'Loitering with intent' – a model of practice for working in a New Zealand secondary school

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Introduction

What are the critical ingredients that enable social work involvement in the empowerment of a secondary school community? Social work in schools has become a growing field of practice in New Zealand primary schools in the last 15 years. Social workers are less common in secondary schools and where they are practising, the predominant model for practice is casework or counselling. This paper presents a dialogue between a final year BSW student and a practice teacher who acted as an external supervisor during the student's final placement. It highlights the process, activities and learning that occurred when a 'loitering with intent' community development approach was adopted by the student in a decile 4 rural secondary school with 500 pupils. Strength-based and social justice themes permeate the experience. Important insights are shared into key factors contributing to the success of the placement and to the sustainable programmes that endured after its conclusion.

Getting started

Charmaine: At the start of my final year I considered the idea of a social worker in schools placement. However, I did not want to be with primary school children as I prefer teenagers. My husband works as a teacher at the local high school so the first port of call was to clear it with him and then approach the Principal.

This is not how the placement process normally works, however, because we knew the Principal university formalities were commenced after the initial affirmative response. After my placement was arranged I realised I had no knowledge of what Social Workers in Schools did. So as part of my Field of Practice paper I took the opportunity to do some very useful research which I will discuss shortly.

I already had an established relationship with the school through supervising exams and the withdrawal room. The school uses a withdrawal room for students who are not

managing in class for that particular lesson. In Term two I did some relieving work in this room which is based in the canteen. So although I had school links through my husband, I had already started to make my own.

Withdrawal room cats

While I was working in the withdrawal room the Property Manager came in one day and spoke to the owner of the canteen, saying that he had spotted the kittens and it was time. When he had gone I asked her what he had meant. The kittens were to be caught and taken to the local SPCA. The school did not know the local SPCA euthanises feral cats and kittens. I have very strong views around animal welfare and do not believe in euthanising feral kittens as the cats just continue to have litters. I had to think about this and how to approach the subject with the school, as I was just a reliever. The next day I spoke to the owner of the canteen and asked how she would feel if we tried to trap the cats, neuter them and return them to live under the canteen. She was very pleased with the idea. Over the years she has become very fond of the cats, feeding them well and enjoying their antics. We decided we would fundraise amongst the staff and students to pay the vet bill. I spoke to the Principal and the Property Manager first to get permission. The Principal was very supportive and the Property Manager was pleased that the cats would continue to keep the school clear of vermin. So we started!

Building relationships
To my surprise many people were drawn into the saga of catching the cats. The kittens were first to be trapped, but this proved difficult as they would go into the trap, eat the food and come out again because they were too small to set the trap off. The groundsman stepped in and modified the traps. Students who came into the withdrawal room for being disruptive were fascinated with what was happening. Two in particular sat silently watching (something they were unable to do in class), and then altered the trap to make it more sensitive. One of these students came back at lunchtime to watch through the canteen window. He was ecstatic when a cat was trapped as he believed it was all his doing! Three people took credit for the first capture: the groundsman, the student and the canteen lady. (The canteen lady reported she had spoken to the cat in the morning – told her she wasn't going to be hurt but we were going to make her life better!) Finally, near the end of Term three we had trapped most of the cats, certainly the regulars. The school raised money towards the cost and the canteen lady and I split the difference.

Helen – This scenario began prior to the official placement starting. It gives a clear indication as to how Charmaine works. I heard the story during supervision and marvelled at the ingenuity of it. It was a classic illustration of how a worker could use her worldview to involve a school community in a win-win scenario.

Loitering with intent – the beginning of my new role as a student on placement

My placement was 12 weeks. I spent my first two weeks finding my way round the school, without looking lost, trying to remember to call everyone Mr or Mrs, and meeting com-

munity organisations. When my placement started my profile was raised in a strange way by catching and neutering the feral cat colony. People were not sure of what my role as a student social worker was but some thought the tasks I did were somewhat strange!

The research I accessed for my Field of Practice paper was all relatively new. It covered a range of social and educational issues in New Zealand and international communities. There were a few issues that stood out:

1. How vast the role was and how one worker usually covered a cluster of schools.
2. How beneficial many programmes were.
3. Two of the most important themes from the research were the need for breakfast, and the need for a significant and relevant person in the student's life, someone who cared (Best & Decker, 1985; Bliss & Tetley, 2006; Cowie, Smith, Boulton & Laver, 1994; Dubois & Karcher, 2005; Elias, 2006; Frey & Walker 2007; Gianesin, 2007; Goren, 2006; Haynes, 2006; Horner & Krawczyk, 2006; Knobel, 2006; Lang, 1985; Lee, 2007; Maharey, 1994; Ministry of Social Development, 2002; Monkman, 2006; Openshaw, 2008; Phillips Smith, Swindler Boutte, Zigler & Finn-Stevenson, 2004; Ribbins, 1985; Sabatino, Timberlake, & Milgram 2002; Sanders, 2002; Shaffer, 2007; Steinberg, 2001; Arroyo, Gable & Selig 2002; Thomas, Tiefenthal, Charak & Constable, 2002; Tracy & Usaj, 2007)

Meeting with the Principal
I had no idea what the school would like me to do but was hoping to initiate some programmes that would run independently and require minimal work.

I reckoned that the less the school had to do, the greater the chance of the programmes surviving after the placement finished. Programmes must not add to the school's work load. After the first few weeks I had a list of ideas and basic information about all of them. These I now realise were informed by my earlier research. I knew the Principal needed to give the go ahead. He fully endorsed all my ideas which was incredibly generous and showed faith in my competence and capabilities.

Helen - Although Charmaine was not a school teacher she showed 'insider' knowledge in terms of what is realistic in a school environment and that having the Principal onside is vital to making things happen.

The first initiative: Establishing a breakfast club

Prior to my starting placement a student-led survey indicated that a breakfast club would be well received, but the question was where to start? Options were to apply for funding or to obtain food directly. Funding grants are time limited and ultimately funds need to be reapplied for. My thinking was if we could get basic food to start with it could be self service. This would keep staffing the club to a minimum and enhance the sustainability of the programme. I approached the local food bank, and explained who I was and

what I was doing. They generously donated cereal, spreads, sugar and milo. If the club was successful they agreed to donate at the beginning of every term. Next I approached the local supermarket and met with their manager.

He also donated produce and as much bread as we needed, be this daily or weekly. Between these two there was enough food to set the club up the following week. So back to school I went and told the senior managers and students the good news!!

Student involvement

Year 13 students volunteered to staff the club. Three students and a staff member were on duty every morning. Volunteers do one morning a fortnight. The plan was initially to get the food, but then for the students to grow and develop the club as they chose. This happened. The club extended the time open to 40 minutes. One of the club leaders wrote to all the food manufacturers in New Zealand, and Sanitarium donated 47 boxes of cereal. Another student got in touch with the local women-only gym and they regularly donate spreads and Milo. Year 12 students volunteered to take over the running of the club the following year.

The breakfast club is open to all students at the school. It adopts the human rights perspective that it is a community responsibility to feed a child. As the food has been donated there is no charge. I could not believe how quickly it all happened, but all the preparatory work had been done in terms of the research, and through Principal, staff and student support.

Side effects

After a few weeks a couple of staff spoke to me about the club. They had been surprised by the need for it and asked their classes who had eaten breakfast. They discovered that the majority of students, for a variety of reasons, had not eaten before they left for school. One teacher incorporated the benefits of accessing the breakfast club as part of healthy eating habits. It was such a bonus to see teachers incorporating it in their teaching.

The second initiative: Stop smoking programme

The local Primary Health Organisation (PHO) had been into the school in Term two and left some information. Three students had approached the Deputy Principal and asked about quitting smoking. It appeared that a stop smoking programme could work in the school. So I approached the worker, Marianna, from the PHO to talk about this. We decided that she would come in weekly to test interest. Marianna gave a brief talk to assembly so the students knew who she was and what she would do.

The first week she had five referrals and at least five new referrals every subsequent week. In fact there were so many students on the programme that she felt she would need to come twice a week. Marianna started talking to some students about being mentors and support people for others who wanted to give up.

Bicultural practice

Being involved in this programme has been an awakening for me. During my degree I have completed many papers around living in a bicultural country. I learnt about what this means and who the right people are to deliver services.

Intellectually I got it, however, I never understood it until I worked with Marianna. She is a Maori woman. This was not deliberate, she was the worker. I firmly believe that this was one of the reasons we had so many students take part. The Maori students, especially the girls, were really excited to see their aunty on stage at assembly and to know she was running a programme. They were buzzing.

Most weeks one of the Maori girls would leave her appointment and go and get some of her friends to enrol. It was a humbling experience for me to watch and has clarified to me that there are the right people for the job

Helen: As a supervisor it was wonderful to just sit back and listen to Charmaine articulate what she was observing, whanau working with whanau, and what this meant for them. I noted that the idea for both the breakfast club and the stop smoking club had come from the students giving impetus to a 'development from below' approach to the programmes (Munford & Walsh-Tapiata, 2001)

The role of supervision

I was being supervised externally by Helen every two weeks. Supervision enabled me to link theory to practice in a way that worked for me.

I am a doer and have a pragmatic learning style (Honey & Mumford, 1992). I do first and think later after I've done something. I think about what I could do better. I have found if I think about things too much before I do them, I end up over-thinking the process. Helen was very good about this. She used the strengths-based approach and we negotiated that I could act first, keep a record or diary of what I was doing and then relate my actions to theory.

Helen - Given that Charmaine was a mature student with considerable life and work experience I believed this was realistic and accountable. Charmaine was careful to seek approval from the Principal for initiatives undertaken and had access to the Assistant Principal who was her school-based supervisor.

Charmaine - The theories/approaches I came to see were connected to my work were numerous: for example, strength-based, community development, human rights, Vygotsky's socio-cultural theory, and youth participation model to name a few.

I found that I much preferred external supervision. It gave me the freedom to reflect and justify my practice from the questioning of someone external.

BBBS and Parent Educator programmes

Two other initiatives were commenced during my placement. One involved students mentoring students and the other a parent educator programme. The mentoring programme was the initiative that took the longest to get started.

I approached our local Big Brother, Big Sister (BBBS) coordinator to see if it would be possible for her to run the programme in school. The idea was that Year 12s and 13s would mentor Year 9s. This would mean the programme would run continuously from year to

year without having to train students at the beginning of the school year. The students set the programme up themselves with the help of the BBBS coordinator. They decided when they want to mentor. They designed their own posters, came up with their own mission statement, and designed the application forms and their own logo. They decided to present the programme to assembly.

Parent educator

While visiting local community organisations I met our local parent educator.

This led to her doing a presentation for the Pastoral Team on the services she could offer to parents. The school asked her to run a general Parenting Teen's course and discussed her running programmes as issues arise for the parents or the students. This arose in recognition of the need that parents may require help to understand and support their teenagers as parenting teens may be a new experience for them.

Both these initiatives were further examples of wider community involvement in the school. This was highly significant given previous school reluctance in engaging external groups.

What's happening now?

The Breakfast Club is still running. The school have made it part of the prefects' responsibility. Sanitarium provides the cereal every term and Fonterra provides the milk. Other produce is purchased through a local grant obtained by one of last year's students. The School Council has undertaken to maintain funding for the project.

The Stop Smoking Programme is still running. There continues to be new recruits signing up. It has highlighted other drug issues and a worker now comes in to work with students who have mental health issues.

The cats are all doing well. I visited the canteen not long ago and saw a cat I didn't recognise. It was Orri, the first adult cat we trapped. She looked very different, with long fur and fatter.

Sadly the BBBS programme did not continue. The teacher who was in charge of the mentoring programme left at the end of the school year and it appears to have slipped through the net. The parent educator is still involved with the school. Parents or caregivers do get referred to her, and the service is an option for the Pastoral Team.

The learning

What are the key ingredients that contributed to the success of this placement and to the initiatives that endured beyond its boundaries?

Firstly, I already had established relationships with the school community through previous involvements. Building relationships is fundamental. Knowing who to approach and having the confidence of the Principal is essential. Once trust is established permission was given for initiatives to be undertaken.

Where possible, initiatives need to be student-led, so students can be as self-determining as possible in terms of the means and goals of programmes.

To be sustainable, programmes need to be linked to structures already existing in the school / wider community and require minimum effort to maintain.

Programmes need to add value for the whole school community – the cats, the students, the staff and the parents – so there is good buy-in.

Having the right people for the job can make a difference in terms of programme up-take.

Overcoming barriers to working in partnership with others is essential

External supervision meant it was possible to be removed from the school dynamics and I could independently reflect on my practice according to university requirements

Most importantly in terms of a secondary school placement is to enjoy the students. To engage with their energy and enthusiasm and let them know you are on their team.

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