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Integrated Work Health and Safety in NDIS and Educational Settings

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Abstract— *Work health and safety (WHS) in disability support and educational environments involves complex interactions among worker safety, participant safeguarding, student wellbeing, organisational governance, accessibility, psychosocial risk, human rights and service quality. Workers operating within National Disability Insurance Scheme (NDIS) services and educational settings may be exposed to hazardous manual tasks, occupational violence and aggression, biological hazards, slips and falls, fatigue, remote or isolated work, high emotional demands, inadequate organisational support, traumatic events and other psychosocial hazards. These risks may occur simultaneously rather than independently. This conceptual and integrative review examines how WHS can be strengthened across Australian NDIS and educational settings through a systems-based approach. It synthesises Australian WHS principles, NDIS Practice Standards, psychosocial risk-management principles, disability-inclusive practice and organisational safety theory. The paper identifies a central practical tension: organisations must protect workers, participants and students while avoiding unnecessarily restrictive approaches that diminish autonomy, dignity, inclusion, learning or meaningful participation. To address this challenge, the paper introduces the SAFE-ED Framework, consisting of six interconnected domains: Safety Identification; Accessible and Inclusive Participation; Fit-for-Purpose Risk Controls; Education, Competence and Workforce Capability; Evaluation, Reporting and Organisational Learning; and Dynamic Continuous Improvement. The framework proposes that effective WHS requires movement beyond reactive compliance toward prevention-oriented organisational design. It integrates physical safety, psychosocial safety, participant safeguarding, educational inclusion, leadership, worker consultation, incident learning and continuous improvement. The paper also develops an implementation model, risk matrix, governance structure, performance indicators and an empirical research agenda through which SAFE-ED could subsequently be evaluated.*

Keywords*— *work health and safety, WHS; NDIS, disability support; education, psychosocial hazards, occupational safety; inclusive education, risk management, disability, safety culture, worker wellbeing, SAFE-ED.

I. INTRODUCTION

Work health and safety is traditionally associated with preventing workplace injury, controlling physical hazards and complying with occupational safety legislation. Contemporary human-service environments require a broader understanding because disability support and education involve relationships among workers, participants, learners, families, communities, technologies and organisational systems.

An NDIS support worker may assist a participant with personal care, community participation, transportation, communication, meals, mobility and social activities during a single shift. A teacher or education assistant may simultaneously manage curriculum delivery, behavioural support, accessibility, communication, emotional regulation, emergency preparedness and classroom safety. Consequently, the participant's home, a community venue, a vehicle or an excursion site may also become a workplace.

This paper asks how organisations can protect workers from harm while simultaneously protecting the dignity, autonomy, inclusion and meaningful participation of people receiving education or disability support. It argues that WHS, disability safeguarding, educational inclusion, psychosocial safety, incident management and organisational governance should operate as interconnected components of a comprehensive safety system.

Australian WHS and NDIS Context

Australian WHS risk-management principles require duty holders to eliminate risks to health and safety so far as reasonably practicable and, where elimination is not reasonably practicable, to minimise those risks so far as reasonably practicable. Risk management therefore requires more than forms: it requires systematic hazard identification, consultation, control, monitoring and review.

Within registered NDIS service provision, the NDIS Practice Standards add quality and safeguarding expectations. Provider governance, risk management, incident management, human resources, information management, work health and safety, and emergency and disaster management are interconnected. This means participant safety and worker safety should not be treated as independent systems.

Jurisdictional requirements must be checked before submission or implementation because model WHS laws and codes are adopted and administered through Australian states and territories with jurisdiction-specific variations.

WHS in Educational Settings

Educational settings include schools, specialist and inclusive education, vocational education and training, adult and community education, disability learning programs, therapeutic education, workshops and structured learning delivered within disability-support services.

Safety in these settings is multidimensional. Physical safety includes buildings, equipment, movement, electrical hazards, manual tasks, excursions, vehicles and environmental conditions. Psychosocial safety includes protection from bullying, harassment, violence, excessive demands, poor organisational support and other psychosocial hazards. Inclusive safety requires accessible communication and environments. Emergency safety requires evacuation and continuity arrangements. Digital safety increasingly includes privacy, cybersecurity and responsible use of artificial intelligence.

Fragmented Safety Management and Systems Thinking

Human-service organisations may divide WHS, quality, education, NDIS compliance and human resources into administrative silos. Real incidents rarely respect those boundaries. A systems approach asks not only what an individual did, but what organisational, environmental, communication, staffing, supervision and design conditions made an event possible.

For example, an incident involving a distressed participant during a community educational activity should prompt examination of sensory conditions, communication supports, worker preparation, staffing, safe exits, activity planning, previous warning signs and the adequacy of existing controls. This approach shifts organisational learning from blame toward prevention.

Physical Hazards

Common physical hazards in disability and educational work can include slips, trips and falls; hazardous manual tasks; unsafe equipment; transport and vehicle risks; biological hazards; environmental hazards; noise; heat; electrical hazards; and emergency situations.

Hazardous manual tasks require attention to task design, equipment, environment, staffing, time pressure, worker capability, frequency, duration and participant needs. Training alone is not an adequate substitute for safer work design.

Biological hazards may arise through exposure to infectious agents or bodily fluids. Controls can include hand hygiene, environmental cleaning, appropriate personal protective equipment, safe waste handling, training and outbreak procedures, proportionate to actual exposure.

Occupational Violence and Aggression

Violence and aggression are important WHS considerations in human-service environments, but terminology requires care. Disability-related distress should not automatically be characterised as intentional aggression. Communication barriers, pain, fear, sensory overload, trauma, unexpected change, lack of choice and environmental stress may contribute to incidents.

Controls may include individualised risk assessment, communication planning, environmental modification, adequate staffing, safe exits, emergency communication, de-escalation capability, post-incident support and systematic review of recurring patterns.

Psychosocial Hazards and Worker Wellbeing

Psychosocial hazards can include high job demands, low job control, poor support, lack of role clarity, inadequate recognition, poor organisational justice, traumatic events, remote or isolated work, violence and aggression, bullying, harassment and workplace conflict. These hazards may interact and amplify risk.

Disability-support and education workers may experience emotional labour, unpredictable environments, shift work, insufficient recovery, role ambiguity, traumatic events and the challenge of balancing duty of care with participant choice.

Worker wellbeing programs such as counselling, mindfulness or resilience activities may provide support, but they do not replace organisational controls. Where the hazard is excessive workload, inadequate staffing, unclear roles or violence, the source of the hazard must be addressed. Worker resilience should complement safe work design rather than substitute for it.

The SAFE-ED Framework

The SAFE-ED Framework is proposed as an integrated approach to WHS across disability support and educational environments. Its six domains are designed to connect legal and governance obligations with frontline practice, inclusion and organisational learning.

S - Safety Identification

Prevention begins with identifying hazards before serious harm occurs. Organisations should draw on worker consultation, participant and student feedback, incident reports, near misses, complaints, injury data, environmental inspections, risk assessments, supervision, audits and performance data. Physical and psychosocial hazards should be considered together.

A - Accessible and Inclusive Participation

Risk management should enable safe participation wherever reasonably practicable rather than automatically using safety as a reason for exclusion. For example, risks associated with outdoor community participation may be addressed through route planning, suitable support, transport, weather assessment, communication, equipment, rest periods and emergency procedures.

Accessible risk management should consider communication, sensory, physical, cognitive and cultural needs, and should preserve dignity and choice while controlling foreseeable risk.

F - Fit-for-Purpose Risk Controls

Controls should address the source and characteristics of the actual hazard. Worker-isolation risks may require communication systems, scheduled contact, emergency escalation, supervision or staffing redesign. Sensory-overload risks may require environmental modification, predictable transitions, quiet spaces or smaller groups. Controls should be reviewed when circumstances change.

E - Education, Competence and Workforce Capability

Training should be connected to real work. Workforce development may include WHS induction, hazard identification, manual-task safety, infection prevention, emergency procedures, incident reporting, psychosocial hazards, communication, disability awareness, trauma-informed practice where appropriate, de-escalation, cultural responsiveness and reflective supervision.

Competence should not be assumed simply because a worker attended a course. Organisations should evaluate whether knowledge can be applied safely and consistently in practice.

E - Evaluation, Reporting and Organisational Learning

Incidents and near misses should become sources of organisational learning. Effective investigation examines what happened, who was affected, the conditions present, the adequacy of controls, previous warning signs, contributing organisational factors and the corrective actions required.

A strong reporting culture avoids treating low reporting numbers automatically as evidence of safety. Declining reports can also indicate fear, fatigue, inaccessible systems or a belief that reporting produces no change.

D - Dynamic Continuous Improvement

Risk is not static. Participant needs, staff, technology, environments and services change. SAFE-ED therefore operates as a continuous cycle: Identify -> Consult -> Assess -> Control -> Educate -> Monitor -> Report -> Learn -> Improve -> Reassess.

Risk Assessment and Practical Application

A practical SAFE-ED risk assessment can consider likelihood and consequence while recognising that numerical matrices support rather than replace professional judgement, consultation and legal duties.

Likelihood categories may range from rare to almost certain. Consequence categories may range from insignificant through minor, moderate and major to severe or catastrophic. The purpose of categorisation is to prioritise effective controls, not merely produce a numerical score.

Community-based NDIS support may involve traffic, heat, falls, worker isolation, communication breakdown, medication timing, public interactions and transport. Inclusive classrooms may involve noise, crowding, rapid transitions, communication barriers and sensory stress. In each setting, SAFE-ED directs attention to foreseeable hazards, participant or learner needs, worker capability, emergency arrangements and post-event learning.

Emergency and Disaster Management

Emergency planning is particularly important when people rely on continuous support. Plans should consider fire, extreme weather, power failure, transport disruption, infectious disease outbreaks, technology failure, workforce shortages, evacuation and interruption of essential supports. Plans should be accessible to the people expected to use them and should account for communication and mobility needs.

Leadership, Consultation and Safety Culture

Policies alone do not create safe organisations. Leadership behaviour influences whether workers report hazards, whether near misses are investigated and whether psychosocial hazards are treated seriously. A strong safety culture encourages early reporting, consultation, learning and respectful challenge.

Frontline workers often possess operational knowledge unavailable to senior managers. Consultation may occur through team meetings, health and safety representatives where applicable, committees, anonymous reporting, supervision, surveys, risk workshops and post-incident reviews.

SAFE-ED also extends consultation to participants and learners. Accessible methods can include Easy Read, visual communication, augmentative and alternative communication, interpreters, supported decision-making, advocates and culturally responsive communication.

Human Rights, Dignity and Positive Risk Management

Safety and human rights should not be treated as competing concepts. Poorly designed safety systems can become unnecessarily restrictive. A rights-informed approach asks what proportionate controls could enable participation rather than assuming that the presence of risk requires exclusion.

This approach does not disregard genuine danger. It seeks an appropriate relationship among safety, autonomy, dignity, choice, participation and organisational responsibility.

Technology, AI and WHS

Digital systems may support hazard reporting, mobile risk assessment, electronic incident management, training records, emergency communication, trend analysis and safety dashboards. Artificial intelligence may eventually assist in identifying patterns across incident datasets, such as relationships between incidents, environments, shift patterns or staffing conditions.

AI-assisted safety systems also create risks involving privacy, cybersecurity, data quality, bias, false predictions, explainability and inappropriate automation. Human oversight, transparent governance and privacy protection remain essential.

II. PROPOSED SAFE-ED GOVERNANCE MODEL

SAFE-ED can be implemented at four interacting levels. Governance-level leaders establish policy, resources, accountability and oversight. Operational managers implement risk assessment, staffing, supervision, training and incident response. Frontline practitioners undertake dynamic risk assessment, safe practice, communication and escalation. Participants, learners, families and advocates contribute lived-experience knowledge and feedback.

The intended feedback loop is Governance <-> Management <-> Workforce <-> Participants/Learners, with information moving in both directions.

III. PROPOSED EMPIRICAL RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The SAFE-ED Framework should be empirically tested before effectiveness claims are made. A future multi-site mixed-methods longitudinal study could recruit approximately 300 participants across NDIS providers, schools, community education organisations and disability-support services.

Potential groups could include disability-support workers, teachers and education assistants, managers and WHS personnel, NDIS participants or adult learners, family members or advocates, and organisational leaders. These numbers are a proposed protocol only and do not represent completed recruitment.

Quantitative measures could examine safety climate, psychosocial hazard exposure, burnout, work engagement, perceived organisational support, reporting confidence, psychological safety, job satisfaction, turnover intention and participant perceptions of safety. Organisational indicators could include incidents, near misses, absenteeism, turnover, training completion, complaints and corrective-action completion.

Qualitative interviews and focus groups could explore perceptions of safety, barriers to reporting, workload, participant involvement, organisational learning and the relationship between safety rules and participation.

A six-month intervention could include baseline assessment, leadership and workforce development, risk-system redesign, participant or student consultation, incident-learning review and post-intervention evaluation, followed by longer-term measurement.

Proposed Hypotheses

H1: Higher organisational safety climate will be associated with lower reported exposure to unmanaged psychosocial risk.

H2: Higher perceived organisational support will be associated with stronger hazard-reporting intentions.

H3: SAFE-ED implementation will be associated with improved worker perceptions of safety.

H4: Greater worker consultation will be associated with stronger perceived safety culture.

H5: Greater exposure to unmanaged psychosocial hazards will be associated with higher burnout.

H6: Burnout will be positively associated with turnover intention.

H7: Stronger organisational learning following incidents will be associated with higher reporting confidence.

H8: Inclusive risk-management practices will be positively associated with participant perceptions of safety and participation.

These hypotheses remain propositions for future testing and are not presented as established findings.

Proposed Performance Dashboard

Organisations could monitor physical safety, psychosocial safety, safety culture, participant safety and organisational learning. Example indicators include injuries, hazards, manual-task incidents, workload indicators, exposure to violence, reporting confidence, consultation, participant feedback, complaints, corrective-action completion and recurrence of incidents.

Indicators should be interpreted collectively. A sudden reduction in incident reports may reflect improved safety, but it may also reflect a deteriorating reporting culture.

IV. DISCUSSION

SAFE-ED proposes that contemporary WHS in NDIS and educational settings should move from a narrow compliance model toward a systems model. Compliance remains essential, but documents, policies and training certificates alone do not establish a safe culture.

The framework connects law and regulation, governance, organisational design, frontline practice, participant experience, incident learning and continuous improvement. It also recognises that physical and psychosocial hazards frequently interact. Understaffing may increase workload and fatigue, which can reduce attention and increase physical risk. Poor communication can increase uncertainty and distress, potentially contributing to psychological or physical harm.

An integrated framework is therefore particularly relevant to environments in which worker safety,

disability support, education and community participation overlap.

Implications for NDIS Providers and Educational Institutions

For NDIS providers, SAFE-ED can support closer integration among WHS, NDIS Practice Standards, incident management, risk management, human resources, supervision, participant safeguarding, emergency management and continuous improvement.

For schools and educational providers, the framework can connect teacher and staff safety with student wellbeing, inclusive education, disability support, psychosocial risk management, classroom design and emergency planning.

For workforce development, the framework supports education extending beyond technical competency to include psychosocial safety, communication, supervision, incident learning, risk assessment, leadership and inclusive practice.

Limitations

This manuscript is conceptual and does not report a completed SAFE-ED intervention. No causal claim should therefore be made that SAFE-ED reduces injuries, burnout, incidents or other outcomes until appropriate empirical research has been completed.

Australian WHS requirements vary by jurisdiction, NDIS obligations depend on registration and supports delivered, and educational settings differ across sectors and populations. These factors must be considered in implementation and future research.

A further limitation is that a full systematic-review protocol has not yet been conducted for this manuscript. Before submission to a specific high-ranking journal, the literature search, database strategy, eligibility criteria and peer-reviewed reference base should be expanded and documented in accordance with the selected journal's requirements.

Future Research

Future research should examine psychosocial hazards among NDIS workers, occupational violence, community-based and isolated work, safety culture in inclusive education, staffing and incidents, participant involvement in risk assessment, culturally responsive WHS, AI-assisted safety systems, worker supervision, burnout and retention, reporting culture and relationships between worker safety and service quality.

Longitudinal and multi-site research would be particularly valuable because safety culture and organisational systems change over time.

V. CONCLUSION

Work health and safety within NDIS and educational environments cannot be reduced to incident forms, induction training or risk-assessment templates. These environments involve complex relationships among workers, participants, students, families, educators, providers, communities, technologies and organisational systems.

The SAFE-ED Framework proposes six interconnected foundations: Safety Identification; Accessible and Inclusive Participation; Fit-for-Purpose Risk Controls; Education, Competence and Workforce Capability; Evaluation, Reporting and Organisational Learning; and Dynamic Continuous Improvement.

Its central proposition is that a high-quality safety system does not merely respond to harm. It continuously redesigns work, education and support environments so that foreseeable harm becomes less likely while meaningful participation, dignity and inclusion remain possible.

AUTHOR PROFILE

Professor Dr. Idi (Ras) Banamungu, PhD, PhD, DBA, is Founder and Chief Innovation Officer of Laughter Percussion Academy (LPA), developer of Laughter Percussion (LP), an educational psychology researcher and practitioner, researcher in human rights and migration law, community development and disability professional, counselling and therapeutic arts practitioner, educator, trainer and facilitator, and Authorised Academic Supervisor with Dunster Global Education Corporation. He is based in Kalgoorlie-Boulder, Western Australia.

His stated qualifications include a PhD in Educational Psychology from Dunster Business School Switzerland; a PhD in Human Rights and Migration/Immigration Law from Kennedy University; a Doctor of Business Administration from the International Business School of Scandinavia; Graduate Diploma of Management (Learning); Graduate Diploma of Strategic Leadership;

Advanced Diploma of Community Sector Management (CHC62015); Diploma of Counselling (CHC51015); Certificate IV in Training and Assessment (TAE40122); and Certificate IV in Disability. Additional honorary academic recognitions include an Honorary Professorship in Counselling Psychology and Therapeutic Arts and an Honorary Doctorate in Music Therapy and Counselling Psychology.

His professional and scholarly interests include educational psychology, disability support, counselling, community development, therapeutic arts, curriculum development, WHS, psychosocial wellbeing, artificial intelligence, human rights, migration, social inclusion and participatory practice.

AUTHOR CONTRIBUTION STATEMENT

Professor Dr. Idi (Ras) Banamungu is presented as the principal author and conceptual developer of the SAFE-ED Framework. Contributions include conceptualisation, framework development, proposed methodology, professional contextualisation, manuscript development and future research direction. The final contribution statement should be adjusted if additional authors materially contribute before submission.

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Particular recognition is given to people with disability and NDIS participants. Their lived experiences, voices, preferences, communication needs, rights and aspirations should remain central to the design and evaluation of safe disability-support systems. Recognition is also extended to students and learners, particularly those who experience disability, communication barriers, cultural or linguistic diversity, sensory differences or other barriers to participation.

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DEDICATION

This work is dedicated to people with disability, NDIS participants, students, educators, disability-support workers, families, carers, community workers and all people working to create environments where safety does not become an unnecessary barrier to human participation.

ETHICS STATEMENT

This manuscript is a conceptual and integrative scholarly paper. It does not report a completed human-participant experiment or claim empirical findings from participants specifically recruited for SAFE-ED. Proposed participant numbers, intervention periods, hypotheses and research instruments constitute a future research protocol. Any subsequent empirical study should obtain appropriate ethics approval and informed consent before data collection and provide accessible

safeguards for participants requiring communication assistance, supported decision-making or other accommodations.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST DECLARATION

The author is Founder and Chief Innovation Officer of Laughter Percussion Academy and developer of Laughter Percussion. This professional interest should be transparently declared wherever Laughter Percussion Academy, Laughter Percussion or associated programs form part of a study, intervention or analysis. No effectiveness claim should be inferred solely from the author's professional association with those programs.

FUNDING STATEMENT

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DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

No new empirical dataset was generated for this conceptual paper. Data generated through future empirical evaluation should be managed in accordance with ethics approval, privacy requirements, informed consent and applicable institutional research-data policies.

STATEMENT OF ORIGINALITY

The SAFE-ED Framework is proposed in this manuscript as an original conceptual framework developed by Professor Dr. Idi (Ras) Banamungu for integrating work health and safety principles with disability support, educational inclusion, psychosocial risk management and organisational learning. Before journal submission, a literature and intellectual-property search should confirm the originality of the framework name and distinguish it from any similarly named existing frameworks.

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