

# “It’s about the most needy children”: A Foucauldian analysis of school social workers’ responses to need in post-earthquake Canterbury

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## ABSTRACT

**INTRODUCTION:** After the 2011 Canterbury earthquake, the provision of school social work was extended into a larger number of schools in the greater Christchurch region to support discussions of their practice priorities and responses in post-earthquake schools.

**FINDINGS:** Two main interpretations of need are reflected in the school social workers’ accounts of their work with children and families. Firstly, hardship-focused need, which represented children as adversely influenced by their home circumstances; the interventions were primarily with parents. These families were mainly from schools in low socioeconomic areas. Secondly, anxiety-based need, a newer practice response, which emphasised children who were considered particularly susceptible to the impacts of the disaster event. This article considers how these practitioners conceptualised and responded to the needs of the children and their families in this context.

**METHOD:** A qualitative study examining recovery policy and school social work practice following the earthquakes including 12 semi-structured interviews with school social workers. This article provides a Foucauldian analysis of the social worker participants’ perspectives on emotional and psychological issues for children, particularly those from middle-class families; the main interventions were direct therapeutic work with children themselves. Embedded within these practice accounts are moments in which the social workers contested the predominant, individualising conceptualisations of need to enable more open-ended, negotiable, interconnected relationships in post-earthquake schools.

**IMPLICATIONS:** In the aftermath of disasters, school social workers can reflect on their preferred practice responses and institutional influences in schools to offer children and families opportunities to reject the prevalent norms of risk and vulnerability.

**KEYWORDS:** School social work; vulnerability; disaster recovery; Foucault; discourse analysis

Following the 2011 Canterbury earthquake, the New Zealand Red Cross (NZRC), a non-government organisation, drew on monies from donations to fund six social workers to work in earthquake-affected schools with

students and their families “considered high need, high risk and high priority” (New Zealand Red Cross, 2014, p. 14). This initiative opened new practice territory for school social work. Although there had been

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a government-funded Social Workers in Schools (SWiS) programme in place since 1995, these practitioners had been allocated to work with children and families in schools situated in low socioeconomic areas (Ministry of Social Development (MSD), 2015) with Māori and Pasifika families identified as a priority focus (Belgrave et al., 2002; Selby, English, & Bell, 2011). In contrast, the Red Cross Social Workers (RCSW) were allocated to a range of schools in the greater Christchurch region, including those in higher socioeconomic areas that did not have SWiS involvement. Given this unique practice context, it is worthwhile examining the prevalent practice responses that both SWiS and RCSW provided to address the diverse needs of earthquake-affected children and their families.

This article applies a critical approach informed by Foucault's theorising and methodological toolbox to school social work practice in post-earthquake Christchurch. Of particular interest is the over-arching concern for children as susceptible to not being able to cope with the effects of the earthquakes. These kinds of representations of vulnerability are prevalent in the disaster recovery field and are associated with a range of efforts to protect children which, at the same time, reinforces passive positions, excluding children from decisions that impact on their lives (Mutch & Gawith, 2014). Whilst the desire to safeguard children from trauma is understandable, objective, taken-for-granted constructions which present need as identifiable and measurable, can encourage social workers to take top-down, problem-solving approaches instead of focusing on subjective experiences or structural causes of the problems (Ife, 2009). Foucault's (1978, 2003a, 2003b) theorising assists in understanding that claims about human need are not objective truths; they are outcomes of contingent historical forces. He emphasises that even the most well-intentioned theories of personhood interface with narrowly defined parameters of normality, promoting specific forms of conduct. This article engages with the

complexities of school social work in post-disaster Christchurch, noting how older and newer forms of social differentiation were deployed as normative criteria for recognising and targeting need in this space.

The first part of this article discusses the current research literature on school social work. There is little existing literature specifically on school social work in the aftermath of a disaster so the focus is on general school social work practice in Aotearoa New Zealand and internationally. Some practice tendencies and tensions for practitioners working within the school system are noted. Next, Foucault's concepts of the norm, normalisation and the role of the expert within institutional settings are outlined. These concepts assist to analyse school social workers' alignment with eco-systems, developmental theories and knowledge of trauma, which support representations of children as in need of protection. Finally, in recognition that close analysis of normative knowledge and effects can enable new, innovative modes of thought and practice to emerge (Taylor, 2009), an account of school social workers' counter-conduct in their work with children and families in post-earthquake schools is provided.

### Literature review

In reviewing the local and international literature on school social work, it is important to note the arrangements of both the SWiS and RCSW programmes have practitioners employed by social services rather than schools. Schools are mainly sites for school social workers to access and intervene with 'at risk' families (MSD, 2015). Whereas in the United States, where the majority of the research literature originates, school social workers are employees of the schools in which they are based. Therefore some dimensions of school social work in Aotearoa are unique (Beddoe, De Haan, & Joy, 2018; Selby et al., 2011), although the practice frameworks from both Aotearoa and the United States share a

similar commitment to ecosystems-focused interventions to address children's holistic needs.

The systems perspective features as a framework for school social work (Beddoe et al., 2018; Berzin et al., 2011). Practitioners are encouraged to assist students to adapt to the school environment and mediate the school processes to fit with the needs of students, which involves intervening at multiple levels. This practice model reflects Bronfenbrenner's (1979, as cited by Krishnan, 2010) ecological theory that delineates child development, not as an individualistic process, but one that occurs within family and other significant social relationships. These relationships are conceived as reciprocal in that, not only do the conditions of the environment influence the child, but the child influences their environment (Krishnan, 2010). The ecosystems' perspective has also been coupled with strengths, empowerment and resiliency theories (Early & Vonk, 2001; Leyba, 2010) with an emphasis on assisting children and families to utilise personal, cultural and contextual strengths and resources to overcome problems (Belgrave et al., 2002; Selby et al., 2011).

Both the local and international literature includes a focus on working with parents to support them to address their children's needs (Belgrave et al., 2002; McManama-O'Brien et al., 2011). However, in terms of actual practice, this is more prominent in Aotearoa with practitioners guiding parents to establish positive routines for their children, utilise non-violent disciplinary strategies, and manage their finances and living situations (Beddoe et al., 2018; Belgrave et al., 2002; Jiang, Maloney, Staneva, Wilson, & Vaithianathan, 2017). In contrast, despite its holistic framework, school social work in the United States is lamented for its over-use of individualistic interventions such as counselling and, to a lesser extent, group work with students (Kelly et al., 2010; Phillipppo & Stone, 2011). Likewise in Australia, school social workers

spend a lot of their time on counselling-type interventions with students (Lee, 2012). Nonetheless, despite the differences, school social work has a common focus on individual behaviour, either in relation to parents' responses to their children or therapeutic work with children.

Strong emphasis is placed on the school social worker working collaboratively with teachers (Beddoe, 2019; Berzin et al., 2011). School social workers consult and communicate with teachers mainly over home-school information (Berzin et al., 2011; Lee, 2012). Professional interactions with teachers are more likely to be limited to supporting the social worker's clinical work. Social workers are less involved in student-teacher sessions, school-wide collaboration or the provision of teacher training (Kelly et al., 2010; Lee, 2012), alluding to challenges for school-based social workers in influencing the school system and culture (Beddoe et al., 2018).

The peripheral positions of social workers within schools can constrain practice (Bronstein & Abramson, 2003; Corbin, 2005). In the Aotearoa context, this factor might be more challenging given they are not employees of schools and often in sole positions (Beddoe et al., 2018; Belgrave et al., 2002). Social workers are often isolated professionally, without direct support and modelling from other social workers and might have difficulties in conceptualising more systemic work (Corbin, 2005). Teachers are more numerous in schools and their perspectives, which tend towards cognitive understandings of student difficulties, are more prevalent (Belgrave et al., 2002; Bronstein & Abramson, 2003). Teachers can perceive the student as the source of difficulty, which conflicts with the aims and values of school social workers. School staff expect social workers to undertake caseworker roles rather than policy work or whole school interventions (Berzin et al., 2011; Lee, 2012). School social workers often need to defend their role and expertise in schools with other professionals

who do not always understand or value their input (Beddoe, 2019; Belgrave et al., 2002; Corbin, 2005).

This review of the literature highlights the role of school social workers in seeking to address the systems that influence children. School social workers are themselves embedded in the school system, which are not neutral sites. Schools are socio-political contexts, which are constituted by educational norms, professional power relations and institutional processes. As I discuss in the next section, Foucault's theorising on the norm, normalisation and the roles of experts is instructive in examining how these knowledge–power relations shaped the understanding of children's needs and the positions of school social workers as they sought to justify their expertise in post-earthquake schools.

### **Foucault on the norm, normalisation and the role of the expert**

In this article, the focus is on the specific understandings of need that the school social workers employed to undertake their assessments of children's circumstances in post-earthquake schools in Canterbury. These representations of need are normative; they operate as a measure of what is a standard or a normal condition. Normative knowledge is essential in "ordering multiple elements, linking the whole with its parts, placing them in relationship with one another" (Ewald, 1992, p. 171). However, Foucault (2003a) warned that, within modernity, the norm becomes prescriptive and is often utilised by authorities to promote specific forms of conduct. In modern institutions such as schools, normalisation ensures subjects (persons) conduct themselves in accordance with an ideal or optimal model. Although, as Foucault emphasised, normalisation is a productive process that functions through "raising value, intensifying rather than constraining, forbidding, stopping" (Ewald, 1992, p. 171). Normalisation includes individuals,

groups and populations within the realms of normality through positive techniques of education, intervention and transformation, highlighting the embedded nature of social work interventions, including those premised as caring and therapeutic, within modern power relations (Tudor, 2020). Nonetheless, despite its affirmative connotations, normalisation is counter to positive freedom, a self-formation process through which subjects have the capacity to transform themselves in accordance with their own interests, motivations and objectives (Foucault, 1978). Subjects become very proficient at carrying out a narrowly prescribed set of practices (Taylor, 2009). Normalisation alerts to the governing effects of school social workers' predominant practice responses after the earthquakes and the influence on children's (and their parents') conduct.

Foucault's concept of normalisation is also useful in examining notions of expertise for social workers and their attempts to secure credibility and influence in schools. Foucault (as cited by Chambon, 1999) noted that the emergence of health experts in hospitals in the 19th century was inextricably connected to the advent of new systems for classifying diseases and interventions for treating "the ill" (pp. 67–68). He considered these expert positions to have proliferated throughout society as the "judges of normality," including the "social-worker-judge," commenting that "it is on them that the universal reign of the normative is based" (Foucault, 1975, p. 304). The normalising practices which enable individuals to improve and enhance themselves in specific and accepted ways are enacted by the experts and notions of expertise (Rose, 1996).

However, these governing practices are not fixed or totalising. Foucault (2003b) emphasised that, within the processes of normalisation, there is constant struggle against subjection, emphasising the ability of subjects to refuse the normative vision of selfhood that human science theories

and power relations prescribe. The aim of his critical approach is to enable subjects to evaluate the value of privileged normative knowledge relative to other perspectives, so they may appreciate the understanding they are captivated by is just one among many (Owen, 2002, p. 219). Resistance is positive freedom, the processes of self-formation through which subjects act upon themselves. Thus, this article also attends to the ways in which school social workers configured alternate practices not wholly anticipated within the child vulnerability lens taken up in post-earthquake schools.

## Method

A qualitative study was conducted on the recovery policy and practices in post-earthquake Christchurch, Aotearoa, utilising policy documents and 12 semi-structured interviews with school-based social workers. These participants had been working in either SWiS or RCSW positions for at least six months following the 2011 Canterbury earthquake. Of the participants, eight were women and four were men, and 11 identified as Pākehā and one as Māori. The participant group worked across 30 schools in the Christchurch and Waimakariri areas of Canterbury.

Ethics approval for this research was gained through the Monash University Ethics Committee. School social workers were invited to participate following presentations of the research design by the researcher at all three social service agencies that employed SWiS and RCSW in late 2012/early 2013. Interested practitioners made contact with the researcher via email, following which a face-to-face interview was arranged. The interviews were conducted during 2013 and early 2014. At the beginning of each interview, the consent form was discussed and completed. Participants were informed that they could withdraw at any time during or after the interview. None of the participants chose to do this and each took part in one semi-structured interview of approximately one hour's duration.

A primary aim of the research was to understand how school social workers engaged in community building in Christchurch schools after the earthquakes. The interviews invited participants to discuss how they conceptualised and responded to their priorities in schools following the earthquakes. The participants described the school communities they worked in as more a practice context than as the primary focus of their interventions. The predominant practice responses were framed in relation to children's needs.

A Foucauldian discourse analysis (Arribas-Ayllon & Walkerdine, 2011) was used to analyse the notions of need within the interview texts. This involved tracing need as forms of knowledge, modes of action and subject positions made available for children, parents and school social workers themselves. I also paid attention to the power relations that made the production and circulation of the normative *truths* possible (Burr, 2006), focusing on the techniques school social workers utilised, including the referral processes, assessment procedures and modes of intervention. The main findings from this analysis are provided in the following section. The names of research participants, other people they spoke of and the schools at which they were based have been anonymised and pseudonyms are used.

## Social workers' responses to need in post-earthquake schools

The research participants made distinctions between schools and clients with reference to decile ratings. The decile system is a New Zealand government statistical tool which allocates 'equity' funding to schools on the basis of aggregated measures of the income, educational qualifications, forms of housing and occupations for groups of individuals living within the geographical area (Thrupp & Alcorn, 2011, p. 55). The allocation of both SWiS and RCSW in schools relied on decile ratings. SWiS were allocated to a school or a cluster of schools with decile ratings of 1-3 or at least 60% of

their population in the low socioeconomic range (Jiang et al., 2017), whereas RCSWs were funded to work predominantly in higher-decile schools which did not have a SWiS. Low-decile and higher-decile schools were discussed as if they were two separate, yet comparable, contexts of need, which corresponded broadly to two practice responses: hardship-focussed interventions and anxiety interventions. As I discuss, both responses draw on objective conceptualisations of children's needs, positioning them in different ways as vulnerable. However, the school social workers also worked to open up space for children and their parents to negotiate different forms of need.

### ***Hardship-focussed interventions***

The research participants who were based in schools in low socioeconomic areas, predominantly SWiS, referenced the low-decile rating to objectively describe the families with whom they engaged:

... so there's that kind of flavour to the ... presentations ... lots of accommodation issues and people struggling financially ... (Peter, SWiS)

I see people being transient...people not having enough money or ... there's not enough housing or they'll struggle to access and sustain the housing, often within Housing New Zealand [government social housing organisation] situations, meaning they've got to kinda constantly change or are just simply over-crowded. (Darren, SWiS)

Low-decile families were understood as essentially the same. Their needs resulted from poverty including low income, welfare dependency, and unstable and poor housing. References to Māori and Pasifika were largely absent from the discussion of need despite the fact that these populations are significant in low-decile schools in Aotearoa (Belgrave et al., 2002; Jiang et al., 2017).

There was little sense from the accounts that the earthquake had qualitatively changed the needs for families in low-decile schools:

But I think in the earthquake time there's a lot of families in this school that were affected by [earthquake land effects] ... because there's a certain amount of people I think that may have been renting or were just moved quite quickly. And I think there was probably some other people, that lost their homes and were displaced. (Nicole, SWiS)

The view was that the disaster had intensified and extended hardship for a wider range of children and their families.

The predominant emphasis was on the effects of poverty on children, bringing the actions of parents into focus:

The kids' needs are often not being focused on or really consistently met (Darren, SWiS).

So they can take that from an angle of educating and supporting the parents, to educate and support the kids. ... But, ultimately it drips down to best supporting the kid depending on the resources you have. (William, SWiS)

Parents and caregivers were considered the primary focus for school social work practice in low-decile schools. This rationale is consistent with the holistic view of development found in ecological theory which proposes children have an inbuilt capacity for social, emotional and cognitive growth and with adults' support and nurturance they can reach developmental maturity (Baker, 2010; Kiersey, 2011). The school social workers sought to address important health, welfare and social issues adversely impacting on children's wellbeing. However, representing children as in need of protection meant they were afforded little agency. Further, the emphasis on

enhancing parenting reflects more of a focus on the personal, individual effects of poverty than structural conditions.

The hardship-focussed interventions also encouraged the research participants to see their roles as instrumental in supporting schools and teaching staff to focus on academics:

Because I know in these schools the teachers become social workers sometimes, the principals have parents in with social issues. They're dealing with health stuff, they're sometimes taking kids to the doctors, there's the education, all of that, so it's huge. (Nicole, SWiS)

... they have to deal with kids that are coming with ... no breakfast, not a lotta lunch, ... the night before, Dad's come home drunk or something like that ... if those fundamental needs aren't being met, you can't expect much learning to happen. (Scott, RCSW)

Relieving teaching staff from the burden of children's troubled home lives provided a clear, demarcated role for social workers. This also meant that the school context and the children's and parents' relationships with teaching staff were less of a focus. The primary focus in low-decile schools for school social workers was the children's immediate physical and social needs.

### **Anxiety-based need**

A number of the NZRC worked in higher-decile schools, which had not previously had the involvement of a dedicated social worker. Whilst there was less call to focus on poverty-related concerns, the research participants continued to assess unmet need, but in relation to children's emotional concerns:

...there's a *lot* of emphasis from some parents on academic achievement and *sport* opportunities ... (Angela, RCSW)

... for some kids, because it's higher decile, parents are so busy and just don't have time. So that can ... create those anxieties or fears ... that sense of not feeling good enough [which] can lead into so many other things. So it's like that *social* kind of side of things can be lacking at a higher decile school ... (Sophie, RCSW)

There's a lot of anxiety from the children ... this *thrust* to do well ... it's a different level of anxiety [than] children that just might be anxious with earthquakes. But that's also on top of it. (Susan, RCSW)

High-decile children were considered anxious, a pre-existing condition resulting from the high expectations of their parents.

There were concerns that the earthquake-related stress would adversely affect the children's development, particularly in their future lives:

... if it's not fixed, well...that they haven't got strategies to deal with it when they're kids ... as they get to adults they're not gonna succeed in what they need to be succeeding in ... (Lynne, RCSW)

Children who were infants and pre-schoolers at the time of the earthquakes were also a concern:

... the ones that have maybe been in pre-school when the earthquakes happened and then they're coming to school and there's so many behaviour things and ... anxieties and just such ... high-strung kids that just don't know how to cope ... (Sophie, RCSW)

Anxiety is a big one ... especially now with the young five-year-olds that have come through and they were born ... around the earthquake time, and especially in the next year's gonna be a huge one with kids coming in that were in their mum's womb when the earthquake was [happened], and have

had to deal with all that stress ... So it's around those five and six-year-old levels, a lot of anxiety. (Scott, RCSW)

... there has been effect on the young, these pre-verbal kids that are just starting to start school now ... There's something like 20% [that] had ... your classic post traumatic symptoms of your avoidance, sleep issues, and hyperarousal. (Peter, SWiS)

The research participants discuss the earthquake as a cause of anxiety for these children such that they are now in a state of developmental crisis. They reference research conducted by Liberty, Macfarlane, Basu, Gage, & Allan (2013) in Christchurch after the earthquakes which purported that one in three children who were preschool age at the time of the earthquakes, were at risk of developing trauma and developmental delays. The research participants' accounts highlight their inclinations to not only understand the children's needs with a neuro-biological, anxiety lens, but also their interest in contributing to positive brain functioning. In contrast to the focus on social concerns for children in low-decile schools, high-decile children are constituted with psychological, but still developmental, concerns.

Anxiety needed to be addressed lest it disrupt children's ability to reach important educational and social milestones. This normative frame encouraged the research participants to work therapeutically with the children themselves:

And I think they don't ... feel safe or comfortable telling maybe mum or dad about what's going on. And quite often it just takes somebody out of the situation for them to just blah blah blah. (Sophie, RCSW)

... they had lots of kids with anxiety, so we put a group together with the school counsellor ... So we had about nine kids in that group. (Lynne, RCSW)

The focus of interventions was on enabling children to understand and manage their emotions. Social workers were less likely to involve parents in their work in high-decile schools.

The shift from external to internalised need was not necessarily straightforward for the research participants, especially when they compared high-decile children with those from low-decile schools:

... when you've got a higher decile school, if you pick out the highest need child from that school, potentially is probably one of the kids, if it was in a *lower* decile school, that would never even get picked up, you know? (Sophie, RCSW)

... probably the beauty of being in some of those schools I suppose [is that] in some [low decile] schools ... the children wouldn't stand out necessarily. But they do more in a high decile school. (Susan, RCSW)

The research participants offered a rationale for this work based on exclusion:

Cos how I see it is somebody who might have plenty of money and stuff, like their worries might look to us like nothing, but to them it's still a big deal. (Sophie, RCSW)

The high-decile child was described as a kind of 'lost soul,' whose needs only became visible when assessed from a psychological frame, although there was a degree of ambivalence in recognising these needs as worthy of intervention.

Understanding children through an anxiety lens also provided a basis for social workers to establish themselves in high-decile schools:

And I mean the majority of teachers will say, "Oh she just seems a bit teary" or "she's a bit withdrawn" ... report it to the DP [Deputy Principal] and she'll refer out to us. (Lynne, RCSW)

“Well, what, what is the first need that you’ve got?” And they said, “Oh, we’ve got these kids who are worried about the earthquake.” I said, “Well, look, Journey of Hope have done this training, would you like that to come in?” And, so that was all up and running ... (Susan, RCSW)

Educating children, individually and in groups to facilitate their development of emotional self-management skills, simultaneously established social workers’ utility in high-decile schools. However, an effect of this practice is that it perpetuated the norm of anxiety as a predominant lens for children to understand and respond to their emotional needs in response to a natural disaster.

### ***Negotiating need***

The research participants also described negotiated, relational determinants for practice with children and parents. These accounts do not represent an additional or alternate mode of school social work practice. Rather, they reflect spaces within the predominant approaches where the school social workers acknowledged or challenged the normalising effects of the prevalent interventions for addressing need. In one situation (as cited in Tudor, 2020), the children participating in a group focussed on friendship skills shifted the focus of the discussion to their own agenda. As Vivienne (SWiS) discussed, this focus was not anticipated and did not fit with the purpose of the group:

I thought we were meeting to eat lunch and learn how to make friendship bracelets, but they came to the table—talk about literally ... opened their lunchboxes and then spilled their stuff on the table. Not their lunchbox contents I don’t mean. Almost within minutes of entering the room.

The children were keen to talk about issues with their home lives:

Divided custody, conflict at home ... being removed from mum’s care and put into dad’s care, all those sorts of things. So we let them do that. We don’t directly respond to that stuff. We listen but we don’t try and tease that out with them. We just give them an opportunity to talk about that. And then we work on building them as a group to develop relationships with each other and with us so that’s a good place to be for them.

Vivienne did not seek out the girls’ disclosure of their difficult home-life experiences; she expresses some discomfort with the discussion:

I just don’t think that’s the focus—we’d lose that sense of safety.

Vivienne’s focus was on safeguarding that the content was not too distressing for the girls. Nonetheless, Vivienne did not stop the girls’ self-directed discussion. The mode of the group intervention as a relatively non-structured discussion and the relational focus on friendship skills seems to have precluded this. The social worker hesitantly let the conversation continue, although she was probably continuing to make judgments throughout the session about the girl’s safety. For the girls, bringing forth their experiences of loss enabled them to connect with each other. As discussed, this therapeutic focus on home-life related issues with children themselves was not usual practice.

There were also instances where children and parents in high-decile schools who were referred to see the social worker declined intervention. In one case (as cited in Tudor, 2020), a young girl was referred by her teacher due to concerns about her lack of friendships, as Erin, RCSW recounts:

A referral came through for her around isolation and her expecting friendships to be happening, but her not putting in the effort around that.

When Erin met with the girl there did not seem to be a clear indication of a problem; essentially Erin did not consider that the girl had an issue to be addressed:

So once I kind of got to know her, I didn't pick up anything about her being depressed and I didn't pick up anything about feeling isolated in any way. She had huge confidence in herself and in her abilities, she was really good at explaining her strengths to me and writing them down.

By presenting herself as a confident, independent thinker who could articulate her motivations for not associating with same-aged peers, the girl conceivably demonstrated socially prized normative, neoliberal behaviours. In her position of expertise, Erin was able to legitimise the girl's way of being and relating to others, informing the referring teacher that her involvement was not required.

Another example of refusal was led by parents and in negotiation with a deputy principal of a high-decile school. Amy, RCSW, describes how some parents refused consent for their children to be seen by her:

We have consent forms that we get the parents to sign and things like that, and it just has a bit about information sharing, and where we keep our records. And I had two parents complain to the DP saying, "I don't want my child's name being kept on records. What are they gonna do with my child's name?"

From Amy's point of view, the parents were worried that their children may be *marked* as a concern and this may have repercussions for their future lives. She adds "they feel like they can handle stuff themselves ... We don't need help—we're fine." The parents viewed themselves as capable in meeting their own children's needs and were supported by the Deputy Principal who legitimised their right to decline.

A feature of the acts of refusal is that they took place in high-decile schools. Amy, RCSW, was cognisant of this difference, stating "you never get that at any other school." She compares the response to parents from low-decile schools:

But I feel like the other people in maybe Tekau, like [low socioeconomic suburb] area are a lot more used to having people coming in and out of their lives and they are happier about having people support them and open to it, and not so suspicious.

The parents in low deciles demonstrate their responsibility for their children by being open to and trusting of professional support. In contrast, the parents from the high-decile school, who refused consent, exercised their child-focussed obligation through self-responsibility. The middle-class clients' abilities to present themselves in such self-assured ways can also be related to their skills of self-expression which, as Vandebroek and Bouverne-De Bie (2006) noted, are aligned with white, Westernised, middle class norms (p. 76). This implies that school social workers may not recognise the discursive effects of class and racial norms on their clients' abilities to understand, articulate and enact their needs.

Nonetheless, even in low-decile schools, school social workers guide and educate their clients to advocate for themselves. William (SWiS) (as cited in Tudor, 2020) discusses how he would assist children and parents to assert themselves with teachers:

Some clients I've had where they've expressed to me, "I don't like the way the teacher talks to me; they make me feel dumb." So as a result we'll have a meeting together and I'll sit there while they tell the teacher, "You actually make me feel dumb in the way that they're talking to me or the way that they're interacting with me."

William recognised the need for the children and parents to be treated with

respect and have a positive relationship with their teacher. He set up opportunities for his clients to meet with their teacher and articulate their views. William took on the roles of coach and mediator which he created by being clear and mindful of his professional boundaries:

I don't spend a lot of time in the staff rooms ... so collegially I'm not in there chatting and giving my personal life to people or sharing the stories that they share in the staffroom. I did initially but you've got to maintain some separation and some of it's black humour ... it's not even okay to be in its presence and not challenge it. So I choose to stay away from it.

He adds:

Because I also can't challenge that, because that's a personal space for the teachers and so you just can't have that. My presence is more in the playground and the times I talk to teachers will be when they're on duty, usually there. I also do quite a lot of stuff in classrooms.

William desired for children and parents to be respected in schools and the need for teaching staff to be comfortable in their personal spaces. However, he was clear he did not agree with aspects of the school culture. He directed interchanges with teachers where there was a clearer mandate for professional communication, taking the role of intermediary.

## Discussion and conclusion

The professional contexts of school social work were pre-formed by norms that represented children at risk of not being able to cope with and recover from the earthquakes. In responding to these needs, existing and newer flexible, normative criteria were brought into play. The dominant discourse of need of school social work in low socioeconomic areas was hardship, which recognised poverty as a

personalised concern, focussing primarily on the care of children. Consistent with the Aotearoa New Zealand school social work literature (Beddoe et al., 2018; Belgrave, 2002), the school social workers drew on the holistic, eco-systems perspective to target the quality of children's home situations. In the aftermath of the earthquakes, this understanding of need was not dispelled, but rather intensified. However, for schools in higher socioeconomic areas, the hardship lens would not suffice. In these contexts, school social workers attended to another form of social difference—that of *anxiety*, recognised through a developmental lens as an internal barrier to the development of children. Drawing on child-focussed renditions of PTSD (Liberty et al. (2013) the practitioners were able to recognise the earthquakes as another stressor for children already emotionally vulnerable, constituting a new set of subjects previously unseen within school social work. In alignment with Foucault's view of normalisation in the aftermath of the Canterbury earthquakes, there was an intensification and proliferation of the meaning and criteria for recognising and understanding need in schools. At the centre of the categorical systems is the vulnerable child, who was differentiated, compared and ranked against other children on the basis of emotional, behavioural and psychological functioning, income bands and housing standards.

In the post-earthquake context, where there was an overall arching concern for wellbeing of children in schools (New Zealand Red Cross, 2014), recognising new subjects of vulnerability enabled school social workers to re-appraise their existing methods and develop new forms of intervention. Practices to enhance children's emotional processing reflect a shift to active subject positions for children in high-decile schools (Mutch & Gawith, 2014), showing consistency with the school social work literature from the United States (Bye, Shepard, Partridge, & Alvarez, 2009; Lee, 2012; Phillippo & Stone, 2011). In low-decile schools, there was a tendency for

school social workers to work with parents to guide, educate and support them to provide better care for their children, with little involvement of children themselves in the interventions. Nonetheless, despite the distinctiveness of the school social workers' class-based responses to need, both reflect a dominant problematic of the earthquake as developmental risk and a commitment to self-responsibility. As Foucault (2000b) emphasised, governance at the level of individual bodies recognises subjects as endowed with capacities, which can be indirectly shaped and moulded through normalising practices of the self. Without denigrating the child-focussed intention of these practices, school workers need to be alert to their embeddedness with disciplinary power as normalising experts and their roles in facilitating the active complicity of service users.

The analysis lends weight to Ife's (2009) claim that the predominant emphasis of need in social work places emphasis on the provision of what is needed, rather than the subjective experience or the cause of the problem (p. 40). Representing need in this way reduces complexity, as a range of factors must be simplified and left out (Baachi, 2009). In low-decile schools, families were represented as essentially the same with similar forms of hardship. Whilst the school social workers did identify culturally responsive practices, there was little attention to how culture affected and structured the needs of Māori and Pasifika in the aftermath of the earthquakes. This difference-neutrality (Croom & Kortegast, 2018) potentially reflects the practitioners' reluctance to present Māori and Pasifika as problematic or "the other" in low-decile schools (Ploesser & Mecheril, 2012). However, avoiding reference to cultural difference also meant that issues of privilege and power relations were left out of the analysis. These are important considerations for school social workers as they seek to embrace difference and practice with Māori and Pasifika in culturally inclusive ways (Selby et al., 2011).

It is imperative that school social workers attend to the diversity and complexity of the needs of children and families in disaster contexts where social policy and institutional techniques operate to standardise aspects of human life. In this article, examining the school social workers' practices from a Foucauldian perspective reveals the role they play in opening up small spaces for difference and alternate relations not readily visible within the prevalent configurations of child vulnerability. Through their positions of expertise, school social workers are able to influence the attitudes and actions of teaching staff and other professionals whilst still working collaboratively. These kinds of practices reinforce the relevance of the eco-system's principle of interconnectedness and provide guidance on how school social workers cultivate multiple forms of social relations and act as bridges within school systems (Beddoe et al., 2018). However, practice theories on their own cannot provide the definitive ground for transformational practice. Non-normalising practice emerges from a critical attitude rather than a process of replacing existing norms with more positive ones (Taylor, 2009). School social workers demonstrate this critical ethos when they disrupt or refuse to comply with individualistic, normative knowledge and institutional hierarchies associated with securing children's developmental safety.

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