

# Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire's strengths and limitations as a practice and evaluation tool in social work

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## ABSTRACT

**INTRODUCTION:** The Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire (SDQ) is an internationally recognised psychometric and behavioural screening tool. The Ministry of Social Development (MSD) have endorsed the SDQ as the primary behavioural screening and client outcome evaluation tool for the Social Workers in Schools (SWiS) service in 2018. The usefulness of the SDQ in social work practice and in evaluating client outcomes, however, remains unclear. This study explored two years of aggregated Youth Workers in Secondary Schools (YWiSS) SDQ scores to understand what client outcomes could be evidenced. This study further reflects on SDQs as a contractually mandated practice tool and their appropriateness in social work practice.

**METHOD:** Data were collected from the Family Works Northern (FWN) YWiSS database. Data modelling and analysis tested what aggregated client, parent and teacher SDQ scores communicated for changes in clients' behavioural difficulties at service entry, mid-point and exit.

**FINDINGS:** Analysis of two years of YWiSS client, parent and teacher SDQ scores aggregated at a service level provided inconsistent evidence of client need and outcomes by SDQ thematic categories. A number of factors, including the SDQ being voluntary, clients exiting service early and the challenge of asking the same teachers and parents to complete an SDQ, meant that there were very few SDQ scores completed by all parties at the service exit point, following a two-year intervention.

**CONCLUSION:** The findings in this research suggest that the SDQ as a standalone behavioural screening and outcome evaluation tool within social work is limited. Aggregated YWiSS SDQ results provided limited insights about the complexity of client needs or any intervention outcomes to practitioners, social service providers and funders. The use of SDQ in social work requires further scrutiny to test its ability to communicate a client's level of need and any intervention outcomes to these stakeholders.

**KEYWORDS:** strengths and difficulties questionnaire, social work practice, client behavioural screening, needs identification, evaluating client outcomes

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The Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire (SDQ) is one internationally recognised psychometric and behavioural screening tool used to identify and assess mental health and behavioural disorders within young people (Vostanis, 2006). The SDQ uses scores

to compare young people's self-reported difficulties alongside parent/caregivers, teachers, registered nurse or doctors scores to inform decisions about what health and social services the young person could benefit from (Weller, Moholy, Bossard, & Levin, 2015).

Designed within clinical psychology, the SDQ uses nosological child mental health-screening categories from a minimum of two scorers at two points in time to monitor a young person's emotional and behavioural difficulties from first contact to treatment or service completion (Vostanis, 2006). Interest in using the SDQ as a behavioural screening, intervention planning and evaluation tool within the health and social service sectors continues to grow within a broad range of studies including language impairment in children (Toseeb, Pickles, Durkin, Botting, & Conti-Ramsden, 2017), child decision-making processes (Weller et al., 2015), and child sociality post-abuse (Lim et al., 2015).

Despite its popularity, some health professionals, social work practitioners and social science researchers see the use of standalone clinical assessment tools, like SDQ, to diagnose behavioural challenges as problematic. The problem with tools like SDQ as standalone assessment tools is that they remove the individual from their broader socio-ecological context (Black, Pulford, Christie, & Wheeler, 2010; Kersten, Czuba et al., 2016; Kersten, Dudley et al., 2016; Thomson, Seers, Frampton, Hider, & Moor, 2016; Sargisson, Stanley, & Hayward, 2016). Socio-ecological context in behavioural diagnosis is important as an individual's social and physical environments intersect and affect their overall health and wellbeing (Black et al., 2010; Kersten, Dudley et al., 2016; Sargisson et al., 2016; Thomson et al., 2016). The limits of standalone clinical assessment tools are evidenced in Thomson et al.'s (2016) work which found that SDQ scores alone provided little insight into how the Christchurch earthquakes impacted four- to six-year-old children's behaviour and emotional state one year after their initial B4 School Check SDQ was completed (Thomson et al., 2016). Thomson et al.'s (2016) work highlighted SDQs' inability to measure change between scoring points (less than 12 months) despite the advent of significant events or "shocks" (Thomson et al., 2016). Thomson et al.'s (2016) findings also aligned with Sargisson et al.'s (2016) and Kersten,

Czuba et al.'s (2016) findings where parent and teachers' SDQ scores varied significantly between scoring points making cross comparison of the results difficult.

Alongside scorer variation and the exclusion of socio-ecological facets, the SDQ does not invite children younger than 11 to self-report and score their own behavioural challenges. When aged below 11, children do not complete a self-reported SDQ due to clinical assumptions that young children do not have sufficient cognitive understanding or capability to give accurate insights into how they behave (O'Neill, 2014; Tisdall, 2012). Clinical assessment tools like SDQ then rely on a young person's parent, caregiver or other professionals to report on their behavioural challenges and strengths, speaking on their behalf (Kersten et al., 2014). As SDQ is to be mandated in Aotearoa New Zealand's SWiS service in 2018, some social workers will be using an information gathering and assessment tool which downplays their clients' voice, fundamentally challenging a socially just approach to social work (Beddoe, 2014; Harrison, Van Duesen, & Way, 2016).

The Aotearoa New Zealand Association for Social Workers practice standards for social workers situates social justice, human rights and dignity at the heart of best practice (ANZASW, 2014, p. 9). These standards, which professionally guide social workers' practice, however, are often frustrated by government funder's contractual requirements and KPIs for social service provision (Hunt, 2017). The challenges faced by social work practitioners stem from the contract-outcome over a client-outcome-funding model that operates within most social service providers which rely on government agency funding (Hunt, 2017). The contract-outcome-funding model focuses social work on meeting organisational KPIs, prioritising clinical assessment outcomes (such as improved SDQ scores), service specifications, contract volumes, programme completions and evidence of client outcomes (such as self-reported satisfaction and needs

meet). Social workers then operate within two, often-competing mindsets. One being their contractual KPI mindset, ticking key performance boxes to sustain their professional position and organisational funding, and the other their commitment to abate human suffering and indignity (Beddoe, 2017; Harrison et al., 2016; Hunt, 2017).

In the Aotearoa New Zealand context, SDQ previously was only a contractual requirement for one Ministry of Social Development (MSD) funded service, Youth Workers in Secondary Schools (YWiSS). YWiSS is a Prime Minister's youth mental health project where social workers (also called youth workers or mentors) provide social work support services to the base 15% of high school students who are identified as having low school attendance or poor academic performance (Wylie & Felgate, 2016). YWiSS is a two-year intervention programme where a year 9 or 10 student meets a mentor once a week to discuss their progress in school (Wylie & Felgate, 2016). YWiSS mentors are contractually required to complete an SDQ with the student, their parent and/or a teacher at service entry, a designated mid-point (usually end of year one) and at service closure (end of the two years). YWiSS SDQ results are processed by the Youth in Minds online SDQ scoring tool, which identifies a young person's total difficulties score (out of 40) alongside a series of sub-scores by SDQ theme. YWiSS have collected SDQ scores for the past three years; however, MSD have not yet assessed the strengths and weaknesses of the SDQ tool based on the YWiSS data collected. In 2017, MSD announced that the SDQ information gathering and evaluation tool would be a contractual requirement for the SWiS service. Therefore, despite SDQ remaining untested for its practice and evaluation value in social work, it is being mandated at a service provider level in 2017 to 2018.

This article analyses YWiSS SDQ data at an aggregate level and speaks to one social service provider's assessment of

the strengths and limitations of the SDQ tool in the context of social work practice and service evaluation in Aotearoa New Zealand. As this article argues, aggregated SDQ scores, as a standalone social work practice and evaluation tool is limited. The findings do not seek to discredit the tool's screening and evaluation potentials. Instead, this article emphasises that SDQ represents one client screening and evaluative resource that practitioners could use alongside other practice and evaluation tools to ensure their practice is socially just and contextually responsive.

## Methodology

To analyse the strengths and weaknesses of the SDQ tool, YWiSS service data collected from 286 students between 2015 and 2017 were analysed. The data collected by YWiSS staff were stored in an Excel database where the SDQ scores are entered against each client at service entry, mid-point and exit points over the two-year intervention. The data were organised by SDQ scorer with youth self-reported scores, parent scores and teacher scores presented under thematic headings ranging from high, medium and low. The analysis of all scores by scorer and theme was favoured, as the SDQ database did not distinguish between clients who had exited the service early, or between clients who had three scores entered (youth, parent and teacher) as opposed to clients with only one or two scores entered. All scores were counted based on the high, medium and low score categories for youth, parent and teacher responses by year and thematic SDQ category. In the discussion that follows, the summarised scores for YWiSS are analysed at a service level. The service level approach was favoured as, once scores were broken down to a high school or worker level, fewer than seven students (2% of all clients) had at least two SDQ scores completed at the entry and exit point. The low scores are due to the challenges YWiSS staff face in getting the same young person, parent or teacher to complete an SDQ before a client leaves the service.

This body of research was guided by Presbyterian Support Northern (PSN) internal ethics process and best social work practice guidelines. All SDQ scores were collected by YWiSS mentors—each young person whose score was analysed had been provided with and signed a client rights' form and a consent form at service entry. Each form outlined the young person's rights and how the data would be used by PSN for reporting and research purposes. The forms identify the client's rights to see and withdraw any information. The author of this article is bound by PSN's internal codes of ethics, which is advised by senior management, an independent advisory panel and Māori caucus.

### Score analysis

SDQs have been a contractual requirement of Family Works Northern (FWN) YWiSS services since the services' inception; however, despite YWiSS SDQ data being collected for several years they have not yet been analysed by MSD to assess their usefulness as a client screening and outcome evaluation tool. The SDQ score ranges for client screening and evaluation purposes are provided in Table 1. Table 1 breaks down SDQ score ranges by the scorer, range (very high to very low) and thematic category. The latest SDQ scoring approach is seen on the right hand side of the table below and shows Youth in Minds categorisation of behavioural difficulty in 2017 compared to previous scores.

Table 1. SDQ Score Ranges Youth in Mind 2015-2017

|                              | Original 3 band categories |            |          | Newer 4 band categorisations |                                  |             |                       |
|------------------------------|----------------------------|------------|----------|------------------------------|----------------------------------|-------------|-----------------------|
|                              | Normal                     | Borderline | Abnormal | Close to average             | Slightly raised slightly lowered | High (/low) | Very high (/very low) |
| <b>Parent completed SDQ</b>  |                            |            |          |                              |                                  |             |                       |
| Total difficulties score     | 0-13                       | 14-16      | 17-40    | 0-13                         | 14-16                            | 17-19       | 20-40                 |
| Emotional problems score     | 0-3                        | 4          | 5-10     | 0-3                          | 4                                | 5-6         | 7-10                  |
| Conduct problems score       | 0-2                        | 3          | 4-10     | 0-2                          | 3                                | 4-5         | 6-10                  |
| Hyperactivity score          | 0-5                        | 6          | 7-10     | 0-5                          | 6-7                              | 8           | 9-10                  |
| Peer problems score          | 0-2                        | 3          | 4-10     | 0-2                          | 3                                | 4           | 5-10                  |
| Prosocial score              | 6-10                       | 5          | 0-4      | 8-10                         | 7                                | 6           | 0-5                   |
| Impact score                 | 0                          | 1          | 2-10     | 0                            | 1                                | 2           | 3-10                  |
| <b>Teacher completed SDQ</b> |                            |            |          |                              |                                  |             |                       |
| Total difficulties score     | 0-11                       | 12-15      | 16-40    | 0-11                         | 12-15                            | 16-18       | 19-40                 |
| Emotional problems score     | 0-4                        | 5          | 6-10     | 0-3                          | 4                                | 5           | 6-10                  |
| Conduct problems score       | 0-2                        | 3          | 4-10     | 0-2                          | 3                                | 4           | 5-10                  |
| Hyperactivity score          | 0-5                        | 6          | 7-10     | 0-5                          | 6-7                              | 8           | 9-10                  |
| Peer problems score          | 0-3                        | 4          | 5-10     | 0-2                          | 3-4                              | 5           | 6-10                  |
| Prosocial score              | 6-10                       | 5          | 0-4      | 6-10                         | 5                                | 4           | 0-3                   |
| Impact score                 | 0                          | 1          | 2-6      | 0                            | 1                                | 2           | 3-6                   |
| <b>Self-completed SDQ</b>    |                            |            |          |                              |                                  |             |                       |
| Total difficulties score     | 0-15                       | 16-19      | 20-40    | 0-14                         | 15-17                            | 18-19       | 20-40                 |
| Emotional problems score     | 0-5                        | 6          | 7-10     | 0-4                          | 5-17                             | 6           | 7-10                  |
| Conduct problems score       | 0-3                        | 4          | 5-10     | 0-3                          | 4                                | 5           | 6-10                  |
| Hyperactivity score          | 0-5                        | 6          | 7-10     | 0-5                          | 6                                | 7           | 8-10                  |
| Peer problems score          | 0-3                        | 4-5        | 6-10     | 0-2                          | 3                                | 4           | 5-10                  |
| Prosocial score              | 6-10                       | 5          | 0-4      | 7-10                         | 6                                | 5           | 0-4                   |
| Impact score                 | 0                          | 1          | 2-10     | 0                            | 1                                | 2           | 3-10                  |

Table 2, Table 3 and Table 4 show the aggregated SDQ scores for the YWiSS clients at service entry, mid-point and closure points between 2015 and 2017. The data capture all students within the YWiSS database and distinguish between student, parent and teacher SDQ scores. The findings from the analysis of the scores are summarised by SDQ theme. The overarching themes are any diagnosis and emotional, behavioural and hyperactivity. These categories and scores are what YWiSS staff are sent following entering the SDQ

score data in to the Youth in Mind online data tool. The raw SDQ data in the YWiSS database were broken down into ranges and thematic categories to identify (here in aggregate not individual client terms) what themes were scored high, medium or low by youth, parents and teachers at service entry, mid- and end-points. The tables compare the overall score counts for high (H), medium (M), and low (L) SDQ results at entry, mid-point and exit for the 286 youths listed as being within the YWiSS SDQ database.

Table 2. Total Entry SDQ Scores by Category, Difficulty Area and Range 2015-2017

| Entry           | Any Diagnosis |        |         | Emotional |        |         | Behavioural |        |         | Hyperactivity |        |         |
|-----------------|---------------|--------|---------|-----------|--------|---------|-------------|--------|---------|---------------|--------|---------|
|                 | Student       | Parent | Teacher | Student   | Parent | Teacher | Student     | Parent | Teacher | Student       | Parent | Teacher |
| Counts          |               |        |         |           |        |         |             |        |         |               |        |         |
| High            | 13            | 12     | 23      | 6         | 2      | 4       | 8           | 10     | 19      | 1             | 0      | 1       |
| Medium          | 52            | 12     | 44      | 15        | 12     | 13      | 18          | 10     | 28      | 45            | 11     | 45      |
| Low             | 77            | 31     | 40      | 121       | 41     | 88      | 116         | 35     | 58      | 95            | 45     | 61      |
| No Score (0)    | 144           | 231    | 179     | 144       | 231    | 181     | 144         | 231    | 181     | 145           | 230    | 179     |
| Total           | 286           | 286    | 286     | 286       | 286    | 286     | 286         | 286    | 286     | 286           | 286    | 286     |
| Minus no scores | 142           | 55     | 107     | 142       | 55     | 105     | 142         | 55     | 105     | 141           | 56     | 107     |
| % H             | 9%            | 22%    | 21%     | 4%        | 4%     | 4%      | 6%          | 18%    | 18%     | 1%            | 0%     | 1%      |
| % M             | 37%           | 22%    | 41%     | 11%       | 22%    | 12%     | 13%         | 18%    | 27%     | 32%           | 20%    | 42%     |
| % L             | 54%           | 56%    | 37%     | 85%       | 75%    | 84%     | 82%         | 64%    | 55%     | 67%           | 80%    | 57%     |
| Check           | 100%          | 100%   | 100%    | 100%      | 100%   | 100%    | 100%        | 100%   | 100%    | 100%          | 100%   | 100%    |

Table 3. Total Mid-point SDQ Scores by Category, Difficulty Area and Range 2015-2017

| Mid             | Any Diagnosis |        |         | Emotional |        |         | Behavioural |        |         | Hyperactivity |        |         |
|-----------------|---------------|--------|---------|-----------|--------|---------|-------------|--------|---------|---------------|--------|---------|
|                 | Student       | Parent | Teacher | Student   | Parent | Teacher | Student     | Parent | Teacher | Student       | Parent | Teacher |
| Counts          |               |        |         |           |        |         |             |        |         |               |        |         |
| High            | 10            | 3      | 9       | 7         | 2      | 1       | 4           | 1      | 9       | 0             | 0      | 2       |
| Medium          | 24            | 6      | 11      | 7         | 4      | 5       | 15          | 3      | 5       | 14            | 3      | 13      |
| Low             | 53            | 21     | 38      | 73        | 24     | 52      | 68          | 26     | 45      | 73            | 27     | 44      |
| No Score(0)     | 199           | 256    | 228     | 199       | 256    | 228     | 199         | 256    | 227     | 199           | 256    | 227     |
| Total           | 286           | 286    | 286     | 286       | 286    | 286     | 286         | 286    | 286     | 286           | 286    | 286     |
| Minus no scores | 87            | 30     | 58      | 87        | 30     | 58      | 87          | 30     | 59      | 87            | 30     | 59      |
| % H             | 11%           | 10%    | 16%     | 8%        | 7%     | 2%      | 5%          | 3%     | 15%     | 0%            | 0%     | 3%      |
| % M             | 28%           | 20%    | 19%     | 8%        | 13%    | 9%      | 17%         | 10%    | 8%      | 16%           | 10%    | 22%     |
| % L             | 61%           | 70%    | 66%     | 84%       | 80%    | 90%     | 78%         | 87%    | 76%     | 84%           | 90%    | 75%     |
| Check 100%      | 100%          | 100%   | 100%    | 100%      | 100%   | 100%    | 100%        | 100%   | 100%    | 100%          | 100%   | 100%    |

Table 4. Total Entry SDQ Scores by Category, Difficulty Area and Range 2015-2017

| Entry          | Any Diagnosis |        |         | Emotional |        |         | Behavioural |        |         | Hyperactivity |        |         |
|----------------|---------------|--------|---------|-----------|--------|---------|-------------|--------|---------|---------------|--------|---------|
|                | Student       | Parent | Teacher | Student   | Parent | Teacher | Student     | Parent | Teacher | Student       | Parent | Teacher |
| High           | 0             | 1      | 0       | 0         | 0      | 0       | 0           | 1      | 0       | 0             | 0      | 0       |
| Medium         | 3             | 2      | 4       | 0         | 2      | 0       | 2           | 0      | 2       | 2             | 2      | 3       |
| Low            | 21            | 9      | 12      | 24        | 10     | 16      | 22          | 11     | 14      | 22            | 10     | 13      |
| No Score (0)   | 262           | 274    | 270     | 262       | 274    | 270     | 262         | 274    | 270     | 262           | 274    | 270     |
| Total          | 286           | 286    | 286     | 286       | 286    | 286     | 286         | 286    | 286     | 286           | 286    | 286     |
| Minus no score | 24            | 12     | 16      | 24        | 12     | 16      | 24          | 12     | 16      | 24            | 12     | 16      |
| % H            | 0%            | 8%     | 0%      | 0%        | 0%     | 0%      | 0%          | 8%     | 0%      | 0%            | 0%     | 0%      |
| % M            | 13%           | 17%    | 25%     | 0%        | 17%    | 0%      | 8%          | 0%     | 13%     | 8%            | 17%    | 19%     |
| % L            | 88%           | 75%    | 75%     | 100%      | 83%    | 100%    | 92%         | 92%    | 88%     | 92%           | 83%    | 81%     |
| Check          | 100%          | 100%   | 100%    | 100%      | 100%   | 100%    | 100%        | 100%   | 100%    | 100%          | 100%   | 100%    |

It is important to note that, in Table 4, because response rates at exit were so low (highlighted by the number of zero scores in row four) the results emphasise the challenges faced by YWiSS staff in acquiring three completed SDQ forms at any time – particularly at service exit where, to date, only one youth had a SDQ completed by all three parties at entry, mid and exit points. The SDQ results from entry- and mid-points were the most consistently collected, and it was apparent that very few clients had three completed SDQ at any stage, and in most cases youth had only one or two scores entered at the entry- and mid-points.

The following subsections summarise the key findings by thematic SDQ category. Note that client, student or youth is used to refer to the young person engaged in the YWiSS service and that a high SDQ score refers to a more severe degree of difficulty, while a low score means the level of difficulty was minor. The author acknowledges the sample of clients was small and that the results will benefit from further statistical tests for data trends.

### Any diagnosis

At entry, the majority of client and parent scores identified that both parties thought the young person's difficulty levels overall

were low (54% and 56%). More students and teachers than parents felt the difficulties scores were in the medium range (students 37% and teachers 41%). It was parents and teachers, not the students who, at entry, stated stress scores were in the highest range (22%).

At the mid-point, the majority of youth, parent and teachers, scored overall difficulties low (over 60%), with less than 15% of all scorers stating that students' overall difficulties scores were high. It remained that youth self-identified an overall stress score of medium the most, followed by parents and teachers. Teachers' scores for overall stress at the mid-point were equal to parents at 20%.

At exit, because overall score rates were lowest, the results represented only a small sample of clients overall. At exit, 88% of all students had a low overall difficulties score, while 75% of all parents and teachers scored students overall difficulties scores in the low range. No young people had a cumulative stress score of high and no teachers scored clients as having high stress scores either. Twelve percent of youth, 17% of parents and 25% of teachers scored youth with a medium overall difficulty score at exit.

The overall diagnosis scores revealed that young people in YWiSS had predominantly

low difficulty scores from entry to exit (over 50%). Few scorers placed youth in the high stress score range at any point under this theme. Taken at face value, the SDQ scores align with the overall service mandate of YWiSS which is to provide mentoring and social work services to mainly low-risk clients in terms of their level of personal difficulty.

### Emotional SDQ scores

At entry, most students self-identified emotional scores in the medium range (41%); however, this was closely followed by 37% of students' self-identified scoring of emotional difficulty in the low range. Teachers and parents mostly stated that the youth's emotional difficulty level was low (74% and 84% respectively). Only 4% of teachers and parents had provided a high emotional difficulty score at service entry. This compared to 22% of students self-identifying an emotional difficulty score in the high range.

At the mid-point, 8% of youth had self-identified a high emotional difficulty score, while 7% of parents and 2% of teachers identified youth as having a high emotional difficulty score. Only 8% of youth self-identified a medium emotional difficulty score and 8% of teachers did the same. A total of 13% of parents felt their child had a medium emotional difficulties score. Overall, the emotional stress scores remained in the low bracket (sitting between 80% and 90% of respondents).

At exit, all emotional difficulties scores from youth and teachers were low, as was the overall number of scores provided. Of parents, 17% indicated that they felt their youth had a medium range emotional score; the remaining 83% scored their youth as having a low level of emotional difficulty.

Emotional difficulty scores between scorers were more varied at entry and exit compared to other SDQ themes. At the mid-point, there seemed to be more agreement between youth self-identified scores and parent and teacher

scores. The scores generated at entry suggest students felt they faced more emotional difficulties than their parents or teachers were willing to disclose. This suggests that clients felt more emotionally challenged than their parents or teachers could recognise or were willing to disclose.

### Behavioural SDQ scores

At entry, for the behavioural difficulties scores, 82% of youth respondents scored themselves low. At service entry, youth scored their behavioural difficulties less (compared to adult and teacher scores) in the high range (5%) and medium range (13%). Parents' and teachers' total behavioural scores were the same, scoring youth as having high levels of behavioural difficulty (18%); however, more teachers felt that students sat in the medium score range than did parents (18% parents and 27% teachers).

At the mid-point, youths' self-reported scores in the medium range were slightly higher (17%) for behavioural difficulties, but the high range remained the same as at entry. Parents' scores shifted in this category by the services mid-point, with a 13% drop in the high-level difficulties scores and an 8% drop in the medium range score. Overall, 87% of parents at the mid-point felt that their youth had transitioned to a low behavioural difficulties score. Teachers' scores in the high range dropped slightly, while medium scores dropped significantly from 27% (at entry) to 9% (at closure). Some 76% of teachers scored youths' behavioural difficulty low at the mid-point.

At exit, because overall score rates were lowest, the results predominantly sat in the low range. While a total of 92% of youth self-scored within a low behavioural difficulty range, only 8% of these sat in the medium range. Interestingly, there was a 5% increase in parents scoring youth in the high behavioural difficulties range at service exit. There were no medium range scores from parents, with the remaining 92% of parent scoring behavioural difficulties in the low

range. Teachers' exit scores in the medium range increased slightly from 9% to 12% but no teachers scored youth difficulties in the high range. Some 88% of teachers felt the youths' behavioural difficulties were in the low range at service exit.

Behavioural and hyperactivity scores were the most diverse between scoring points across all themes. These scores showed that youth seemed to self-identify lower scores of behavioural difficulties than did parents and teachers. Teachers, who knew youth from a classroom setting in particular felt (more so than parents) the young people they taught had more behavioural difficulties at service entry, with noticeable changes in their scores by the service mid-point. This would suggest the intervention had a positive impact on the young people's behaviours at home and school by the intervention's mid-point; interestingly however, by exit some young people's behaviours may have relapsed as they were scored in the medium range over the low range identified at the mid-point by their parents and teachers.

### Hyperactivity scores

SDQ hyperactivity scores were not well represented out of all areas of difficulty. A potential reason for this would be many people would not fit within this category because of the ambit and nature of the YWiSS service. The YWiSS service focuses on monitoring and encouraging school attendance and academic achievement, meaning any challenging behaviours identified by a social worker in the SDQ would see the student referred on to another specialist service provider.

At entry, hyperactivity difficulty scores in the high range were nonexistent in youth self-identified scores, parent or teacher scores. Medium scores were highest from teachers, representing 42% of entry scores. Hyperactivity scores in the high range were the next highest at entry where 32% of students and parents at 20% identified high levels of hyperactivity difficulty. Overall

hyperactivity scores were mostly in the low range (57% of teachers, 67% of students and 80% of parents' scores).

At the mid-point, no students or parents provided a high hyperactivity score and only two teachers scored a high level of hyperactive difficulty in their students. Mid-range hyperactivity scores shrank by half for all groups at the mid-point. The low range scores were 84% for students, 90% for parents and 75% for teachers. Teachers continued to have the highest percentage of mid-range scores at the services mid-point.

At closure, all scorers had a high-range score of zero. Eight percent of youths self-identified scores, 17% of adults' scores (7% higher than at the mid-point) and 19% of teachers' scores sat in mid-range at the exit point. The low score ranges were highest, with 92% of students self-scores, 83% of teachers and 81% of parents scores sitting in this range. Overall, hyperactivity scores were not well represented within the YWiSS service particularly at service mid- and exit-points where fewer scores were available due to SDQs not being completed.

### Discussion of scores

Based on the above analysis of aggregated scores, SDQ as a client screening and outcome evaluation resource showed a number of gaps in relation to what SDQ can communicate to social work practitioners, social service providers and government agency funders. Scores by theme revealed that students, parents and teachers had varied opinions about the young person's difficulties at service entry, mid-point and exit. Under the headings to follow, the implications of these differences between scores by SDQ theme are discussed in relation to reporting results to funders and for social work practitioners using the tool. The discussion focuses on the aggregated findings, as the ministry will only be using SDQ data to measure service quality and client outcomes at an aggregated, national service level at this stage.<sup>ii</sup>



### *Aggregated scores: Implications for reporting results to funders*

With SDQs being compulsory for SWiS from July 2018, providers' SDQ data collection and reporting focuses on analysis of aggregated SDQ scores. Each provider will submit their SDQ scores through an online tool to MSD and provide data and narrative report summarising the scores alongside traditional client satisfaction results and success stories. In analysing YWiSS SDQ data, it was apparent that the SDQ scores provided a disjointed picture of overall service quality and client outcomes for several reasons. In particular, data entry gaps and the variability in scorer results by SDQ theme from entry to exit made it difficult to deduce consistent findings. The SDQ scores, best represented at entry and mid-points, further did not show any coherent relationships between difficulty themes at entry or how these difficulties diminished or intensified over time. Again, tracking themes was difficult due to very few clients having two SDQs completed at service exit by any of the scorers. YWiSS staff identified early exit and the challenge of asking the same teachers, and parents to complete an SDQ, as reasons for fewer closure scores.

Based on the findings from the aggregated YWiSS data at entry, mid- and exit-points, the majority of SDQ scores sat in the low range (over 50%). This suggests that, at an aggregate level, SDQ provided limited insights into the complexity of clients' service needs at entry or outcomes at closure within the FWN YWiSS service. As YWiSS is a mentoring service working with the base 15% of young adults with academic or attendance challenges these "low" difficulty scores are unsurprising. The overall lower aggregated SDQ scores align with the services' mandate to work with clients who present low levels of service need with students identified with complex behavioural difficulties being referred to specialist services. As a result, if YWiSS SDQ data were aggregated for reporting need or service outcomes to the funder at this

stage, few insights could be communicated about specific cases of high need and risk or outcomes as client, parent and teacher SDQ scores were highly variable or non-existent as the service progressed towards its two-year completion point.

SWiS social service providers have been informed that SDQ from a funder perspective is being used to establish a longitudinal evidence base, substantiate need for increased funding for SWiS services, and illustrate the quality of SWiS practice through improvements in client difficulty scores by SDQ theme. Based on analysis of two years of YWiSS SDQ data, there were no coherent thematic shifts between aggregated scores taken at entry and exit-points. Aligned with the SDQ literature, there were also significant variations between scorers at all points and there were very few cases where two, let alone all three parties had completed an SDQ to rate the young person's behaviour at service entry, mid- or exit-points (Sargisson et al., 2016; Kersten, Czuba et al., 2016). For service providers, this suggests that SDQ alone cannot evidence practice quality or client outcomes to funders when aggregated at a service level. These findings do not diminish the value of the tool on case-by-case basis where social workers can use the SDQ as one of a suite of practice tools to assess client need, plan an intervention and evaluate change (Kersten, Czuba et al., 2016). Instead, these findings suggest that the aggregation of SDQ data will be fraught with challenges due to factors such as scorer variation and poor SDQ response rates. In light of these insights, social workers should continue to screen clients' service needs and evaluate their experiences in a way that uses SDQ as one of a suite of practice tools. The SDQ's creators even acknowledged that SDQ is *one* type of evaluation tool that should be used against other qualitative based formats such as surveys or interviews (Youth in Mind, 2017).

As funders continue to mandate specific screening and evaluation tools within social work it is important that all parties are transparent around the strengths and

limitations of how screening and evaluation tools may work (and the likely challenges) at all levels. Agreeing with Bruns et al. (2014), more communication between social service providers around how mandated practice tools work on the ground would substantiate stronger arguments for more comprehensive testing and review before they are contractually required. This would ensure that providers have more robust, cross-agency tested, and collaboratively informed client screening and evaluation tools which can communicate client and service need (as well as quality) more comprehensively to funders.

### *Aggregated scores: Implications for social work practitioners*

As outlined in the introduction of this article, Aotearoa New Zealand social work practitioners are guided by a commitment to social justice, humanity and human rights but work within a contract-outcome-over-client-outcome service model. This means social workers must consider the needs of their clients in the context of meeting their organisations' contractual requirements (such as service volumes) and KPIs (such as attendance and client satisfaction). This section discusses how the aggregation of SDQ scores to measure social work outcomes and practice quality may present challenges for SWiS practitioners and social work more generally in Aotearoa New Zealand. Although MSD has not mandated SDQ as a standalone assessment or evaluation tool (as it is voluntary to complete), it is important to consider that, under a contract-outcome funding model, practitioners are asked to prioritise this tool in their practice. In the 2018 SWiS service specifications Oranga Tamariki asserted:

The SDQ is an appropriate measurement tool for SWiS as it is internationally validated, can be used in initial screening, and can be applied after an intervention to track levels of change (and hence success of an intervention). It can also be used to generate key performance

indicators such as the percentage of children who have improved on before / after scores. (MSD, 2018, p. 25)

The service specification does not inhibit social workers from using existing practice tools such as Strength or Bear Cards (St Lukes Innovation Resources, 2018), Three Houses (Oranga Tamariki Practice Centre, 2017) and the Blob Tree (Wilson, 2017) for information gathering or evaluation purposes; however, it implies that the SDQ can somehow accurately express what a successful intervention looks like. The issue with this assertion is twofold. First, it empowers SDQ as a resource that can accurately measure behavioural change in social work settings without any evidence it can do so. The assertion that SDQ alone represents a comprehensive information gathering and evaluation tool is especially troubling from a social justice perspective. It is troubling as the SDQ does not invite children under age 11 to provide insights into their behavioural strengths and challenges. Instead, the SDQ privileges parent and teacher scores as an accurate representation of the young person's needs. Children's voices matter as they offer unique perspectives of social life, as their lives are multifaceted as active social agents in society (Bruce, 2014; Kirby et al., 2003; O'Neill, 2014; Tisdall, 2012). To be socially just in social work is to collaborate with people of all ages, cultures and abilities to help them take control of their environment and circumstances to alleviate human suffering at an individual and community level (ANZASW, 2014, p. 7). To take on such a task it would be prudent for social workers to have the freedom to use tools which best respond to the ability, personal and contextual needs of their clients. The SDQ, as a mandated practice tool in YWiSS and SWiS, therefore requires further assessment relative to how it will implicate social worker's ability to engage with children genuinely when they are not invited to express what they want out of an intervention. A key question to test the social justness of SDQ in social work will therefore be asking whether a young

child's rights, aspirations and insights are given equal consideration alongside their parent and teachers in an SDQ setting. The ministry has maintained that voluntary client satisfaction surveys will capture under-11s' voice and evidence intervention outcomes; this assertion will also need to be tested over time.

The second concern with the assertion that SDQ accurately measures client outcomes is that it overlooks the literature on the difficulties in administering the SDQ to clients of different cultures or with language or literacy challenges. Differences in ethnicity, context, age, gender, sexuality, ability and class feed in to how different people experience the world, identify their place in it and engage with others (Gibson-Graham, 2016). Kersten, Dudley et al.'s (2016) findings suggest that some individuals or families, although guided through the SDQ question by question, faced challenges about:

- Some questions being inappropriate based on their cultural background. Interviews with ethically distinct parents and families found that the exclusion of context made some questions inappropriate, for example, a Māori respondent articulated that, without reference to colonisation, their scores would be misleading.
- The social worker leading the scorer when they asked questions about a word or a question's meaning. This was a particular concern where the scorers had language or literacy barriers.
- Parents feeling nervous about the consequences (such as their children being taken away) that may flow from answering a question in a certain way.

The above issues illustrate how the SDQ (as it is currently designed and administered) can be challenging to administer in social work settings due to barriers around culture, literacy and language and its exclusion of contextual difference. Kersten, Dudley

et al.'s (2016, p. 5) study also found that it took a significant amount of time for some questions to be broken down so that the question's meaning would be understood. There were particular challenges in translating terms to non- or limited-English-speaking parties or where a question had two parts, for example nervous and clingy, were understood as two different things by some scorers despite being in the same question (Kersten, Dudley et al., 2016). Kersten, Dudley et al. (2016) also found that most parents felt that the SDQ's value and purpose were unclear, and the questions themselves were seen as challenging to decipher without assistance. Māori parents in particular felt that SDQ would only be suitable if a sit-down, face-to-face conversation was held around the questions with their social worker because, without explanation, there was concern about how the tool would reflect on them as parents, wondering what consequences lay behind the boxes they ticked (Kersten, Dudley et al., 2016, pp. 4-5). As no interviews were conducted in this body of research, a direct correlation to Kersten, Dudley et al.'s (2016) findings is not possible but is analysed to provide an example of why SDQ scores may have been so variable between scorers or no response was given. SDQ, although seen as easy to use in psychology circles (Vostanis, 2006), thus remains largely untested in social work practice for its potential strengths and weaknesses as an information gathering and evaluation tool.

## Conclusions

Based on analysis of the YWiSS SDQ scores collected over a two-year period, it is unclear how SDQ, as an aggregate social work quality and client outcome evaluation tool adds value to social work practice, or provides more robust evidence to inform funders of service quality or need. Irrespective of evidence, the MSD will roll out the SDQ within the SWiS service, alongside the existing YWiSS service in July 2018. As of January 2018, all that is known at social service provider level is that SDQ will

be a voluntary screening tool at service entry and as a client evaluation tool at closure. Based on initial analysis of the YWiSS SDQs, what the tool can actually tell social work practitioners and social service providers in terms of overall service quality or client outcomes requires further investigation and comprehensive debate due to:

- Inconsistency in score collection, particularly at mid- and exit-SDQ points. Score collection was particularly inconsistent for parents and teachers at mid- and exit-points.
- YWiSS data having predominantly mid-to-low difficulties scores. Scores in this range meant there was limited change between service entry and exit difficulty scores by SDQ theme. This was the case for hyperactivity, emotional and behavioural scores.
- The purpose and implications of the SDQ and the SDQ questions not always being clear to scorers as young people, parents, whānau and teachers.

Based on the issues outlined earlier, SDQ needs to be reviewed comprehensively as it is rolled out in Aotearoa New Zealand social work settings. It may be that SDQ needs to be re-designed so that the questions are made more contextually responsive to the social work practice values and scorers in Aotearoa New Zealand (Kersten, Dudley et al., 2016). This should include SDQ translations for Māori and Pacific groups and robust discussion about the purpose of the SDQ's questions to scorers to avoid confusion and anxiety (Kersten, Dudley et al., 2016). Practitioners should therefore use SDQ as one of a range of information gathering and outcome evaluation tools to meet their contractual obligations, while also speaking to the unique components of their client's wellbeing, which is specific to their socio-ecological context.

To ensure better practitioner buy-in, funders also need to be much clearer about why

SDQ is being rolled out and, over time, provide evidence of the value SDQ adds to social work practice generally and SWiS specifically; and why it is being mandated into social work practice over other practice and outcome evaluation tools. In turn, it is important to consider that no self-report SDQ exists for children younger than 11 years of age, meaning the tool does not fit well within Aotearoa New Zealand social work's framework of social justice, inclusiveness and human rights. The exclusion of children under 11 years is a key consideration for SWiS practitioners because, for providers like FWN, SWiS work mostly with children under 11 years, with SDQ actively devaluing children's firsthand accounts of what they need and how they measure personal development over time. This does not align well with Aotearoa New Zealand social workers' commitment to help all people to take control of their own behaviours and their environment as SDQ privileges parents' and teachers' insights over children under 11 years. Whether client satisfaction surveys can capture under 11s' feedback adequately will need to be considered as SDQ is rolled out in SWiS to ensure children's voices are heard relative to how they respond to the interventions they receive.

This article provides a preliminary lens into some of the practical and analytical implications of aggregating SDQ results for client screening and outcome evaluation purposes in social work practice. Over time, as SDQ results are collected, the ministry, social workers and social service providers need to do more to test the strengths and limitations of the SDQ tool comprehensively. To test the SDQ, it will be crucial to consider the implications of its use in funding allocation and on SWiS social workers and social work more generally.

### Declaration

I declare that I, Emma O'Neill, have no conflict of interest with *Aotearoa New Zealand Association of Social Workers (ANZASW)*. All work was completed by Emma O'Neill,

Evaluation Analyst at Presbyterian Support Northern as part of her normal duties as the organisation's evaluation analyst, with no conflict of interest as per organisational standards. Work was also completed in line with Presbyterian Support Northern Code of Ethics and no information which would identify clients is disclosed.

## Notes

- i SDQ questionnaires cannot be self-completed by people younger than 11 years of age. Youth in Mind (2016) state that, for children under 11 years, a parent/caregiver, teacher or other professional is best to judge the young person's level of difficulty.
- ii The extent of what aggregate refers to (e.g., practitioner, school, regionally or nationally), is yet to be determined contractually.

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