

9 Conclusion

This evaluation has utilised a range of different measures to assess the extent to which the SWIS programme, as a new service, has been able to assist children and families to achieve positive change. In reviewing change, the evaluation has accessed the perspectives of children, families, social workers, schools and other stakeholders to assess the ability of SWIS to effect positive changes. Although this evaluation has been concerned with outcomes for a variety of SWIS stakeholders, the main emphasis should be on outcomes for the children involved. Positive changes for children flowed invariably from changes within their families. Changes in children and their families were also the result of improvements in the relationships between families and schools and families and other agencies.

The increase in children's and families' capacity to deal with problems was evident in a multitude of ways: children going to school with lunches; families setting clear boundaries for their children; and reductions in behaviour problems. Important as these changes were, they were only part of the story. In reviewing these outcomes primarily from the perspective of children and families themselves, it was clear that more fundamental changes were taking place. It was concluded that developing the capacity to change and the willingness to change were more important than the changes themselves as was forming new positive relationships with schools and agencies based on structural changes within these agencies and schools.

Much of this change was the result of schools and agencies being able to develop better relationships with children and families. A great many clients brought histories of suspicion and poor relationships with schools and agencies. In many cases this was because they themselves had too often been regarded as problems. Social workers acted as mediators, advocates and facilitators in reforming these relationships. As independent professionals, social workers were able to bring agencies together and work in partnership with other professionals and their services. Families developed greater self-confidence and better skills in their dealings with important stakeholders. Schools and other agencies, in turn, were able to address families more from a strengths than a deficit model. At this stage in SWIS's development, however, there was only limited evidence that changes in the way that schools and agencies were dealing with clients and their families had influenced the way that they dealt with children and families more generally.

For the majority of families with significant needs who were involved in SWIS, the process has been transformational. The elements fundamental to changes for families involved:

- their ability to restate their present circumstances with an emphasis on their strengths;
- their desire for improvement in their circumstances;
- their capacity to imagine a more positive future;
- their ability to develop a strategy to achieve that future; and
- their ability to access resources, in terms of materials and skills, to realise that future.

Not all of the social work undertaken within the SWIS programme operated on such a transformational plane and nor did it need to. Social workers also worked with strong and well-resourced families at times of crisis, providing access to additional resources when needed and support through periods of grief or loss or when disability or health issues needed addressing.

However, SWIS was not a panacea, although having a wide application. There were still major barriers for families in making these changes. The first four elements of change discussed above focus on the family, but they also involve relationships with schools and agencies whose role is to support children and families. Changing attitudes within families and family dynamics were often constrained by negative relationships with external agencies, including schools and statutory and voluntary agencies. Change involved these agencies as well as the families themselves. The agencies' relationships with the children and families often needed to be restructured and this required change within the agencies as well as within the families. Social workers were, however, well placed to be advocates and facilitators in this change.

Social workers' referral networks also enhanced access to resources, but poverty and delays in access also limited the resources available to families intent on change.

The ultimate test of the success of SWIS lay in the extent to which social workers in schools encouraged the transformation of families in their capacity to achieve or enhance these fundamental changes and on the capacity of schools and agencies to re-think their approach to what were loosely termed 'difficult families'.

The emphasis in this discussion on families rather than on the children themselves is crucial. While individual children were able to contribute to change, the fundamental contribution to change in children's lives was the capacity of families to transform their own situations with the support of community and statutory resources.

In looking at the ability of social workers in schools to be a catalyst for these transformations it was clear that there were major strengths in the programme and in the model itself. The three primary strengths were the voluntary nature of the service, the social worker's independence and the ability of social workers in schools to access a wide range of supporting resources through advocacy, skill enhancement and referral. The independence of the practitioners and the voluntary nature of the service made it much easier for families to develop strong working relationships with social workers. Social workers' strategic location within schools, but independence from them, also allowed trust relationships to be established more readily. Without such relationships, the overarching capacities for change were much harder to achieve, both for change within the family and for structural change in agencies and schools. The relationships made it easier for the families to gain access to the social workers' network of resources and encouraged the development of family skills to use these resources more effectively.

These outcomes would be enhanced if the number of Māori and Pacific social workers and providers were increased, giving greater access to important client populations and more choice for Māori and Pacific people.

The evaluation has emphasised the extent to which social workers were able to draw on a wide range of timely and appropriate resources that enhanced the families' capacity to assess their own needs, imagine their own futures and have the resources to achieve them. All of this required responsiveness on the part of the agencies themselves, sometimes based on new, more positive relationships between these agencies and their clients.

The report has highlighted the capacity of individual social workers in schools to provide effective assistance to children and their families. However, it also has drawn attention to some very significant professional, organisational and structural issues complicating the operation of the programme. In a context where effective social work in schools depends on the building of strong professional relationships across schools and agencies and with children and their families, the high turnover of social workers is of considerable concern as such losses undermine the efficacy of the programme as a whole. The report has identified a number of professional reasons contributing to this turnover, such as the isolation of some positions, the levels of workload and

worker stress, lack of adequate professional support, lack of a career structure and adequate levels of remuneration, and it has set out how some of these issues could be addressed. Such professional issues intersect with those relating to governance and organisation: the relationship between providers and schools and the building of positive partner relationships; the clustering of schools; and the resolution of the tensions between line management and clinical supervision. Irrespective of whether the programme is further extended, such issues require attention.

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