effective interventions from those modeled in educational experiences (Biggs, 2007). Moreover, effectively preventing and responding to violence against students in field education could produce more capable and productive university graduates who able to protect and advocate for themselves and the people they work with. And if universities, governments and industries are serious about securing and capitalizing on the educational merits and economic benefits of quality internships then they should step up and provide the leadership critical for preventing and responding to the abuse of students in the workplace.

This article draws on the relevant literature to report on students' experience of violence in field education. The extent of the problem has encouraged the development of models for preparing students for exposure to violence in the field and supporting them when it occurs, and these strategies are examined. The limitations of such approaches are explored, as are the ways they could be strengthened with the development of a national framework. This article will be of interest to educators, policy makers, employers, students and others who value the delivery of quality, safe cooperative education and who appreciate the educational and economic value of equipping students to effectively deal with violence at work.

Student's experience of violence in field education

To examine student's experience of violence on placement, this article draws mainly on the literature from human service domains, in particular youth work and social work, which fall into the category of industries Kiser (2008), Mama (2001) and Maidment (2003) identified as having a higher risk of workplace violence. There are accounts of physical, sexual, verbal and emotional abuse against students on placement (Barlow, Phelan, Hurlock, Sawa, Rogers, & Myrick, 2006; Cherrey Reeser & Wertkin, 2001; DiGiulio, 2001; Ellison, 1996). Students report being assaulted, bullied, sexually harassed and threatened by clients and workers (Beddoe, 2001; Dunkel, Ageson & Ralph, 2000; Emslie, 2009). Students also report worrying about their safety as well as feeling scared and intimidated as a result of witnessing violence between others (Burke & Harris, 1996; Lam, Wong & Leung, 2007; Rosenthal Gelman, 2004).

The literature reports varying rates of violence experienced by students as part of their internship experience. Figures range from 26 per cent (n=121) (Tully et al., 1993), to 54 per cent (n=37) (Mama, 2001). A further study of 258 Bachelor of Social Work students found that one fifth had been verbally or physically assaulted while on placement (Knight, 1999). The discrepancy between the statistics is not surprising given the problems associated with gathering accurate empirical data on the extent of the problem. Bibby (1994) identified that underreporting of violence by human service workers is a problem and students will not necessarily disclose for a number of reasons including the assumption they should be able to protect themselves. Students may lack an understanding of the behaviours that constitute violence or they might think what they were exposed to was not serious enough. Students might also fear victimization, or they might believe they will be branded troublemakers or will not be taken seriously if they report abuse (Kiser, 2008; Tully et al., 1993). Research also indicates that if students make it known that they have been victimized or if they seek help after an incident they might believe they will be seen as not coping and incompetent (Fernandez, 1998; Fook, Ryan & Hawkins, 2000). It is difficult to appreciate the extent of violence against students in cooperative education given the constraints on students identifying and disclosing. At the same time, the risk of violence is significant.

Exposure to violence can have harmful personal and professional consequences for students as well as those they work with (Cherrey Reeser & Wertkin, 2001). The effects of violence on students correspond to the ways abuse impacts on survivors of family violence (Finucane & Finucane, 2004). For example, students who are abused report blaming themselves and not knowing what to do (Green, Gregory & Mason, 2003). They can also experience stress, depression and anxiety as well as physical injuries (Stanley & Goddard, 2002; Tully et al., 1993). Also of concern are the negative effects of abuse on student's learning, work performance and careers (Knight, 1999). Being abused is associated with students fearing and depersonalizing their clients, denying and minimizing client's experiences of violence, and failing to act in ways that protect clients from abuse (Stanley & Goddard, 2002). In the aftermath of violent incidents, students can feel uncomfortable about doing similar work

again and this can disrupt their education as well as future employment prospects (Green et al., 2003; Knight, 1999). However, following Pratt and Barling (1988) and Rosenthal Gelman (2004), if university and agency field work staff adequately prepare students for work with abuse, and deliver appropriate responses and quality support to students who are victimized, then the harmful affects just mentioned can be reduced and student's learning can be enhanced.

As mentioned, there are good reasons for intervening in ways that effectively prevent and respond to violence against students in cooperative education. This is a complex issue requiring a sophisticated response that is becoming more and more urgent given the growing numbers of students who are required to do a component of work-integrated learning as part of their formal education (Patrick, peach, Pocknee, Webb, Fletcher, & Pretto, 2009).

PREVENTION OF AND RESPONSES TO VIOLENCE AGAINST STUDENTS

Approaches to reduce and respond to violence towards students in cooperative education typically share four components, all of which emphasize a student's right to safety when in the field. Models generally consist of faculty policy and procedures, on-campus teaching modules, professional development for university field educators, and consultation with agencies regarding their safety policies, procedures and training. The following description of each of these measures illustrates the critical role of university field educators and agency-based staff in the implementation of frameworks aimed at preparing students for witnessing and experiencing violence during workplace-based placements and supporting them when it takes place.

1. Faculty policy and procedures

First, the literature recommends university facilities have relevant and responsive formal policy and procedures on student's safety in field education, and that these documents be distributed to all university and agency staff as well as students involved with placements (Burke& Harris, 1996; Mama, 2001; Rosenthal Gelman, 2004). According to proponents of such guidelines, they should draw on current legislation and government policy, which could include occupational health and safety, human rights and equal opportunity in the workplace as well work-integrated learning in universities. Further, it is usually recommended that the policy and procedures contain information on students' legal rights, their insurance coverage, and options for redress, advice and support in the event of victimization (Dunkel et al., 2000). It is also suggested that the responsibilities, roles and options of university field educators, agency-based staff and students following a violent incident feature in the policy, and that universities should provide a dedicated liaison person who can be called upon by students and agency supervisors. As indicated in the literature, these materials can also include step-by-step procedures for incident reporting and management that take in information sharing, record keeping, debriefing, negotiating a safety plan and discussing placement continuation or termination (Cherrey Reeser & Wertkin, 2001).

2. On-campus teaching modules

The second activity common to the models is on-campus teaching modules (Dunkel et al., 2000; Rosenthal Gelman, 2004). Suggestions for classroom instruction on workplace safety range from a stand alone workshop to comprehensive and integrated curriculum materials (Cherrey Reeser & Wertkin, 2001; Maidment, 2003). Curricula proposals include introducing students to behaviours that constitute abuse, alerting them to the possibility of violence on placement, and then equipping them with strategies for risk assessment, prevention and management that aim to help them identify and defuse potentially violent situations, reduce the risk of injury, and which give them options on what to they can do if there is an incident (DiGiulio, 2001; Tully et al., 1993). Teaching and learning activities that draw on student's experiences of victimization are also suggested, as is exploring with students the personal and professional consequences of witnessing and experiencing violence in the workplace (Goldblatt & Buchbinder, 2003).

3. Professional development for university field educators

Third, continuing educational opportunities for university field instructors are usually recommended in models aimed at addressing violence against students during internships (Dunkel et al., 2000; Stanley & Goddard, 2002). Cherrey Reeser and Wertkin (2001) identify that university field education staff may not fully appreciate the

skills, knowledge, time and effort needed to prepare students for safety on placement or to support students and agency supervisors when violent incidents take place, and that they may need training. According to the literature, professional development could encompass all aspects of the three other components discussed herein. In other words, it is suggested that university personnel responsible for student placements be equipped and motivated to develop and implement relevant and responsive formal policy and procedures and on-campus teaching modules as well as consult with agencies regarding their safety policies, procedures and training.

4. Consultation with agencies regarding their safety policies, procedures and training

Finally, the literature emphasizes that agencies providing field education should have up-to-date student placement safety policies and procedures as well as ongoing training for staff to support their implementation. University educators are also identified as having a role in assisting the development of such measures in agencies that do not have them in place (Dunkel et al., 2000; Tully et al., 1993). The importance of agencies in orienting students to such materials, which identify potential risks and detail guidelines for reducing and managing these, is also highlighted (Bogo & Vayda, 1998; Danowski, 2005). It is suggested that policies, practices and professional development, in this instance, be specific to the agency setting and cover topics such as the prevention of workplace violence, personal safety standards, building and office security, how to handle dangerous situations, emergency procedures, management of violent clients and, when applicable, safety precautions on home visits (Burke & Harris, 1996; Kiser, 2008). Further, it is recommended that the guidelines clearly identify the responsibilities of university- and agency-based field education staff as well as students, following a critical incident, with particular attention to injury management, student support and recovery, quality supervision, information sharing and record keeping (Cherrey Reeser & Wertkin, 2001; Cleak & Wilson, 2007; Mama, 2001).

Do these approaches prevent violence against students as well as reduce its effects while they are on placement? It is assumed by proponents of the models that by implementing these measures such ends will be achieved. However, this article makes a case that these recurring proposals are deficient.

A CRITIQUE: LIMITATIONS OF THE MODELS

The strategies put forward to promote student safety in the field are insufficient for a number of reasons. First, proponents of the models demand much from university and agency co-op staff while ignoring the contexts within which they practice and teach that limit their ability to do what is typically suggested. The approaches rely on university field instructors and agency-based supervisors to deliver them but at the same time these workers report being under-resourced, unsupported, overworked and subject to violence themselves and subsequently not in a position to do so (Green et al., 2003; Jayaratne, Vinokur-Kaplan, Nagda & Chess, 1996; Kulisa, 2007; McCurdy & Zegwaard, 2009; Patrick, et al., 2009; Stanley & Goddard, 2002). This is not to deny that co-op educators have a critical role to play in adequately preparing students for work with violence or supporting them when it takes place. But, given the concerns just mentioned, it would appear that many do not have the time, knowledge or capacity and this is indicated in reports that many universities and agencies fail to put the strategies in place (Cherrey Reeser & Wertkin, 2001; Mama, 2001; Rosenthal Gelman, 2004; Tully et al., 1993). The constraining workplace issues, such as demanding workloads, abusive workplaces and a lack of support and recognition given to the work associated with practicum education, are at times acknowledged in the literature. However, there is generally scant mention of how these should be addressed in any substantive way (Burke & Harris, 1996; Cleak & Wilson, 2007; Maidment, 2003; Mama, 2001).

The second criticism of the models is that they neglect reports from university educators and agency based staff who do not see addressing student safety in the field as their responsibility (Cherrey Reeser & Wertkin, 2001). This is not surprising given the workplace concerns just mentioned. If front-line workers do not take it upon themselves to deliver the strategies that are suggested to prevent and respond to the abuse of students then it appears they do not happen. This might explain why many students on placement are not provided education and orientation on safety in the workplace while at university or by the agency (Maidment, 2003; Mama, 2001; Razack, 2001; Rosenthal Gelman, 2004; Tully et al., 1993). The involvement of all parties is critical, given that the

measures rely on a collaborative and coordinated approach, but this is unlikely if the workers responsible from either setting are not engaged or encouraged to play a part.

Safe, supportive and trusting relationships are a critical element that underpin the strategies and are often overlooked by proponents of the models. To be effective, the components of the frameworks rest on robust relationships that encourage help-seeking and facilitate prompt follow up. However, students report concerns and conflict with their agency and university field mentors (Barlow & Hall, 2003; Fernandez, 1998; Ralph, Walker & Wimmer, 2007). Subsequently, students who are victimized might not seek help from agency supervisors and university staff in charge of field education as a result of problematic and unsatisfactory relationships. This could mean that, following a violent incident, students do not set in motion the guidelines in university and agency student placement safety policies and procedures because they do not get along with the field work staff. If this is the case, then it seems pointless to have such materials in the first place. Student's accounts of poor relationships are not surprising given cooperative educators can struggle to find the time to put in the effort that securing such relationships requires.

Finally, the approaches put forward in the literature are, by and large, insufficient because they generally ignore the critical role of key stakeholders other than front-line field education staff. Tertiary institutions, governments, professional associations and employers are key drivers of work-integrated learning and are responsible for adequately regulating, resourcing and equipping academic and industry field educators so they are in a position to meet their duty of care and educational obligations towards students who are victimized while on placement (Bates, 2008; McLennan, 2008; O'Connor, 2008; Patrick et al., 2009). However, universities, governments, professional bodies and industries usually fail to rate a mention in the literature. To attend to the limitations of the models, a systemic approach is needed that incorporates the roles and responsibilities of all parties who share an interest in promoting students' safety, as well as their recovery from victimization in internships.

THE NEED FOR A NATIONAL FRAMEWORK

To strengthen efforts aimed at dealing with the victimization of students on placement a broad and holistic national framework on managing the risk of violence in field, education is needed. Models and good practice in violence prevention recommend violence prevention activities should move away from individualized responses and instead recognise integrated, collaborative and coordinated institutional arrangements as fundamental (Australian Human Rights Commission, 2008; Bowie, Fisher & Cooper, 2005; Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations, 2003; Finucane & Finucane, 2004). In other words, promoting students' safety in cooperative education requires effective leadership and interdepartmental collaboration across the higher education sector, governments, professional associations and industries. This is because the efficacy of any measures interested in securing the safety of students on placement and that rely on university field educators and agency-based supervisors, are contingent on good governance and forthcoming resources. A national framework could facilitate such partnerships, leadership, investment and consistency across jurisdictions.

There is also a need to address the workforce concerns experienced by university and agency co-op staff so they are in a position to adequately prepare students for working with violence and support them when it takes place. A national framework could assist in doing just that by identifying the roles and responsibilities of university executives, governments, professional bodies and industries in ensuring such staff are supported and resourced in ways that significantly improve on what is currently in place. Moreover, there is a need to adequately recognise and reward the knowledge, skills, time and effort demanded of front-line internship staff who are responsible for attending to students' safety in the field. A national plan could deliver on this by initiating increased funding, improved workload allocation and better professional development for field education activities. Such measures could go a long way towards guaranteeing university and agency field educators implement the types of strategies that are typically suggested for preparing students for violence during workplace-based placements and supporting them when it does take place. Such measures could also enable the flourishing relationships and safe workplaces critical for them to be of use (Stanley & Goddard, 2002).

FURTHER RESEARCH

To develop a national framework on student's safety on placement, the question of how universities, governments, professional associations and industry groups can work together and deliver the investment in cooperative education that is required to improve the capacity of field educators to meet their duty of care to students requires further attention. This research could assess the efficacy of measures already in place such as those relating to work integrated learning that are articulated in the *Higher Education Support Act 2003* and accompanying administration guidelines (Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations; 2009). It could also examine whether the Australian Government's recent reforms to higher education, as well as the national occupational health and safety legislation currently being developed, offer anything of use (Commonwealth of Australia, 2009; Safe Work Australia, 2010). Moreover, a national plan that is interested in managing the risk of violence in cooperative education would need adequate financial backing to be effective. Financial modeling of this type is far from out of the question, as is demonstrated by similar proposals that aim to prevent violence, such as the Victorian government's plan to prevent violence against women (Office of Women's Policy, 2009).

Research on the extent and type of violence experienced by co-op students in different occupational settings, as well as the experiences of different populations of students based on gender, geographic location, ethnicity and age, is needed to assist with developing a comprehensive and responsive national framework. Further research is also required to identify the most effective methods for prevention of and responding to violence in placements, with differences between industry groups and university disciplines as well as sites of practice taken into account (Kulisa, 2007; Green et al., 2003; National Health and Medical Research Council, 2002). This research should also be interested in examining educational standards on attending to violence in work-integrated learning that take in curriculum as well as structures for student and staff support, inter-organizational collaboration, and mandatory up-skilling of relevant workers (Stanley & Goddard, 2002; Wee & Myers, 2005). Involving students in the development and implementation of a plan that aims to equip and support them could also be beneficial, and their suggestions should be sought.

CONCLUSION

In light of accounts of growing numbers of students doing internships and subsequently being exposed to abuse in the workplace, as well as the significant developments in approaches on violence prevention, it is surprising that university students' safety when in the field has not yet received coordinated institutional attention from governments, industries, professions and universities. It was suggested that such interest is long overdue.

The case was made that models typically put forward for addressing abuse against students in the workplace are incomplete and out of touch. More importantly, it was noted that they could be failing dismally at ensuring students are adequately prepared to respond appropriately to violence. It was also observed that in many instances universities and agencies that provide field education appear to overlook their duty of care for students' safety and do not provide students who are victimized the support they deserve.

The need to develop an integrated and coordinated national approach was highlighted as a way to strengthen efforts aimed at managing the risk of violence and promoting students' safety in the field. It was suggested that the framework could feature the ways educational institutions, governments, professional associations and employers can provide effective leadership and regulate, resource and equip academic and industry field education staff so they are in a position to meet their pedagogical, legal and ethical obligations towards students on placement.

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ABOUT THE JOURNAL

The Asia-Pacific Journal of Cooperative education (APJCE) arose from a desire to produce an international forum for discussion of cooperative education, or work integrated learning (WIL), issues for practitioners in the Asia-Pacific region and is intended to provide a mechanism for the dissemination of research, best practice and innovation in work-integrated learning. The journal maintains close links to the biennial Asia-Pacific regional conferences conducted by the World Association for Cooperative Education. In recognition of international trends in information technology, APJCE is produced solely in electronic form. Published papers are available as PDF files from the website, and manuscript submission, reviewing and publication is electronically based. In 2010, Australian Research Council (ARC), which administers the Excellence in Research (ERA) ranking system, awarded APJCE a 'B' ERA ranking (top 10-20%).

Cooperative education/WIL in the journal is taken to be work-based learning in which the time spent in the workplace forms an integrated part of an academic program of study. More specifically, cooperative education/WIL can be described as a strategy of applied learning which is a structured program, developed and supervised either by an educational institution in collaboration with an employer or industry grouping, or by an employer or industry grouping in collaboration with an educational institution. An essential feature is that relevant, productive work is conducted as an integral part of a student's regular program, and the final assessment contains a work-based component. Cooperative education/WIL programs are commonly highly structured and possess formal (academic and employer) supervision and assessment. The work is productive, in that the student undertakes meaningful work that has economic value or definable benefit to the employer. The work should have clear linkages with, or add to, the knowledge and skill base of the academic program.

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Research reports should contain; an introduction that describes relevant literature and sets the context of the inquiry, a description and justification for the methodology employed, a description of the research findings-tabulated as appropriate, a discussion of the importance of the findings including their significance for practitioners, and a conclusion preferably incorporating suggestions for further research. Essays should contain a clear statement of the topic or issue under discussion, reference to, and discussion of, relevant literature, and a discussion of the importance of the topic for other researchers and practitioners. The final manuscript for both research reports and essay articles should include an abstract (word limit 300 words), and a list of keywords, one of which should be the national context for the study.

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