ADVANCES
IN SOCIAL WORK
& WELFARE EDUCATION

5. Decolonising field education - challenging Australian social work praxis

Ines Zuchowski, Dorothy Savage, Debra Miles and Susan Gair

Ines Zuchowski, Department of Social Work and Human Services, James Cook University, Douglas, Qld.
email: ines.zuchowski@jcu.edu.au

ABSTRACT

Social Work's contribution to Australia's legacy of colonisation, the Stolen Generation and ongoing child welfare interventions, may make entering the profession a contentious issue for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. Yet the profession is poorer for their absence, and closing the gap between Indigenous and non-Indigenous social work graduates is a quest aligned with social justice, and with social work as a human rights profession. Field education is considered a significant and important process through which students are socialised into the profession. Questions arise about how professional enculturation might occur for Indigenous students as they put theory into practice, when this theory and practice derives from dominant western frameworks.

In this article we present findings from research exploring the experiences of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander social work and welfare students in field placements. The findings identify racism as ever-present, highlight the impact of Eurocentricsm on practice, and reveal the disregard of Aboriginal cultural ways of helping and the potential for disempowerment. These findings have implications for social work praxis and social work education. Recommendations for improved practice and further research are made.

Keywords: *field education; Indigenous, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students; decolonisation; social work education; theory to practice*

INTRODUCTION

Field education is one of the sites where classroom theories get translated into practice. For this reason it is imperative to explore practical strategies to decolonize field education policies and practices. (Clark et al. 2010, p. 22)

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples are the most disadvantaged peoples in Australia on almost all social dimensions, and they are over-represented as recipients of social work and welfare services (Behrandt 2006; Healey 2008).More Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander graduates in social work could make a significant contribution to addressing social in justice on many dimensions. In recent years, social work education has gradually become more inclusive of Indigenous peoples, their history and ways of working. While more needs to be done, these moves respond to consistent recommendations that the profession find more inclusive, respectful and culturally appropriate ways of helping rather than continue to perpetuate deficit models of western intervention that have dominated past social work education and practice (see for example Hart 2001; Gray and Coates 2010; Green and Baldry 2008; Weaver1998; Yellow Bird 2008).A focus on decolonisation has emerged as a key tool in these processes. According to Weaver (1998, p.222) ' decolonisation involves recognising, then shedding the mindset associated with colonial processes by which one culture subjugates another and defines it as inferior' .Yellow Bird (2008, p.284) describes decolonisation as including a process of 'restoration of cultural practices' including thinking, beliefs and values that were abandoned but are still relevant or necessary.Muller (2010) identifies that decolonisation is a process with which both Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples must engage.Recognising the need for change, the Australian Association Social Workers has developed a new Code of Ethics, Professional Standards and special Journal editions to contribute to the development of inclusive education and practice with Indigenous Australians. However, not all areas of the social work curriculum have attracted the same level of attention, and the field education needs of Indigenous students require further exploration.

Field education is the practice arm of social work programs; it provides real world preparation and discipline enculturation in a human service organization under expert supervision from an experienced social work supervisor.While affirmative action for the needs of some minority groups on field placement has been established internationally (Gladstein and Mailick 1986; Messinger 2004), there has been minimal exploration about whether Australian social work field education serves Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students well.

As critically reflective educators we were seeking to decolonise our curricula, and develop programs that were more meaningful, inclusive and authentic for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students. In this article we present findings from our research project that explored the experiences of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander social work and welfare students in field placements. We use 'praxis' to mean reflective theory in practice that

challenges us to go beyond an examination of values, ideologies and frameworks that shape our practice, to take informed, committed action in ensuring that socially just practices permeate, and are reflected in, our work (Desai 2009).

CLOSING THE GAP IN SOCIAL WORK – THE JAMES COOK UNIVERSITY JOURNEY

Work to close the gap between numbers of Indigenous and non-Indigenous graduates from our social work and welfare programs has been in progress for over 15 years.Lynn, Thorpe, Miles at al. (1998) were awarded ARC funds to look at a 'Murri Way' of working in social welfare work, and in 2001 staff members undertook an action research project entitled 'Indigenising the curriculum' (Gair, Thomson, Miles and Harris2003) under the guidance and mentoring of traditional owner and elder, Mrs Dorothy Savage. In 2003 a small industry grant funded research to explore barriers to completing a Bachelor of Social Work for Indigenous students (Gair, Thomson and Savage 2005).

In 2006 our Department undertook a subject audit to examine the Indigenous content of the subjects taught and as an outcome rewrote subjects and purchased resources to enhance the Indigenous content.From 2005-2011, the program 'Towards Critical Mass' embodied our quest to employ Indigenous Student Support Officers within our Department to provide targeted support for Indigenous students.

On reflection, we realised that field education was an area that needed our attention, although we had limited data to guide the necessary change. Most recently we received an AASW practitioner research grant to explore the experiences of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students in field education. The following literature review acknowledges the role of field education within the social work curriculum, highlights the contentious nature of social work as a profession for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, recognises the limited inclusion of Indigenous knowledges particularly in social work field education literature, and exposes the potential for Indigenous students to be highly challenged when undertaking their field education placement.

GAPS IN KNOWLEDGE – THE AVAILABLE LITERATURE

Limited literature explores Australian Indigenous social work, although recent publications highlight it as a contentious subject due to social work's participation and complicity in 'racist, patronising and unjust practices' (Green and Baldry,2008, p. 389), and to ongoing disadvantage, where the profession's stated commitment to social justice has not translated well into structural equality for Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander Australians.Equally, there is a lack of acknowledgement of the skills, knowledge, ways of working, leadership, community work, research and theories from an Indigenous Australian perspective that can inform social work practice and education (Gair,2007; Green and Baldry,2008).A corresponding reliance on Euro-Western social work theories, skills, knowledge and ways of working is evident.

Green and Baldry (2008) argue that it is important to build frameworks and theories relevant to Australian Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. They recommend that

Indigenous ways of being and thinking need to be embraced in Australian social work and that ' [i]t is vital that Australian Social Work education develops courses and practicums that reflect an understanding of Indigenous needs, approaches and world views' (Green and Baldry 2008, p. 396). Moreover, Furlong and Wight (2011, p. 50) stress the need to go beyond cultural competence as an appendage to social work education and stress the need for critical self-reflection ' to recognise the historical specificity, and the colonising effects, of one's own discipline's knowledge and premises'.

Literature on 'Indigenisation' of social work'holds that social work knowledge should arise from within the culture, reflect local behaviours and practices, be interpreted within a local frame of reference and thus be locally relevant'(Gray and Coates 2010, p. 615).Similarly, Gair, et al.'s (2005) explorative study on what's 'stopping' Indigenous Australian social work students from completing their degree identified the invisibility of Indigenous knowledges in social work education as a key disincentive. This resonates with recent research that explores what Aboriginal clients want from social workers, highlighting the need to equip students with skills that reflect an understanding of Aboriginal history, cultural knowledge, and the impact of social work interventions. Participants stressed the importance of understanding 'how profoundly this history continues to be lived on a daily basis by Aboriginal people, rather than to be something merely noted as part of a family's history' (Harms et al 2011, p. 164).

The literature overwhelmingly identifies field education as central, vital and critical to social work education (Abram, Hartung, and Wernet 2000; Barton, Bell, and Bowles 2005; Patford 2000).Relevant research identifies that social work students are benefiting from field education (Patford 2000) although Maidment (2003; 2006) exposed incongruent experiences for students on placement when significant professional learning co-exists alongsidesignificant stress, and this may be particularly the case for minority students. Ornstein and Moses (2010) also observe that field education in social work is both complicated and challenging. These authors argue that field education is a key experience challenging students' sense of self and personal identity and they suggest that the relationship between field educator and student is central to the placement learning experience (Ornstein and Moses 2010).

Strategies for meeting the needs of Indigenous Australian students on placement remains an under-investigated area,however some literature identifying the placement supports necessary for minority groups is evident.For example, Gladstein and Mailick (1986) identified that minority students experienced unfair treatment in field education. Importantly they found if the client group was of the same minority background as the student, and was devalued by the agency, then the student felt similar disrespect. Additionally, Gladstein and Mailick (1986) identified that minority group students might be hindered in developing their professional role when organisations, eager to use their cultural insight, or language skills, only assigning them cases from the same ethnic group as themselves. This may suit the client and /or agency staff needs, but not necessarily the learning needs of the student, however, students felt powerless to refuse such cases. They recommended the use of cultural role models and mentors to meet students' unique needs and identified the need for specifically designed, culturally sensitive programs, with

increased support for the strengths of the minority students and their culture (Gladstein and Mailik 1986).

Most recently, Clark et al. (2010) undertook a collaborative study examining the experience of Aboriginal (First Nations) and non-Aboriginal students on field placement in Aboriginal organisations in Canada.The authors highlighted the importance of developing field education that is culturally safe and suggest that 'first, the educator must be culturally competent; and second, the student culturally safe in the learning relationship' (NAHO 2006 cited in Clark et al. 2010, p. 12). Their findings called for Elders involvement in students' education, anti-oppressive practices, and supports such as strength and wellness plans.Clark et al. (2010) outlined a number of strategies to decolonise field education, including student access to Elders on campus, Aboriginal faculty liaison and the introduction of cultural safety preparation seminars.They explored a number of other recommendations including the importance of creating 'ongoing dialogue about the power relationships inherent in field education experiences' and listening to students' requests for preferences in field educators (Clark et al. 2010, p. 17). The research found that students experienced pain and distress caused by oppressive practices within their field education and recommended mentor support for students.

As the available literature on Indigenous Australian social work suggests, if non-Indigenous Australian social workers, educators and clinical placement supervisors have absorbed colonist attitudes to Indigenous Australians (Green and Baldry 2008), then how are the professional skills, knowledge, and identity of Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander students advanced without targeted strategies to do so. What is being role-modelled, and whether it is relevant and within a culturally safe context, are pertinent questions to be answered. Lynn et al. (1998) pointed out that 'Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander helping styles contrast most strongly with traditional social work literature' (p. 64) and emphasise 'a relationship based on familiar/ cultural connection rather than individualisation' (p65). This is further exemplified by Atkinson's research into the transgenerational effects of trauma in Indigenous Australia.Atkinson (2002) stresses that Aboriginal world views are relationship-centred, and she highlights the concepts of dadirri, or listening to one another. In particular, sharing information and stories may be a core communication practice that cannot be modelled by non-Indigenous field educator supervisors.

In field education the supervisory relationship is seen as crucial. One model for supervision presented by Ornstein and Moses (2010) proposes the acknowledgement of power, the role of mutual feedback, reflection on process, the quality and nature of field instruction and the leadership role of the field educator in initiating and role-modelling processes. On the notion of power, Green and Baldry (2008) argued that non-Indigenous social workers need to 'give up their power and position as 'experts' in relation to Indigenous people'(p. 398).Therefore, the 'expert socialising the novice' notion of field education may need further examination when Australian Indigenous social work students are placed with non-Indigenous supervisors.How cultural knowledge and expertise is conceptualised, accessed, shared and advanced in supervision does not appear to be evident from available literature. Research by Zon (2004, cited in Ban 2005) showed that bi-cultural staffing models may have inherent unequal power relationships and that Aboriginal staff 'can feel,

and be, disempowered unless the cultural context of knowledge development from within both groups is addressed' (Ban 2005, p. 392). Of significance, Maidment and Beddoe (2012) speak of the substantial task still ahead to include Indigenous approaches, cultural knowledge and ways of working into social work supervision models for Indigenous students and graduates.

With Australia's legacy of colonisation, the Stolen Generation, and ongoing child removals into care, entering the profession of social work may cause ambivalence for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students throughout their study. These historical tensions and potential conflicts may remain uncritically present and ignored in social work education for Indigenous students, providing a backdrop and a context for challenging and stressful placement experiences. Research on the unique learning needs, professional identity, and support needs of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander social work students on field placement appears conspicuous by its absence, and urgently needed.

METHOD

Theoretical Frameworks

This project was undertaken by a team of Indigenous and non-Indigenous researchers committed to processes of collaborative research. Ethics approval for this project was granted by the James Cook University Human Ethics Committee.Our collective understanding of 'collaborative research' reflects principles of genuine, respectful engagement with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and is characterised by a strong commitment to research that is participatory and which brings tangible benefits to the research participants (Bennett et al. 2011).Implicit in the processes of collaborative research is an understanding of the social and historical reality of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and the application of implicit and explicit cultural knowledge, values, beliefs and priorities (Lynn, et al. 1998).

In practice the commitment to these principles was evidenced in the research team's discussions and reflections. Indigenous research team members were involved in every stage of this research process: from the early conceptualisation of the research; as joint authors of the grant application; as interviewers and transcribers; and most recently as conference presenters and co-authors as we disseminate the results. Every stage of the research process was scrutinised through a lens which highlighted Indigenous knowledge, values, and assumptions and the ways in which these aspects could inform the non-Indigenous researchers and the procedures and practicalities of the research process. Further the specific recommendations of participants are prioritised as we seek the actions that must emanate as outcomes of the research.

Research Aims and Research Question

This was an exploratory project, supported by a small AASW research grant, reflecting the absence of literature and knowledge in the area of inquiry. The research question guiding this project was 'what are experiences of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students in social work and welfare field education?'With this goal, we developed three core aims:

- To explore the experience of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander social work and welfare students in field education placements;
- To identify gaps, barriers and practices that inhibit positive placement experiences;
- To identify strategies and resources that can be used to support Aboriginal and Torres Strait social work and welfare students in field education placements.

To achieve the aims identified above, the team sought the views of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander social work and welfare students or graduates who had completed at least one social work or social welfare field education experience.Letters were sent to potential participants inviting them to contact the Indigenous research team members to indicate their interest in participating in an interview.

Participants

Eleven participants responded to the invitation to participate in this study and ten of these engaged in face to face interviews.One participant completed a questionnaire writing her responses to the same prompts posed to other participants.Ten of the project participants were women, broadly reflecting the gender distribution of social work students at James Cook University. Similarly all were aged between 29 and 55 years of age. Two participants were current students having completed their first field education experience within the last two years.The other nine participants were graduates with between 2 and 25 years' experience in the field.Eight participants were employed in the social work sector, three in non-government organisations and the other five employed in government organisations. Fields of practice included health, mental health, child safety, women's services and family services.While all were asked to reflect on their field placement experiences it was clear from the interviews that participants considered their experiences holistically, drawing on aspects of life and work as well as placement experiences.This has contributed to an understanding of field education experiences as they are embedded in, and reflective of, whole-of-life experiences.

Interviews

Information and data was collected through semi structured interviews with individual participants and through a focus group where participants reflected collectively on the de-identified comments and ideas gathered in interviews. Interviews were conducted primarily by Aboriginal members of the research team and while general prompts guided the direction, interview participants were encouraged to share their experiences as they chose. Clark et al. (2010, p. 12) claim that 'oral storytelling and narrative analysis are best situated to listen to the stories and experiences of Aboriginal students' and this research affirms this process.Participants were encouraged to share experiences and relate stories of their field education experiences. In addition their views on solutions and strategies for improvement were sought as the research team aimed to not only give voice to the issues that arise for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students during field education but to also facilitate change in policies and practices that impact on those experiences.

Focus Group

All participants were invited to join the research team in an informal group discussion conducted at a local venue with lunch and other refreshments provided.While only three participants were available to join the group due to distance and prior commitments, the discussion was robust. The focus group was facilitated by an Aboriginal member of the research team and the two non-Indigenous research team members who attended listened, acknowledged and contributed to the recording of the group discussions.A de-identified summary of the issues raised by participants during the interviews was shared with the group for further dialogue and debate.One of the primary aims of introducing the focus group method to the study was to provide the opportunity for participants to further reflect on the events described during individual interviews, perhaps highlighting previously unexplored or taken for granted aspects of the experience (Acocella 2012). This proved to be the case as participants supported each other to unpack the nature and characteristics of their field education placements with particular emphasis on the strategies and supports which could have or did encourage their success.New data resulted from these processes as the interaction between participants prompted their thoughts, encouraged an expansion of their stories and created a sense of safety to share critiques and suggestions.

Data Analysis

The process of drawing interpretations and perspectives from the stories, ideas and suggestions presented in interviews and the focus group was complex and intertwined with an ongoing recognition of the subjectivity of the process and the presence of ourselves as researchers in the data and in our interpretations.The analysis was developed as a team and the differing perspectives and understandings drawn together over many group discussions.The process was guided by the Aboriginal members of the team who shared their interpretations of language, thoughts and feelings all apparent during the interviews or in their understanding of the participants' intent but not immediately discernible in written transcripts or through non-Indigenous eyes. Where non-Indigenous members of the research team highlighted certain contexts or frameworks as possibly influencing the perception of the event, the Aboriginal team members were able to confirm or challenge such interpretations from shared understandings of lived experience and social worlds such as those inhabited by participants (Frost, Holt, Shinebourne, Esin, Nolas, Mehdiadeh, and Brooks-Gordon 2011).

FINDINGS

The experiences of field education, shared by participants in this study, mirrored their own life stories and the lived experience of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in Australia. Their social work/ welfare placement experience was no different to everyday life, much of which is impacted by both direct and indirect racism, discrimination and a lack of recognition and valuing of their cultural identity. The findings described in detail below reveal that students experienced significant racism, however they also developed important survival strategies and unique practice skills, and they identified recommendations for positive change.These themes are further developed using the words of participants, whose identities are protected through the use of pseudonyms.

EXPERIENCES OF RACISM

The participants clearly identified that their experience in field education, and often their subsequent practice as professional social workers, mirrored their broader life experience of racism. Student felt vulnerable in field education placements where there was a culture of bullying and injustice:

> *That whole heap of bullying and standover that goes on there all the time. And just the way they talk about their clients …and Aboriginal and Islander people.…they don't say it to your face, 'oh them f-ing blacks...They'll say it to another worker, and they'll say it in an undertone.* (David)

> *I've been through the migaloo system. I've been through it before and I know it and they will get you, they shift the goal posts …they hear you, they listen, they know what you're saying, but they always gotta shift the goal posts to prove you're wrong.* (Jody)

When students raised issues of racism their experiences were disbelieved or reframed creating or increasing the sense of isolation and invisibility:

> *I said to her 'This is completely inappropriate…' and she said things like… 'y' know she's not racist because she has Aboriginal friends'… So I was pretty much on my own.* (Kimberly)

Racism was not confined to interactions in field education placements and a number of students described classroom based experiences where lecturers and/ or other students made or ignored racist comments and assumptions.For some students, the impact was intensified by prior experiences of racism and violence:

> *[The lecturer] stereotyped Aboriginals and it was her statements and another non-Indigenous person in group work who pushed me down …that triggered my traumatic experience… Y'know, and so in the end I had to reveal to them, I said 'look, I have had an attempted murder on my life as a child because in those days it was acceptable for white people to kill Abbos.* (Jody)

It seemed apparent that these experiences linked closely with aspects of their personal lives. Placement was not just a place where they undertook an academic subject and integrated learning, it connected with their individual lived experience and their collective lived history. These students captured how the issues that arose in placement resonated with their cultural identity:

> *All of those issues and particularly given my personal background…my great grandmother was stolen, and then taken out to Palm Island and yeah, I think that really hit home to look at it from a professional perspective.* (Carla)

> *When we go to visit, to see how they are going and the mother is asking for her children back, and then they are saying no, …So the parents are going through this traumatic, it's like stolen generation stuff… And here I am looking at this and I thought, this is what happen to our people, you know. Because they have the children taken off them and I don't know how people can do that…*(Juliet)

So Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students were expected to participate in placement activities that often connected adversely to the history and experience of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people without this personal parallel reality being acknowledged. Further this lack of cultural awareness was demonstrated when Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students found their cultural skills and abilities dismissed, ignored or misunderstood, or when broader relationships were assumed:

> *Sometimes you have the non-Indigenous staff, they just think that because of the colour of your skin, you can communicate but you might be from say a totally different country that can't even relate.* (Denise)

> *Yeah well she said, 'I bloody told you - you shouldn't be doing that. That's not your role.'And I was like 'I was talking language … What if this one wanna sit down here and talk'.* (David)

While not the focus of direct questions within this research, several students noted that racism continued into their professional social work practice. Juliet described how she witnessed the Indigenous manager being disrespected by the white staff in her office during her placement and how this experience was later repeated in her own working life:

> *I thought is this how am I going to get treated? I suppose it dawned on me that you might have to work through that sort of stuff, you know, you might be put in charge here and that did happen to me a couple of times… the white people used to come in - they would be looking for the manager and I had to say, 'well, I'm the manager' or they would say,' oh we are after the manager' , and I would have to say, 'yes I'm the manager', as if we are not able to do…the leadership job.* (Juliet)

As inferred above, participants highlighted that racism is a significant part of their lives. These experiences were no different on placement and continued into their professional working life.

STUDENTS' SURVIVAL

Racism was clearly linked to the idea of student survival. Faced with the challenging encounters described above, students were forced to develop a range of strategies to get through placement. Most often an important source of support came from other Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people:

> *I was not in my home town, but I was working with Aboriginal and Torres Strait I slander colleagues, I socialised with them a lot and was able to have some kind of cultural healing.* (Mary)

Juliet identifies support she received from her family, as well as the encouragement provided by Indigenous graduates during her studies:

> *The lady that came down from Thursday Island that had already done this community welfare, and we all looked up to her… it was lovely to see someone that had already got the degree, and she was coming back to talk to us, you know, and encourage us.* (Juliet)

While some students found support outside the organisation, others stressed the value of support within their placement organisation:

> *She's gotta have a mate. Y'know this is where the non-Indigenous people get us, by numbers. They know when they get one Indigenous person on their own, they can break em.But if they get a bundle, they can't break them.* (Jody)

> *I think having them there really buffers me, really buffers my role as a worker, but also as a student. And cos the Aunties can do most of the advocating (laughs) and the talking and it's good, because they not only offer that support, but that knowledge.* (David)

In the interviews and focus group meetings students identified a number of other strategies to assist student survival in placements, including support from peers, the university, the organisation and specific, culturally-relevant professional support.Participants highlighted the importance of cultural awareness training for non-Indigenous people as some students found themselves unwittingly providing such training on placements and in classrooms. Students talked about preparing for practice and at times walking in two worlds. They outlined approaches to dealing with conflict and racism that ranged from avoidance to directly confronting issues. Most commonly they expressed a strong determination to just get through placement:

> *you got to get this done to get to here, so and I suppose that's where you dust your feet, [laughter], dust your feet and move on.* (Juliet)

Developing a unique professional practice

Students talked about wanting to, and at times needing to, develop a unique professional identity that incorporated non-Indigenous social work practice models and cultural knowledge.This unique professional identity was identified by students who found themselves wanting to integrate their learning in different culturally relevant ways:

> *When women used to come up to the service, I used to go up and meet them and start sitting there and just yarning with them.I just didn't want to sit behind a desk and look at books and think, what am I supposed to do? Just go out and do it.It sort of comes natural I suppose…* (Tara)

> *I was saying, 'look I'm really struggling to understand the clinical stuff from a cultural point of view. I just dunno where you're going with all the theory'.* (David)

Finding a way to integrate the academic knowledge, social work practice and cultural skills and identity was not an easy process and a number of participants identified the support that was provided, often within the field education placement, to help them develop their own practice:

> *That's what [liaison person] actually said to me, he was really good.He said, 'Watch for the undertones, all the time in your placement.'And I started to pick it up …then it got me thinking about my other work experiences as well. And I thought, 'That's just wrong'….If*

> *we're over represented in the criminal justice system and the health system, …you gotta have ones in there that have a bit of an open mind to that stuff.* (David)

> *[I didn't want to] just say, this is the theories they were using, this is the framework I'm developing, I wanted to talk about how I was feeling with it all and I found that my supervisors were really supportive of that, and even if I could just go through in detail, blow by blow what happened that day, or something significant that happened that I thought impacted on me, I felt really supported.* (Carla)

In the focus group meeting the theme of developing unique practice frameworks which integrated social work knowledge and practice with cultural identity and understandings was similarly highlighted.Participants discussed their strategies as developing relationships with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander organisations, learning from their own people and suggested processes for including bringing Indigenous theory and cultural knowledge into the learning and teaching processes.Of significance was the revelation that most often, despite some supports the development of a culturally relevant and responsive practice occurred in an environment where they were the only Indigenous person.

> *It prepared me for working, whether or not to choose to work in a mental health unit, whether to work in the field or not but I really liked working in …a multidisciplinary team although some members of the team were a little bit funny because I think I must have been the first Indigenous social worker in there.* (Denise)

> *Being an Indigenous person, coming in to all white faces, that was a bit daunting.* (Juliet)

Students' Recommendations for Change

Key to the participants' recommendations for change and improvement was increasing the cultural awareness and competence of staff in placement agencies and universities. The inclusion of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander staff to teach, guide and support students was seen as important. Mary, for example, recommended having an Aboriginal lecturer on staff, who would take the time to listen to students' stories and ensure placements were well prepared for Indigenous students:

> *Take them out, [do an] introduction to the workplace, their policy, how they can be supported, how they work culturally in that organisation. Because you know, realistically, with social work, you're going out and working with a majority of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people.So having that understanding of culture.* (Tara)

> *I believe that they [placement organisations] should be screened appropriately for what their cultural competence is, what their cultural supervision expertise is, and what their cultural knowledge is and just their general outlook on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander culture.* (David)

Participants identified that additional strategies were requiredto support Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander studentsincluding the provision of cultural mentors , the development of cultural support plans, thepreparation of field supervisors about the intrinsic value of

culture and what this might meanwhen they accept an Indigenous student on placement. Risk management and ensuring culturally appropriate matching of student and supervisor was also highlighted.

DISCUSSION

It is evident from the findings presented above that ensuring cultural safety for Indigenous students on placement is an imperative. Key recommendations from participants included increased placement preparation, and the provision of cultural mentors and culturally aware field educators.Sadly, racism reflective of participants' broader life experiences was another dominant experience on placement.

Being in the minority was noted by several students including Juliet, who identified the intimidating nature of '…coming in to all the white faces…', and this comment from Jody '…it's where the non-Indigenous people get us. By numbers…'It appears that these Indigenous students felt vulnerable and outnumbered on placement.It is speculated here that in many organisations where students are on placement, the majority of management, trained professionals and administration staff would be non-Indigenous.In contrast, Indigenous students may be the same cultural background as a majority of the service users.Therefore, it could be perceived that some students and clients are stuck in a shared, colonised space that does not feel safe and is not shared by the field educator. Particularly if the student and the clients are aware of their devalued positioning by the agency and are poorly served by the agency, then they will share the same felt disrespect (Gladstein and Mailick 1986).

Participants in this research highlighted that their placement experience powerfully connected with their personal lived experience of being an Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander person. Students' experiences were not disconnected from the experience of clients in their field of practice, so when Juliet is taken along to a child safety investigation she feels pain (this is what happened to our people..); when discussion turns to the history of Aboriginal persecution for Jody it is her history (I have had an attempted murder on my life) and when Carla observes family law at work echoes of her personal story reverberate (my great grandmother was stolen). Thus, in field education, where we know students' sense of selfand identity is challenged (Ornstein and Moses 2010) and students are exposed to stress (Maidment 2003, 2006), we must be vigilant in creating culturally safe environments where students can be appropriately nurtured, supported and guided to develop their practice. We need safe spaces that recognise and hear students' stories.

According to Laenui (2000, 2007) there are five stages of colonisation (Denial and Withdrawal; Destruction/Eradication; Denigration/Belittlement; Surface Accommodation/ Tokenism; and Transformation/Exploitation).Striving to overcome colonisation can include embracing five stages of decolonisation. Muller (2010) added a sixth stage.These stages are Rediscovery and Recovery; Mourning; Healing/Forgiveness (Muller 2010); Dreaming, Commitment; and Action.Colonisation has changed the lives of Australian Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples forever, and the role social work practitioners have played, including the removal of children, would rest heavily on the minds of Indigenous students.

As they seek to link theory to practice in field education in order to play their unique role in decolonising social work practice, much more cultural support seems needed. Equally, Decolonisation theory is a theory and a practice that non-Indigenous social work educators and practitioners also must embrace. Currently, these research findings have been presented in supervision training for the field and in departmental workshops to further develop our own curriculum, advance teaching and increase Indigenous student support. Findings have been presented at local and national conferences.

CONCLUSION

While all stages in the decolonisation process are vital and ongoing, in particular it is the stages of Commitment and Action that we sought to take up and enact.We wanted to gain awareness of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students' experiences, and facilitate their increased safety and success.Key recommendations from participants included increased placement preparation, and the provision of cultural mentors and culturally aware field educators. Assurance that recommendations would be implemented was our pledge to Mrs Dorothy Savage when she became involved in the project and developing strategies to enact the recommendations is a significant priority for our program.Our strategies for change include increased cultural awareness for field educators through training; increased cultural support for our Indigenous students, and increased preparations of educators and placement agencies to better ensure students' cultural safety.While the findings specifically relate to students from the social work program, we believe the findings have relevance beyond our students and our field education program, to offer direction to all academic and practitioner colleagues who seek to grow the field of Indigenous social workers and embrace their unique and desperately needed contribution.Perhaps their relevance extends even further as noted by Dorothy Savage, local elder and second author who presented this research at a recent racism conference 'The findings of this social work research are relevant for all academic disciplines that have Indigenous students' (Savage, et al. 2012).

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