

Partners in Prevention

An interview with Kiri Bear

Interview conducted by Haley Clark

Partners in Prevention (PiP) is a Victorian statewide network for workers involved in the delivery of violence against women primary prevention education projects that target young people. The project is convened by the Domestic Violence Resource Centre Victoria (DVRCV) and was established in 2007. It was modelled on the Rainbow Network for workers supporting same-sex attracted and transgender young people. The overarching goal of PiP is to shape an enabling environment for youth-targeted primary prevention of violence against women activities within Victoria. The project provides regular email bulletins, forums, seminars and evaluation support to a growing network of over 200 violence prevention workers in Victoria. ACSSA's Haley Clark interviewed PiP coordinator, Kiri Bear, about networking, information sharing and evaluation in the violence against women prevention education field. More information about PiP can be found at <www.dvrcv.org.au/pip> as well as on ACSSA's Promising Practice Profiles database <www.aifs.gov.au/acssa/ppdb/pip.html>.

Why are practitioner networks like PiP important to the development and delivery of violence against women prevention education programs?

I think that PiP has made a really big impact on the sector. I did a small evaluation of the first phase of the project and ran a focus group with the workers about the impact the network has had on them. The most striking comment people made is that they feel like they are part of a sector now; they feel like they're part of something bigger. One of the very difficult things about doing primary prevention work is that you often don't get a sense of the impact that you're making with young people you are working with, and the work you're doing is a "drop in the ocean". When we're surrounded by media images of very unhelpful relationships, our work can feel very futile. Being part of or being aware of a group of others working in the same field can be tremendous psychological support—you're not the only one doing this work.

There are practical components of being around others and being able to problem-solve together, to form relationships, to form ideas around what other people are doing, and to have the opportunity to feed that into your own work. I know of partnerships developed between workers who have initially met up through the network—including those between policy-makers and project workers, and between sexual assault service providers and community workers. These facilitated strategic plans and the establishment of new programs.

Three recently released reports—NASASV's *Framing Best Practice: National Standards for the Primary Prevention of Sexual Assault Through Education, Time for Action: The National Council's Plan for Australia to Reduce Violence Against Women and*

Their Children, and the Australian Government's *National Plan to Reduce Violence Against Women*—have emphasised the importance of national standards, best practice models, evaluation and evidence in primary prevention education.

What value do you think standards bring to the delivery of violence prevention education initiatives? What role do networking and information sharing play in improving practice standards?

Having those standards is excellent for several reasons. Firstly, the people who are entering the field have a place to start; a framework for what is the minimum requirement for an effective project that prevents violence against women. Standards for practice add potential for structure for those community sector projects and workers that may not have time, expertise, or access to resources to research effective ways of operating. A lot of the work that's being done in Victoria is very ad hoc and somewhat piecemeal—it very much depends on the passion and commitment of workers and services. Funding or direct prevention activities are often difficult to seek out and acquire. Research enables frameworks, standards and initiation points for new programs and their workers.

PiP is planning various activities to thoroughly assess the role of networking and information sharing in improving practice standards. The NASASV standards include a component on professional development; however there has been very little professional development that targets preventing violence against women and working with schools to prevent violence against women. Projects sometimes run program-specific trainings, [but] broad-based generalist training on the primary prevention of violence against women has not

previously existed. The Sexual Assault Prevention and Education (SAPE) framework strongly identified that professional development is needed, as well as networking, self-care and supervision for workers who do prevention education. A lot of the workers across the country lack support in their roles, so networking and information sharing increases the possibility of providing professional development. There is also the opportunity for workers to help each other and to respond to those frameworks and standards of practice and to consider the implications for their projects. I've also noticed with PiP that a culture around how we do violence prevention is developing out of networking, which is led partly by those standards of practice. This can mean workers in the network have more accountability, as there is more conversation about how to operationalise those standards in practice.

The immediate government actions of the National Plan to Reduce Violence Against Women has included implementing, testing and evaluating violence prevention education programs in schools that promote respectful relationships, with a particular emphasis on evidencing the impact and effectiveness of programs. How can evidence be used effectively to improve primary prevention education? What are some of the challenges that practitioners face in evaluating their practice? Do you see any concerns with focusing on evidencing impacts and effectiveness of programs?

People are more likely to fund violence against women prevention activities in order to invest in our young people's future. Also, in the community sector more broadly is a developing culture of evaluation, so that all future programs will have an evaluation component. Right now we're in a culture shift where some people feel quite unsure of evaluation, and how to engage in it. However, what I realise is that evaluation is part of project management from the beginning to the end. Formative evaluation takes place at the start to ensure your project will meet the needs of your target community. Process evaluation is undertaken throughout the project to assess how effective processes are to tailor activities to fit in with, and meet the needs of, your community. Finally, evaluation takes place to determine how effective the intervention has been, which may feed into the creation of new projects that meet needs not met by the original project. It can be used to report back to the funding body, and to add value to the organisation you're working within. Ultimately it's about improving the work that we're doing and effectively prevent violence against women.

In PiP's Annual Forum in May, an example of the effective use of evidence to improve primary prevention education was given. A teacher spoke quite compellingly about how the information that he was collecting on the CASA House SAPPSS program [that was being run at his school], was presented to the school principal to demonstrate how that program was effective, which meant that the principal then increased his commitment to the program and expanded the program to include a whole school year level. Evidence was quite powerful for that purpose.

I ran a survey with workers at the end of last year as part of PiP's Evaluation Working Group and the top three challenges were time, money and expertise. The process of evaluation can seem insurmountable. It can be easy for workers to become overwhelmed and feel unsure about whether their evaluation plan is good, rigorous, valid, or whether the measures used will yield the necessary information. Mostly I think that community workers don't necessarily have the time to do high-level academic research that can be published in international journals. I don't necessarily think we would profit by making them do evaluation at that level, but there is some confusion regarding what constitutes enough evaluation, and what is appropriate. We're still finding our way in terms of answers to that question.

I have a number of concerns with focusing on evidence. I actually did a presentation here with workers about what an evidence base is. From my very limited research, it would seem that evidence comes from the medical field, and it has very specific connotations in terms of trying to get medical practitioners to provide uniform diagnoses that are in line with internationally published research. In theory that might sound like a good idea, but in practice you need to be able to respond to individuals in terms of their community context, which is going to be different for everyone. The idea of creating universal solutions to the issues of violence against women is very problematic therefore. When we're talking about primary prevention of violence against women, we really mean generating social change, which needs to be owned by particular communities. They need to be empowered to make changes for themselves, which may not always be in line with "evidence-based practice".

In relation to focusing on illustrating the impacts and effectiveness of programs, the clear message from workers in the field is that they're not paid or

funded to do evaluation; however, there is enormous pressure on them to evaluate their practice. Without resources, this is very difficult to achieve. It seems harsh that projects that get the most attention are the ones that have undertaken self-evaluation. Again, just as preventing violence against women itself is dependent upon the commitment of individual workers and their leadership, so is evaluation. However, not everyone has the necessary level of experience or funding to achieve this.

At the PiP Annual Forum, you announced that the PiP project is directing its attention towards program evaluation. Could you tell me about this new direction?

Evaluation is an issue for workers. At the end of last year, I convened an Evaluation Working Group, which consisted of project workers from the sector and some academics. I recognised this issue early on, as did others in the network. Every time there is a topic addressed, or a guest speaker, they almost always speak about needing more evaluation of projects to get a clearer idea about what is effective in terms of preventing violence against women. Workers are concerned about this too, as they want to know the work they're doing is the best that it can be. They also pragmatically recognise that it's going to be increasingly a requirement of funding bodies that they include evaluation as part of their projects. Also, I identified earlier concerns regarding how much is enough, how much is too much, and measuring the expectations of projects in terms of evaluation.

I therefore convened the Evaluation Working Group to consider those issues and to consider how we can support workers in the network to evaluate their projects. So the first step has been having the Evaluation Seminar at the Annual Forum. We also plan to have another evaluation seminar with Sue Dyson from the Australian Research Centre in Sex, Health and Society in the future, and develop resources for workers, or "measurement tools" that workers can use in schools. These tools will be focused at schools or young people to measure the culture of the school, and whether it's violence-supportive or a more healthy and respectful environment. We hope these can be used to measure change in school culture after certain interventions. We have also developed the mentor program.

Could you tell me about PiP's Evaluation Mentoring Program?

Some members of the working group identified the need for a service or network they could contact

regarding issues about evaluation. As such, the Evaluation Mentoring Program was created. This program offers mentoring about issues such as whether a survey is going to measure what it is intended to, or where someone might resource more information about evaluation of community engagement or whole-of-school cultures. It is so we can access an expert someone who has more evaluation experience to gain feedback. At the moment, there are approximately five people who have agreed to become evaluation mentors.

Evaluation mentors take part on a voluntary basis, and as such they do not receive pay. The mentors have an interest in the area, and so they are keen to share their expertise. A help-desk model is an appropriate, is a befitting description. Generally, there is phone or email contact, and the opportunity to ask questions, rather than being like a consultancy. In a way, it's more about having an extra resource to converse with.

Finally, what other plans are in store for PiP until the end of the year?

I'm in the process of constructing a blog to trial. Initially, I aimed to have an email discussion list; however, technology was an issue, so now I'm working from conversations that I know will be of great use for the blog. There will be a post approximately every two weeks regarding a current issue and workers can make comments regarding that. We're also in the process of redeveloping the DVRCV's primary prevention/early intervention website targeting young women—*When Love Hurts*. The content has been overhauled and feedback integrated. The website has received thousands of stories—particularly from young women writing in and providing their stories about violence in relationships. We are hoping that our redevelopment will incorporate more of that material and really use young women's voices to talk about what's healthy in a relationship, what are the warning signs and how you might survive an experience of violence. That is due to be released around December. They are the main plans, as well as our usual network meetings and bulletins.

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