Social Workers in Schools

Report to Oranga Tamariki

Ko te Tamaiti te Pūtake o te Kaupapa
The Child – the Heart of the Matter

Education Review Office
Te Tari Arotake Mātauranga

www.ero.govt.nz

ORANGA TAMARIKI
Ministry for Children

New Zealand Government

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Preamble

This qualitative case study work by the Education Review Office (ERO) set out to understand the changes, benefits and/or challenges children experienced working with a Social Worker in Schools (SWiS). Focusing on the immediate benefits and challenges to children meant privileging the voice of children and whānau who experienced satisfaction and positive outcomes from working with SWiS. Earlier quasi-experimental evaluations have shown SWiS high level impact for children. Our intention for this work was to capture the nuanced voices of those impacted by SWiS. We spoke to six children from five schools, along with their whānau, school leaders and SWiS.

We sought to understand the role and work of SWiS through the school setting, social work practice and workforce related issues revealed during the study. We considered the complex intersection between social work practice and school education.

Many features of SWiS, and social work in general, were outside the scope of this evaluation and are not commented on. These include:

› the efficacy of social work practice in schools
› the effectiveness of various programmes or strategies used by the SWiS
› the salient features of social work in these schools
› the factors that lead to the success of school social work models.

SWiS IMPROVE OUTCOMES FOR THE CHILDREN THEY WORK WITH

Social Workers in Schools (SWiS) is a government-funded, community social work service provided in most English- and Māori-medium decile 1-3 primary and intermediate schools. SWiS work in school communities to support individual children and their whānau. They may also provide programmes to selected groups of children and to schools. Children and their whānau take part voluntarily. One SWiS serves a school/kura or cluster of schools and kura. The government spends $21.4 million annually on the programme.

Past evaluations by agencies and kaupapa Māori studies of SWiS found wide-ranging support for the service. A recent impact study found fewer care and protection notifications for Pacific students, and reductions in police apprehensions for Māori boys in schools and kura who received SWiS when the service expanded in 2012-13.[1] There were no differences in effectiveness of SWiS between Māori-medium and English-medium schools.

ERO COLLECTED CHILDREN AND WHĀNAU PERSPECTIVES TO CONTRIBUTE TO A LARGER PROJECT

This ERO study in English-medium schools informs a wider 'evidence project' at Oranga Tamariki—Ministry for Children. This Oranga Tamariki project seeks to re-evaluate SWiS in terms of its relevance and how it brings about change and benefit to children and their whānau, in their own voices. The Appendix describes the evaluation approach taken by ERO.

HOW AND IN WHAT WAYS DOES A SWiS BENEFIT CHILDREN AND WHĀNAU?

We explored this question with children, their whānau, SWiS and school leaders. We broke this overarching question into three smaller questions:

1   Is the child at the heart of this service?

2   How do schools view the role of SWiS?

3   How does SWiS work and practice fit into the family, school and community environment?

The report looks first at examples of the holistic approach taken by SWiS in dealing with their cases and then explores the individual aspects of their role.

[1]   https://www.orangatamariki.govt.nz/assets/Uploads/Research/SWiS/SWiS-studies-SUMMARY.pdf

Findings

WHĀNAU, SWiS AND SCHOOL LEADERS ALL WANTED THE BEST FOR THEIR CHILDREN

The six children in this study were from diverse ethnicities; Māori, Pākehā, Pacific and Asian. They had experienced a variety of problems at home and in school. They lived in families with various numbers of siblings and relatives. Despite their differences, children and whānau all reported the positive impact SWiS made to their wellbeing and lives.

All the SWiS we interviewed also had one thing in common: they were all passionate about what they did and saw their jobs as a 'calling'.

The children attended five different schools. Some schools were in old buildings, others were ultramodern. They were in semi-rural or urban locations and roll sizes ranged from less than 100 to more than 500. Three schools had almost 100 percent Māori students on their roll, the other two were more ethnically mixed. ERO's school evaluations placed the schools on a continuum of performance, although no school was in the at-risk category. School leaders also wanted the best outcomes for their children and whānau and were unanimous about the positive impact of SWiS working in their schools.

Children and whānau are at the heart of the service

THE HOLISTIC APPROACH HELPS CHILDREN

Two stories clearly demonstrate the extended and effective work of the SWiS.

STORY

1

DADDY'S BOY

A young boy (D) returned to his mother last year having lived with his father and twin brothers since he was four. *Things weren't the greatest. He really really misses his Dad... his Dad's disappeared since last July.* D is upset and angry: *He's Daddy's boy and Dad's just disappeared. That's a bit tough.* He couldn't be angry at Dad because his Dad wasn't around, so D took it out on his Mum. Mum was at her *wits' end*, was depressed and anxious as she was also dealing with a younger son who was very violent towards D.

Mum says she saw a difference in her son from when he saw the SWiS.

[She] blows me away – She's really really helped us. Really helped my son from the very first time.
MUM

D now has strategies that work for him.

If I get angry, [I] go to a place. Like, I've got one here and if I get angry I go to it... so I can calm down. If someone's got me angry I walk away. It's better at school now, I don't get angry in class. She's nice. Gives me a little time out of class if [I'm] getting overwhelmed.
D

The SWiS also worked with him to appreciate Mum. After the first time with the SWiS, D told his Mum she's his queen, gave her a heartfelt hug, and played with his younger brother. He would not previously have done any of that. He also calmed quicker than normal from an anger incident.

Bang. That relationship between D and his Mum just... and she came to me and she hugged me and said, 'what have you done to my son?'
SWiS

I didn't think he'd connect with anyone, ya know, but now he can talk to me. Now he'll let me hug him. He'll come up and hug me. His Dad never hugged him – gave him money, fizzy drinks, sent him out. We don't even fight quarter of as much as we used to. Like, for real.
MUM

D is now setting a good example for his younger sibling and settling to learning in school. Teachers have noticed the improvement:

That's not the kid he was last year. [He's] now doing extra literacy work with a specialist teacher, top of the class. He's a bright kid, with the right encouragement he'll learn to stay on task.

Now D is not missing out on trips because he can manage himself better. Only a little bit of input has made a huge difference for the boy and his whole family.

In addition, at Christmas, the SWiS dropped off heaps of fruit.

I had so much kai in my cupboard a week before Christmas I was able to give food away.
MUM

This action had a positive effect on Mum's self-esteem as she could now offer help to others and not just always be on the receiving end of help.

Mum spoke very highly of the SWiS.

[I don't] think we would have got the change without the SWiS, couldn't do on it our own, don't think the school could do it. She was just what he needed, at the right time.
MUM

STORY
2

FEELING A NUISANCE

B's parents had recently separated and although initially he saw Dad every night, things changed as new work out of town meant the visits became fewer. Mum was studying and things came to a head when Dad had to cancel a promised trip and Mum was busy with exams around B's birthday. B felt *I should be gone, I am making life difficult for my parents.*

B's teacher noticed changes in his behaviour; he was daydreaming in class. His best friends noticed, and when B told them *I want to kill myself* they went to teachers for help. The friends, teacher and principal got together to talk about what they could do and decided to talk with the SWiS.

The SWiS could see the big picture. She could see what needed to happen and worked with B, Mum, the teacher and the friends. Friends, who were so concerned about B, were able to encourage him all the time.

The SWiS worked with Mum and, to support her parenting, was able to secure a spot on the Incredible Years programme. This was despite B being past the cut-off age. However, this was an important step to secure some ongoing stability for him. The programme was a life changer for Mum. The SWiS helped Mum understand B needed more than their just being physically together. He needed to be told how important he was to her.

> *[I] totally changed myself, how important making sure of the small things means a lot to a child. Since then I started telling him more I love you, not just thinking [it].*
> MUM

Things have changed for B through learning strategies through games, drawing and talking. *If the SWiS wasn't there my life would still be bad.* He keeps using a strategy the SWiS taught him when he needs it – *going to my bedroom and getting some space – I probably cheer up very quickly.*

His best friend is still important: *definitely changes my sad face to a smiley face within an hour.*

Mum noticed a *significant improvement* in quite a short time. *His mood is totally different. He's more happy.* B does drawings to show his mood, and Mum puts them up on the wall. They find this a useful way to communicate mood, and they are then able to work on what needs to be done to improve his mood.

> *If a friend was feeling how you were feeling, you'd tell them social workers 'they're friendly and change your life to a better one'. More than a teacher could do, are friendlier than teachers, can talk to on your own.*
> B

awesome
great *nice*
fun **cool**

friendly and
change your life
to a *better one*

CHILDREN

Children strongly related to and connected well with their SWiS describing them as …

Children provided a picture of the many small gestures and conversations that lay behind these positive relationships with their SWiS.

› One child described how his SWiS greeted him with a handshake in the playground.

› A girl said she feels good when she talks to her SWiS, as *she listens to me and we talk about my dad.*

› Children valued opportunities to discuss what mattered to them.

Informal, unscheduled time with their SWiS was important for some children. For two boys going to the SWiS was a safe place when they felt sad or overwhelmed. SWiS are a significant adult in the children's lives they can strongly relate with and talk to.

[I] think it's really good to have a person for a kid to have 1:1 time, often don't get that even with parents. Makes them feel valued and there are adults that you can build a relationship [with] and you can trust. And neutral from home and school. Place just to talk, not to be judged.

SWiS

It's really important for him to have another adult, only have parents and teacher. SWiS is like more horizontal, the power structure is much more flat. She's the adult having much more knowledge that he can trust a lot – instantly trustworthy for you.

MUM

SWiS BUILD RESILIENCE, SHIFT BEHAVIOUR

> *He's doing amazing at controlling himself.*
>
> MUM

SWiS taught the children strategies and activities that contributed to the SWiS's positive impact. Examples of strategies for children to handle their emotions and actions included:

› breathing before speaking: one boy told his mum he was taught to go somewhere quiet by himself, breathe, think about the situation, go back when he's back in his happy spot again. Mum sees him using those strategies.

› mindfulness exercises:

> *I find five things I can see, four things I can hear, three things I can smell.*
>
> CHILD

› taking time out:

> *[We] play a card game, about getting stronger not getting angry. Talk about my anger and that.*
>
> CHILD

> *She's nice – Gives him a little time out of class if getting overwhelmed.*
>
> MUM

› colouring in as a way of settling down:

> *Sometimes she goes to my class and gets me, then [we] go do some work. Almost every day. Sometimes reading books, colouring in. Best thing is colouring in. Just for half an hour with her, around same time each day. [The SWiS] lets me colour in.*
>
> CHILD

One child talked about the hope her SWiS gave her for her future:

> *[The SWiS] gives me a paper to write what I wanna be, when I grow up...Doctor... to help my family.*
>
> CHILD

One parent said written positive parenting prompts such as *If it's safe, sensible, kind and fair, then do it. If any of those things aren't happening, don't do it* were useful to help prompt her child's behaviour at home.

SWiS USE A VARIETY OF TOOLS

Generally, SWiS had a menu of strategies and programmes to choose from. They worked with teachers, Resource Teachers of Learning and Behaviour (RTLB) and others to choose the most appropriate programmes or used their own research to consider what would work best for the child. Programmes mentioned included Seasons for Growth, helping children understand change, grief and loss. Another was the Train of Thoughts.

> *[I ran] the Train of Thoughts programme with eight students – made a significant difference for five of them. [It] included coaching and resources for parents. Amazing feedback from parents about children making good choices now. Students were taught to identify, name and understand their emotions. Taught they're the conductor on the train. Strategies focused on turning negative thoughts into positive ones.*
>
> SWiS

Some SWiS mentioned using art therapy where the referred child was part of a larger group. Card games around managing anger, family splits and bullying were also commented on.

WHĀNAU OVERWHELMINGLY ENDORSE SWiS SUPPORT

> *After everything, after the time with whaea (the SWiS), I actually got my happy child back.*
>
> MUM

Parents confirmed the children's positive view of SWiS. They appreciated knowing there was support for their children, such as plans in place for anger management strategies and safe places to go when they needed time out. One parent observed that having the SWiS at school was helpful, knowing there was a person at school with the time to listen, care, and spend time with children.

Parents commented on the impact of SWiS working with their children. They saw their children starting to put strategies to work. Parents were proud of the improvement in their children's behaviour.

RELATIONSHIP BUILDING WAS A KEY FEATURE OF SWiS SUCCESS

Parents' relationships with their children's teachers were also strengthened by working with SWiS. For example, one mother told ERO her son's teacher speaks to her more often now.

Parents valued the presence of another adult who could help at multiple levels. *When I'm feeling down she's there to help me, comes around to help with the kids.* For example, one SWiS came around once a fortnight, to help with food, support Mum to go into WINZ, or help them sort out a bill if needed.

> *I think she's cool – she understands, ya know? She's approachable, you can talk to her – you want to talk to her, ya know.*
>
> MUM

One child had a poor relationship with his siblings. His SWiS took him fishing with the siblings as a way of strengthening their bond. He thought it was

> *'cos I was doing good work when I was with her. She took me and my two other brothers fishing.*
>
> CHILD

> *[X] needs to work on his relationship with two older brothers. Bugs them to get their attention, get to hang out with them. Think the fishing trip was a really good idea, positive way for them to interact. She's [the SWiS] taught him strategies and techniques so he doesn't get out of control. Sometimes still loses it – but it's not like it was.*
>
> MUM

Mum is getting him to counselling with her counsellor next term.

For the parents and families, working with a SWiS was based on relational trust. A school leader explained *whakapapa sits right at the base of everything we do here.* The SWiS needed to develop a connection before any work could happen with the family. The SWiS reiterated the importance of such relationships to the work they do.

> *Relationship to whānau and the approach is probably the key thing. Without nurturing this relationship, none of the work can occur, as families can be too proud to ask for help.*
>
> SWiS

SWiS worked with whānau to help Māori children understand where they were from. For example, the SWiS invited the children to a wānanga on a marae. The whānau were happy as the children were being taken for holidays, but it also set the ground for SWiS to

> *Get the kid's background so they can stand on the marae and say who they are. It's a way in.*
>
> SWiS

Whanaungatanga, whakapapa is a strength of this SWiS' practice.

> *Working with iwi organisation, you just live and breathe it. Whanaungatanga has always been one of my strengths – [you] need to persevere to build deep relationships.*
>
> SWiS

School leaders reinforced this relational trust as fundamental to the work of the SWiS:

> *The relationship that she's been able to build within the community and within the staff, allows all that other stuff to happen effectively.*
>
> PRINCIPAL

SWiS support schools' work

SWiS ARE INVALUABLE IN BRIDGING SCHOOL AND HOME

> *The beauty of the SWiS is that they get to hard-to-reach whānau that schools can't.*

PRINCIPAL

While schools promote learning and education, this cannot happen without simultaneously attending to the needs and whole development of the child. School leaders were aware of the complex and difficult issues some children and their families faced and that sometimes led to challenges for those children. School leaders and teachers knew they were not best equipped to deal with children's behavioural challenges and day-to-day home situations on their own.

SWiS played the role of an intermediary as school leaders did not always have time for deeper conversations with whānau in their homes. SWiS were vital as they looked at the big picture and had the tricky conversations. They considered children's needs and issues holistically, and supported teachers and leaders by sharing important information about children's contexts.

SWiS provided continuity and regular contact with families in need and were a source of reliable support. Leaders were clear that *access to support is a whole lot better having someone on site* and especially if they were seen to be a part of the community.

> *Whatever you bring in to help us, just remember we live here. When you walk out the gate, and you go back to wherever you come from, we still live here. You need to think about long term support; SWiS gives better leverage for doing that for the kids, rather than one off visits from outsiders.*

PRINCIPAL

SWiS were tasked with *wrap[ping] up any support in the school to help children and their families.* SWiS also supported schools by helping access community resources for children, which had previously been a challenge for some school leaders.

There was variability in access to a SWiS; one school was fortunate to have a full-time SWiS on site while others had fixed SWiS hours each week. In all instances, schools reflected the sentiment that SWiS were *one of the cogs in the wheel that has the school moving.*

> *If you've got secure kids, then you've got a happier playground and a school that's easier to operate.*

PRINCIPAL

SWiS ACT AS EARLY INTERVENTION

> *[The SWiS is the] person at the top of the cliff, rather than the ambulance at the bottom.*
>
> PRINCIPAL

This early engagement translates into avoiding issues that have the potential to snowball into crises.

> *Some of the stuff we're asking our social worker to do are [sic] at the bottom of the priority list for CYFS [Child, Youth and Family Service].*
>
> PRINCIPAL

SWiS acted on their knowledge and relationships with children and their whānau to intervene at the early stages of potential problems. SWiS was seen by one school as a *critical part of our support networks for whānau* when dealing with high and complex needs.

Two SWiS discussed the need for even earlier intervention than primary schools.

> *The original kaupapa for me was early intervention, so that before an issue got to the point where a whānau was heading towards a CYFS or Oranga Tamariki kind of way, that we could get into things early, and get in early when the kids were younger. That was the key thing for me. I think that has definitely still been the way we have tried to operate, but very definitely there seems to be a lot more input coming through from Oranga Tamariki in the way that the contracts are let, and the way the SWiS workers are working, and I'm not totally sure, to be perfectly honest, that that's a good thing. I just feel like some of our workers are getting overloaded with cases that should be Oranga Tamariki.*
>
> SWiS

SWiS were concerned about both the timeliness of intervention, and complexity of the cases referred to them. The two SWiS cited above indicated it would be beneficial to intervene earlier in the lives of the children referred. They also believed some of the children required a lot more intervention than a SWiS could offer.

One SWiS suggested having a similar SWiS type service in early learning settings would support children's issues in a more timely and effective way, meaning they required less intervention and support when they started school. One way to support children in early learning, and as they transition to schools, would be for SWiS to work across all the early learning services and schools in that area. It seemed those children with more complex needs required intensive support that was better facilitated through Oranga Tamariki.

Social work practice in schools

MOST SUPPORT WAS FOR BEHAVIOURAL AND FAMILY NEEDS

SWiS were working with several issues related to their children and whānau.

Principals and SWiS identified the following as common issues they dealt with:

› anger management – often the most visible and common reason for referral, impacting not only on the children in question but their peers and their class

› low self-esteem – often uncovered after referral and included low levels of confidence, negative self-talk, poor resilience, self harm and suicidal thoughts.

Children could present with other contributing factors, such as Autism Spectrum Disorder. School leaders also said sometimes older children or those new to the school faced adjustment issues as they had not grown up with the current school culture and values.

Home contexts were often complex and difficult, contributing to the issues for the child. Supporting parents emotionally was an essential part of the SWiS service as parents often did not have a safe, trusted adult to speak to. SWiS provided them with strategies to support their child and information or help to access services. Parents told us the SWiS was the person associated with the school who had time to listen and care.

> *It's like a relief for me, when she comes around. We talk, 'cos, I need someone to talk to. She's really helpful. She's always there when I need her – need someone to talk to.*

PARENT

> *Our social worker is a very key person in that whole puzzle of trying to figure out what that support looks like. SWiS [is] one of key ways to get that understanding of what's needed.*

PRINCIPAL

> *The best way for us to support our community is just to listen to them and figure out what [the] need is for that individual family. Try not to stereotype them, try not to make judgments; [we] have to build relationships so [we] can help.*

SWiS

Schools saw in SWiS a vital, enduring service.

> *We're not after missionaries. We don't want people to come in here and try to save us; we're not broken. We just need people who can walk alongside us to help our community. Not pass judgment or make judgment about whatever predicament our community is in. For us the best thing that we can have is our kids walking through that gate.*

PRINCIPAL

SWiS took a nonjudgmental perspective on issues confronting children and their families. There were situations that were normal for some families, but where outsiders' concept of what is normal does not apply. Where others may judge children going to bed at 1am as being unacceptable, the SWiS realised the same children may have attended church until 9pm, and they worked with that reality without judging it as wrong.

School leaders saw the work of SWiS as complementary to the work of the school; in the words of one leader,

> *We do a lot of work around developing student agency and sharing student voice for their learning; having a social worker on site also gives them the ability to do that for their emotional side, their social side.*

PRINCIPAL

Without the deeper understanding that SWiS gained of the children's lives, schools could easily lose children grappling with various issues. School leaders discussed the importance of SWiS being genuine, willing to listen to where whānau were at and what they needed. If they were not genuine, whānau would *just turn around and walk away. We don't see them [the children] again.* A school leader believed often these children would not enrol in another school and it was likely their issues would not be resolved, and that those unresolved issues could be repeated in the next generation.

REFERRAL PATHWAYS VARY

Referrals to a SWiS service happened in several different ways and demonstrated the understanding that school leaders, teachers, whānau and friends had of the role of the SWiS.

Most referrals came formally from principals, teachers and Special Educational Needs Coordinators (SENCOs). In some schools, leaders or teachers broadly identified there was a concern for a child and referred the child to the SWiS to dig deeper. In other schools, teachers referred students to the SENCO, who in turn referred the child to the SWiS or other agencies.

School leaders almost always talked to parents before making a referral. Sometimes, principals and teachers would also discuss the possibility with the SWiS before finalising the referral.

At times referral was suggested by the SWiS or whānau who became aware of something concerning a child. This information could come from the child themselves or friends raising concerns.

In one school, where there was a full-time SWiS on site, children could simply visit the SWiS without having to go via a teacher. Sometimes when a child had worked with a SWiS in the past, they referred themselves if they experienced new problems.

Once a referral decision was made, the process typically involved emailing a referral form, formal contact with the referral manager or the SWiS provider, and finally contact with the SWiS worker.

Several people interviewed commented the current referral form was longer and more complicated than a previous version. This was time consuming if a teacher was making several referrals and difficult for teachers new to the process.

Ideally a SWiS provider should be able to match the referral to the SWiS with the best skill (for example with strengths in te reo or tikanga) or personality match. The relationship between the SWiS and each child and whānau was recognised as foundational to working towards positive outcomes.

> *It's about the best fit because not all kids will gel with anybody.*
>
> SWiS

In one case, where the first relationship did not work as well as expected, the provider was able to re-allocate the child to a second SWiS who proved to be a better match. However, in most cases, the school had limited or no choice of SWiS to work with.

ASSESSMENT IS A CRITICAL PART OF PLANNING

On the face of it, the referral process seemed well understood, if time consuming. The bigger task began with collecting comprehensive information on the needs and context of the child and their family. The SWiS decided if the initial conversation should be a quick chat, or a more formal discussion, including beginning assessment, if that was possible. In one case, the SWiS met with the parents twice before meeting the child. They talked with the parents about the process, roles, confidentiality, consent, and understanding the context. SWiS also met with teachers for background information about the child and their whānau.

SWiS all worked differently, within the expectations of their role. They tailored their work to be authentic to themselves and, most importantly, to meet the specific needs of each case.

> *Not everyone's the same, so if we treat them the same, the outcome's going to be not as effective.*
>
> SWiS

> *As you peel back the layers, start to see scale of problem e.g. can get a referral due to child sleeping in and trouble getting to school. Unpack – sleeping in because there's no food, nobody at home to get them to school because parents' shift has started, they're probably at home alone. What does it mean for them as a family if we pull the kids out? [We] need the SWiS to work out what's going on and best way to approach it.*
>
> PRINCIPAL

One SWiS provider had a very structured approach to entry and assessment. The SWiS provider gave SWiS workers 72 hours after receiving the referral to make initial contact and complete assessment. While the prescribed nature of the practice was restrictive at times, a SWiS told ERO it helped with accountability and *creates for a sharper focus.*

Some SWiS asked children to assess their own social skills from a checklist,[2] or various assessment tools that considered children's holistic wellbeing.

> *[The provider expects SWiS to] have a very thorough initial interview – 1-2 hours with whānau. Do assessments. Very positive about assessments – SDQ [Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire], assess housing, whare tapa whā, drugs, wellbeing, wairua, health and safety, whānau, incredibly thorough – immediately got a whānau ora model.*
>
> SWiS

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2   Arnold Goldstein's social skills checklist. (Arnold P. Goldstein, Robert P. Sprafkin, M. Jane Gershaw, and Paul Kline. 1980. Skill-streaming the Adolescent. Champaign, IL: Research Press.)

Sometimes a thorough initial interview and assessment is held with the whānau and child. SWiS stressed the importance of talking to the child too, as they sometimes find out that what the parents see and say about the issues differ from how the child sees the issues. This makes a big impact for the families.

> *Then they feel you care about all of them, not just one of them. That's the difference. It's a huge difference.*

SWiS

SWiS used the Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire (SDQ) as a part of their initial assessment. SDQ is required as part of the SWiS provider contract with Oranga Tamariki and this is used alongside other tools by the SWiS. There was some criticism that the SDQ is too long, requires input from too many people, is inaccessible to whānau with literacy difficulties, and lacks a version to suit younger children.

> *That SDQ is shocking. We used to have to do [it for] the student as well…. It's just a way to measure from the time they start the SWiS programme, the service, to when they finish the service. And they see whether they're going forward or anything's changing. And sometimes it's hard just to get the follow ups. Then the teacher's got to fill it out, the parents, so it even becomes more hard for them, 'cos they've got like 30 kids, and 6 or 7 kids they've still got to do the follow ups and completion of the SDQ. Can be a couple of weeks to get the initial SDQ [completed].*

SWiS

One SWiS suggested alternatives such as whānau self assessment against Te Whare Tapa Whā,[3] the Three Houses Model,[4] or a whānau ora tool used by their employer.

The SWiS took a holistic view of each case, exploring the context and underlying triggers leading to the child's referral. They then developed a plan with whānau and input from the children. For some SWiS, it was an opportunity to find out what else the whānau needed. For example, support for:

› smoking cessation

› living with disability

› suicide awareness

› accessing other resources, such as nurses.

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3 Dr Mason Durie described four dimensions of hauora in the development of his widely used model of Māori health, Te Whare Tapa Whā (Durie, M., 1994. Whaiora, Maori Health Development. Auckland: Oxford University Press). Te Whare Tapa Whā is represented by the four walls of a wharenui or meeting house, where each wall symbolises the elements necessary to sustain hauora or health and wellbeing. These dimensions or elements are Taha Hinengaro, Taha Wairua, Taha Tinana, and Taha Whānau. Taha Hinengaro focuses on mental health and emotions. Taha Wairua focuses on spiritual health. Taha Tinana focuses on physical health, and Taha Whānau focuses on the epicentre of one's wellbeing: whānau.

4 The Three Houses Model provides a framework for gathering information to support strengths-based practice with children and young people. The Three Houses are the House of Worries (other versions include Danger and Harm), the House of Good Things (sometimes called the House of Strengths) and the House of Hopes and Dreams. Children and young people are asked to consider their identity, spirituality, thoughts and feelings and physical wellbeing in relation to these houses.

SWiS make connections with all the different agencies and supports. [They are] another avenue to pursue with parents – SWiS might be able to help, or connect parents to the right help.

PRINCIPAL

The biggest frustration we had before we had a social worker was the slow response from all the other agencies for support.

PRINCIPAL

Sometimes parents were unclear of specific goals set for their child, but they knew the broad intent, for example, to work with anger management. SWiS cautioned that their work could not always be too tightly tied to the goals so they can be responsive to the child or whānau needs in the moment.

Sometimes [you] need to put goals to the side as something has come up.

SWiS

SWiS make connections with all the different agencies and supports.

PRINCIPAL

RESPONSIVE APPROACH THAT'S PERSON-CENTRED AND STRENGTH-BASED

The children typically spent at least six months working with a SWiS. The length of each session with a child varied. While one SWiS usually spent around 45 minutes with a child, sometimes they needed up to an hour, explaining that as a SWiS you *can't look at your watch and walk away when the time was up*; they need to do what was needed on the day. The frequency of meetings varied from a few times a week to once a week or a fortnight as described below.

Usually SWiS were able to make themselves available when need arose and switched between formal and informal appointments. Being timely and responsive was critical for relationships. SWiS needed flexibility for being available when children and their whānau needed it. This involved at times *heaps of texting* with parents. Most SWiS seemed to observe and interact with children in class, the playground and at home.

Only one SWiS was full-time in their school. All the others worked with caseloads across schools. While 'ad hoc' appointments were not always possible, SWiS still tried to respond to needs as they arose. In one school, the principal restricted the SWiS access to children to the afternoon and SWiS made appointments of 20-30 minutes for children on set days. Potential disadvantages to limited time in a school include:

› SWiS not seen around so much and so not as readily viewed as an integral part of the school community

› not on site if a need crops up (although some school principals had agreed to SWIS being able to respond to another school if an emergency arose)

› reduced opportunities to talk with children in the playground to develop trust

› less able to interact with parents collecting children

› harder to form the important relationships with teachers in the school.

From the time of the initial assessment, SWiS focused on what would work best for the child and their family. For example, one SWiS would converse in te reo Māori if the child and family spoke it. SWiS took a strengths-based approach:

> *I try not to focus too much on what the raru [difficulty] is...
> their strengths are what helps them try to overcome whatever
> their challenge is.*
>
> SWiS

SWiS also discussed the importance of not letting biases get in the way of their work, especially around visiting whānau in their homes. It was important to recognise that

> *Just because it's paru [dirty] doesn't mean there's bad people
> in there.*
>
> SWiS

SWiS saw it as vital, but sometimes difficult, to get into the home. The first step was getting the parents' consent to work with the child:

> *Now I need to get in that Mummy's head. She needs some awhi
> [support] around how to deal with this problem.*
>
> SWiS

SUPPORT FOR SWiS IS ESSENTIAL

SWiS providers supported social workers in various ways with managing the assessment and paperwork load; for example, one provider had their SWiS put Fridays aside for keeping up to date with paperwork.

> *Fortnightly supervision is my main support. [I] didn't even think about me. Never think about me. It's always my whānau and my kids I'm working with.*

SWiS

Through the assessment process, SWiS sometimes discovered they had more acute cases than early intervention cases. All SWiS commented on the issue of workload being measured by the number rather than the severity of cases allocated to them. Using the number of cases was not an accurate measure of the time cases demand. They all noted the intensity and complexity of effort required can vary enormously. This was supported eloquently by one principal:

> *One case can literally take the place of about five or six cases, just the time and energy and coordination and bits and pieces.*

PRINCIPAL

> *[Another school] absolutely could utilise someone for 40 hours because the need is just so high. The families that get referred to me are really complex and are going to need support for a longer period of time. So taking people off your caseload is harder because the need is just so huge – just have to juggle it, assess the risk and get the people in where you can.*

SWiS

Several SWiS talked of their ongoing, informal contact with the children and whānau of previous cases.

> *Past kids will come up for a chat at lunchtime, sometimes [that's] all they need. Parents come back and ask us to work with their child again.*

SWiS

Experienced SWiS also recognised the importance of maintaining professionalism. One SWiS described social work students she had mentored on placement, who moved quickly to sympathy for the child's situation, without the action and support the child needed. For this social worker, the important thing was being clear about what they could or could not do, having emotional detachment, empathy, and the right disposition.

SWiS valued the organisational support they received, enabling them to carry out their role well. In particular, SWiS reported the importance of the supervision they now receive, although there was some variability in access to appropriate professional learning opportunities. One SWiS commented on writing regular internal monthly reports and meetings with their service centre manager.

Their organisation has a help number to call for expert professional advice. This SWiS believed the support from their organisation is *amazing*. They were not micromanaged, and the service was run on a high trust model. The capability and culture of the provider organisation seemed to make a difference to their work.

School leaders were only too aware of the need to support SWiS.

> *I know it's their job, but they're human too. And they wear a lot of this stuff, wear their heart on their sleeve. And I know they've gotta be professional and stuff, but they're still human. And when they see things that some of our families present, they need support. So it's making sure that we're looking after them as well.*

PRINCIPAL

> *Yes, we're trying to look after our community, but we also have to look after the people who are looking after our community.*

PRINCIPAL

LEARNING CONNECTIONS, REVIEW AND EXIT: MIXED AWARENESS OF PROCESSES

The study did not include interviewing classroom teachers, so their perspective on what happens when a SWiS comes on board is not directly captured. From the other interviews, we can confirm there is flow of communication between the SWiS, teacher and parent, and the nature and frequency can vary according to context. Since the focus is on helping with behavioural and family support problems, it is possible learning per se is not foremost in these conversations. One parent said they *Don't talk about learning* while another said, *I don't think she's (SWiS) taught anything, just know he's (son) not hitting as much*. In this context, one SWiS stated that where necessary the learning side is looked after by the SENCO, indicating the division of labour around behavioural issues and learning. Teacher feedback to the SWiS around the child's progress and engagement in learning was more likely to be informal.

Progress reviews to see how the child is faring in relation to the reasons for referral were variable. SWiS tended to work closely with SENCOs or were included in pastoral care teams. One SWiS saw children weekly and met with SENCO fortnightly to give current feedback on children's progress. One SWiS said they reassessed goals, risks and strengths every three months with whānau and children. A key challenge one SWiS noted was that whānau were not always forthcoming with feedback. This lack of feedback was a constraint on them understanding whether a specific approach was working or if the child's needs had changed.

All SWiS claimed exit decisions were based on information from multiple sources – teachers, school leaders, SENCO, student reports, and student data. Whānau and children were also involved in the decision made around exit from the service.

SWiS reflected on some children coming back and being helped with further interventions. For one SWiS if a child was re-referred on more than three occasions, they would refer to higher-level interventions. SWiS generally seemed committed to their client families and one said *We have our families for life!* even if they formally stopped engaging with a child and their family. *Exits happen when the initial referral has been completed, but that doesn't mean it's the end of our service.* Families themselves, however, were not clear about the exit process and when the SWiS would stop engaging. For one parent, plans were put in place at the start by their SWiS, but they had not heard about a plan for finishing up.

VISIBILITY, ACCEPTANCE AND DE-STIGMATISATION

SWiS seemed to increase their effectiveness, and broke down the barriers to access, by being a part of the school landscape/setting and seen as another adult on the school campus. This was largely due to school leaders being clear about the importance of the role of SWiS for their students and community. This resulted in:

› school staff understanding the purpose of SWiS, becoming more confident to refer children and to work with the SWiS

› SWiS sharing school space so they became a familiar figure in the school and could easily talk with teachers and whānau about children's progress

› whānau understanding SWiS have a very different role from Oranga Tamariki social workers, which made them more open to asking for and receiving help.

> *[SWiS are] seen as another adult in the school, rather than an agency. She's very much seen as a person, rather than a position. Not linked to being a social worker. Same with whānau – 'social worker' freaks them out, once they see her, it's fine. 'Social workers' [are] linked to Oranga Tamariki, they've often not had good experiences, so scares families off. Can make the initial contact difficult unless they know the SWiS.*

PRINCIPAL

In one school, the principal said SWiS sometimes sat in the learning space and 90 percent of the time their staff were happy for children to meet SWiS during class time. One SWiS had worked in class with a teacher aide, teaching them skills and strategies to support a child with mild intellectual disability. SWiS on occasion also worked with small groups of students where there was a shared challenge. In one instance a SWiS helped identify causes for self-harm among a group of girls and helped address the issues.

Being physically visible in the school also triggered referrals: *beauty of that is their physical presence in schools*. This became more apparent when the SWiS has designated office space and teachers and children knew where to find them.

School leaders really appreciated when SWiS took the time to understand and work through the values of the school.

> *They're really cognisant of our poupou up there, our cornerstones of our kura and our value representations.*
>
> PRINCIPAL

> *Whanaungatanga and manaakitanga – get our kids making good connections with their classmates and their teacher, and we make good connections with their whānau, [SWiS] worth its weight in gold.*
>
> PRINCIPAL

SWiS also took steps to further their understanding of the school and its community, which helped them in their work. One SWiS said it means

> *You've gotta involve yourself in the corporate life of the school, if it means benefitting the child.*
>
> SWiS

This involved attending prize giving, sports games and school events, and getting used to being seen and included.

Social work environment

SWiS DEMAND – SUPPLY MISMATCH

The demand for SWiS was universal across all schools we visited. Where a school had access to the resource on site, they saw it as a big advantage. Others complained about not having enough of the SWiS' time and wished they could have one for longer. The nature of the demand was also telling. Some talked to us about their desire to see more Māori SWiS, given the disproportionate number of Māori children who required such help. While desirable, it is not necessarily essential, as in this study we did see a well-regarded SWiS who was not Māori valued equally highly by both Māori and non-Māori families.

INCREASING BUREAUCRACY AND REDUCED FLEXIBILITY

There was some unease among school leaders about the increased bureaucracy and lessening of the power of schools. Some schools felt there was some top-down rather than bottom-up decision making on the use of SWiS resources. For instance, the best use of the SWiS resource might not be in working directly with the child but rather with the adults in the family. School leaders raised the issue of removal of the previous flexibility regarding the deployment of resources.

> *Funding for programming or programmes is probably a little tighter than I'd expect it to be. e.g. [previously we] ran a Mana Wahine programme for mums – impact was five mums put hands up for BOT [Board of Trustees] election. Four came in to do Reading Together programme, [they] wouldn't come into school at all before that.*
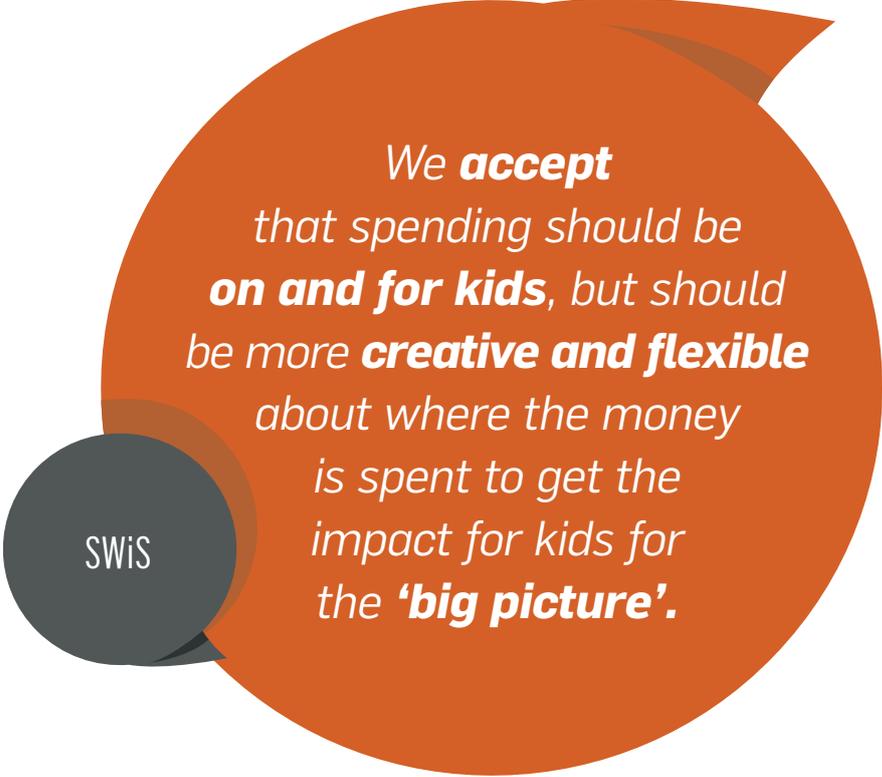
SWiS

> *We accept that spending should be on and for kids, but should be more creative and flexible about where the money is spent to get the impact for kids for the 'big picture'.*

SWiS

SWiS believed some of the cases referred to them ought to have been passed on to Oranga Tamariki. It did not appear they were indicating statutory action but that those children were certainly requiring more intensive support than the current role and scope of SWiS service could provide. It may be worthwhile to make sure the guidelines for referrals to the most appropriate agency are relevant and the underlying processes for determining need are robust.

SWiS also raised the lack of recognition of the complexity of some cases. As noted earlier, not all cases were similar and this required differentiated approaches with varying level of time and effort involved. This essentially meant the notion of average caseloads did not work. Workload for SWiS was further compounded with the increased paperwork now required.

Apparent pay disparity between SWiS and other social workers made SWiS unhappy about how their role was valued and acknowledged. A SWiS mentioned a pay disparity of $20,000 compared to peers working in a similar role. They did not understand how the same job, in the same area should be compensated so differently.

SWiS

*We **accept** that spending should be **on and for kids**, but should be more **creative and flexible** about where the money is spent to get the impact for kids for the **'big picture'**.*

Discussion

During this study, we gained an understanding of the rich, and often complex contexts, which shape the work of the SWiS. We have chosen to touch upon some of the system-oriented and structural aspects in our discussion here.

RESOURCING AND APPROPRIATENESS OF SERVICE

Like all other public goods, social work in schools is in much demand. The fact that almost all school leaders strongly suggested the need for more social worker time in their schools was proof of this assertion. Further, many SWiS felt that the effort required for each case varied considerably according to the context and circumstances of each child and family. This variability in case demand was difficult to manage when SWiS time allocation was based on caseload averages that may not reflect the current reality of demand. Rationing invariably involves withholding beneficial early interventions from some children. While rationing is inevitable, it is worth considering how the service could be more flexible to meet varying demands through possible enhancements to the principles behind the rationing, the flexibility of the services, and caseload distribution and management.

It is also worth reinforcing the importance of the cultural appropriateness of the service. Understanding the worldviews and cultural values of their clients is fundamental to culturally responsive SWiS services. Such knowledge includes understanding what matters to their clients' language, identity and culture as well as their biases and how they apply such knowledge sensitively, effectively, and ethically in their practice. In this study we observed most SWiS demonstrating a high level of cultural appropriateness and inclusive practice. We saw for instance how a SWiS understood why the SDQ may not be appropriate for some of the whānau with literacy difficulties and how something like a whānau ora tool may be more appropriate. Some SWiS clearly grounded their work in whanaungatanga, placing an emphasis on authentic, respectful relationships as a basis for effectively doing their work.

There was a perceived need from stakeholders though for more Māori SWiS, given the large number of Māori students receiving the service. This does not seem to be essential, however, as we found one Pākehā SWiS in particular who was valued equally highly by their Māori and non-Māori families. Previous research has shown that Māori providers have been able to adapt SWiS to suit their broader objectives for Māori wellbeing, while at the same time delivering SWiS to clients from a wide range of ethnic groups. The literature also states that ethnic match is not a factor for instance in successful counselling. The implications are that culture-centred assessment and practice be more specifically imparted at the provider-level training and with periodical reviews of practice. We consider ethnic match of SWiS to child and family per se is not a primary concern.

SOCIO-EMOTIONAL WELLBEING: AN END IN ITSELF

You'll get academics when you've got the wellbeing right.

PRINCIPAL

SWiS help address various problems that children face during their early years of schooling. We saw SWiS were keen to help children with their immediate behavioural issues such as controlling their anger or managing their grief. To what extent SWiS made links to educational engagement, learning progress and achievement is unclear. Despite this, the work of the SWiS is important in its own right. Social and emotional wellbeing of students is deemed to be important for its own sake because children are not just **human becomings** but **human beings** (Qvortrup, Bardy, Sgritta, & Wintersberger (1994). The Australian Association of Social Workers (AASW) Practice Standards for School Social Workers (2013) emphasise the role of schools in providing a quality environment that not only enhances learning outcomes but also promotes the total development of the child.

DUAL FOCUS: TO WHAT EXTENT?

As most social workers do, SWiS based their practice on strengths-based and ecological approaches. We saw aspects of this dual approach in our case studies. SWiS worked to increase the resilience of their children and whānau by strengthening protective factors. Accordingly, SWiS attempted to mobilise the strengths of individual children and their social environment. The strengths-based approach also related to the emphasis given in social work to prevention and early intervention. That early intervention could be extended to include interventions with children exhibiting difficulties in early learning services.

While SWiS invested in becoming a familiar adult on site at school, and to understanding school values, the extent to which they worked with the school in creating a supportive school-wide environment was not clear. Perhaps this is an area for Oranga Tamariki, social workers and schools to consider. Obviously, it will require consideration of how best to configure the dual functions of meeting individual children and school-wide needs. Any approach is likely to make use of the current SWiS role and other school-based professionals, for example SENCOs. Such dialogue may yield a more comprehensive approach for enabling a school-wide environment that has a positive impact on a range of issues including mental health, bullying and sexuality education.

ROLE CLARITY OF SOCIAL WORKERS

Gherardi and Whittlesey-Jerome (2017) conceptualise the practice of social workers in schools in three ways – *in* schools, *for* schools and *with* schools. In the former, social workers are guests whose primary task is meeting the needs of designated children through direct service with activities that spanned being a mental health practitioner, family case manager and behaviour interventionist. In the second instance, the social worker is an employee supporting the needs of schools to benefit designated children to meet educational mandates. In the third case of social work *with* schools, the role is one of *partnership* with the tasks of supporting the needs of all children through applying social work knowledge, values and skills into educational practices and policies. For this, the activities encompass a much wider set of roles – consultant, policy analyst, intervention expert, referral and resource coordinator.

We mostly saw a mix of the first two roles in our SWiS case studies. Making shifts towards a more integral role for social workers in education would require revisiting the positional relationship between social workers and schools. We got the sense schools are places SWiS visit or are based and provide services, and where social worker identity could be peripheral to education. The substantial shift to working *with* schools would require changes at multiple levels including training, development, professional identification, practice, policy engagement and research. Interdisciplinary collaboration between SWiS and other education professionals becomes essential and could include SENCOs, teachers, teacher aides, RTLBs, guidance counsellors, and educational psychologists. Such collaboration can enhance the dual role and partnership model discussed earlier.

POTENTIAL TO ENHANCE EVALUATION OF EFFECTIVENESS

SWiS certainly worked for the children, the families and the schools that ERO spoke to. The literature on assessing effectiveness of social workers in schools emphasises that interventions should lead to changes beyond attitudes and feelings to shifting competencies and behaviours. This study, within the constraints of limited qualitative fieldwork, ascertained changes across all these dimensions.

Future evaluation could focus on these outcomes at the individual child and family level together with associated changes to school engagement and learning. Focus on changes to social-emotional skills, such as increased self-efficacy and resilience as well as engagement in the learning process including collaboration with peer groups, could be some of the key outcomes to focus on. Alongside these individual outcomes, it may be worthwhile to consider classroom effects such as reduced disruption leading to increased teacher and student engagement. Such an evaluation would require more elaborate observational studies combined with effective self-assessments by children and families.

Appendix

EVALUATION APPROACH

This study is best characterised as *external but participatory evaluation* as outlined in Figure 1.

Oranga Tamariki funds the delivery of SWiS interventions and designed the overall evaluation and research programme. ERO mainly provided the school sector and evaluative expertise to collect data and help with the analysis and report writing. ERO's study will contribute to the wider Oranga Tamariki Evidence Centre project. This wider 'evidence project' from Oranga Tamariki seeks to reevaluate SWiS in terms of its relevance and how it brings about change and benefit to children and their whānau, from their perspectives.

FIGURE 1: EVALUATION TYPOLOGY

EXTERNAL, INDEPENDENT EVALUATION

Conducted by organisations or people who are not part of the design and implementation of the project or directly accountable to those responsible for it.

PARTNER-LED EVALUATION

By partner-led we mean evaluations where the implementing partners are part of the design and take a lead role in managing and coordinating data collation, analysis and reporting.
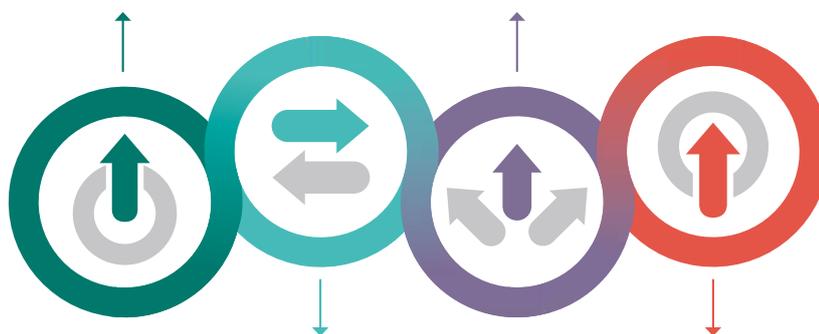
EXTERNAL BUT PARTICIPATORY EVALUATION

Typically led by an external evaluator, though representatives of implementing organisations and other stakeholders (often including beneficiaries) are involved in design, data collection and analysing the results.
The degree of participation can vary.

INTERNAL SELF-EVALUATION

An evaluation carried out by those who are also responsible for the design and delivery of the project.

Source: https://www.odi.org/sites/odi.org.uk/files/resource-documents/11969.pdf

WHY A CASE STUDY METHOD?

Given the complexity and contextual nature of social work practice, treating the practice as a 'complex instance' makes it more amenable to description and explanation using an illustrative case study approach.

> *A case study is a method for learning about a complex instance, based on a comprehensive understanding of that instance obtained by extensive description and analysis of that instance taken as a whole and in its context.*
> (Government Accountability Office, 1990)

A purposive sampling method was used. Sites for the 'instances' for case studies were drawn with Oranga Tamariki. Oranga Tamariki selected a variety of SWiS providers across New Zealand, and informed ERO of the schools these providers served. ERO considered the schools' profile and statistical information, and information held by ERO about the schools (such as reporting history and participation in other ERO work), and informed Oranga Tamariki of the selected schools. SWiS providers then selected children from those schools for ERO to interview. Each provider was asked to select two children. The criteria they used for selection were:

› children had worked with the SWiS for at least six months

› parents/whānau consented to their child being interviewed

› one child had made improvements against their objectives; the other had met their objectives

› one child aged 11–12 years at the time of working with the SWiS, the other aged 8–11 years.

ERO worked with the SWiS to arrange interviews with the children, their parents/whānau and the appropriate person at the school (usually a school leader). In all but one instance, the interviews were conducted face-to-face. Scheduling constraints meant that one interview was unable to be conducted face-to-face; this interview was done by telephone.

ERO researchers conducted semi-structured interviews with participants at a location of their choosing. These included:

› participants' homes

› SWiS provider offices

› private areas at schools.

The interviews were guided by the attached interview schedule. Where participants consented, we recorded the interviews with a digital voice recorder, to ensure fidelity in transcribing quotes. Qualitative data was analysed by themes. The unit of analysis was the child and their whānau who experienced interaction with a SWiS worker in the last 12 months.

The study processes were reviewed and approved by the Chief Review Officer for ethical considerations. ERO's ethics review covered the purpose and benefit of the research, consent, research design, risk for participants, impact on Māori, privacy and reporting. The review considerations closely mirrored the ethics assessment criteria and format used by the Ministry of Social Development and Oranga Tamariki.

INTERVIEW SCHEDULE

QUESTIONS FOR TAMARIKI/WHĀNAU:

What is the benefit for tamariki and whānau having a social worker at their school? (Key question)

› What was their experience working with SWiS?

   COMMENT: we are interested in their perspectives, rather than school-level outcomes visible in IDI [Intergrated Data Infrastructure].

› What was beneficial for them? In what ways is SWiS working for those who participate?

› How did any change they experienced occur? What did the social worker do to support or enable this change?

   COMMENT: we want to understand the change or benefits tamariki and whānau experience from engaging with SWiS, according to them in their context.

QUESTIONS FOR PRINCIPALS:

› What is the benefit of having a SWiS at your school?

› How do they work together with teachers?

› What work do you undertake in your community? How does this relate to SWiS?

QUESTIONS FOR SOCIAL WORKERS:

› What practice models do you use? How do you adapt these to different contexts?

› What helps you do the best for tamariki and whānau?

› What roles do schools play in supporting and facilitating your practice?

› How do you support schools to achieve their goals?

› How do the assessment and exit processes work? How do they facilitate or inhibit your practice?

› How do you support tamariki and whānau? What do you do within this work? How does any change that occurs for tamariki and whānau happen?

› What differences are there between working in your base school and other schools?

   COMMENT: we are interested in social worker practice, alongside the process or mechanics of what they do.

   COMMENT: we need to understand the wider context of SWiS, and its influence on children, social workers, social worker practice, and schools.

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