
Social work at Whakatipuria Teen Parent Unit

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Abstract

A formative evaluation of social work services at Whakatipuria Teen Parent Unit (TPU) was undertaken to improve the delivery of social work support services in order to maintain and enhance the achievement of student outcomes. The views of participants were sought regarding the nature and purpose of social work support in the TPU context, and how this support could be improved. The findings presented are consistent with research that demonstrates that teen mothers respond positively to wrap-around support at their high school. Two substantive conclusions are drawn from the research. First, that a relatively high degree of consensus exists among key stakeholders regarding: (a) the purpose of social work services (i.e. that they contribute to educational achievement, social skills development and outcomes for children); and (b) the range of tasks associated with this service (i.e. advocacy, counselling and family intervention/support). Second, there was less clarity regarding the social work practice framework that informs the delivery of social work services. While there was evidence of core social work practice approaches/models (e.g. a holistic approach and strengths-based practice), a strong, shared understanding did not emerge from the responses of participants. It is suggested that a review of the foundational social work practice framework be completed with a focus on models of assessment and intervention, and joint planning protocols between the social worker and teachers.

Introduction

This paper reports findings from a formative evaluation undertaken at Whakatipuria Teen Parent Unit (TPU) to improve the delivery of social work support services in order to maintain and enhance the achievement of student outcomes (Dale & Lockwood, 2011). The paper has six parts. In the first, the background of the TPU is outlined. Next, key themes taken from a review of literature regarding Social Workers in Schools (SWiS) are discussed. Third, a brief outline of the research method is provided, and two sections then follow in which the findings of the study are presented and discussed. The final section offers a summary of observations and suggestions regarding the development of the social work role.

Background

The TPU (which opened in 2003 and is managed and staffed by Freyberg High School), together with Nga Rito o Te Puawaitanga Early Childhood Centre (which is managed by

the Learning and Growing Together Trust (LATT or Trust)), comprise the Teen Parent Education Centre. The Centre has been located in a purpose-built facility at Freyberg High School since 2005.

The SWiS programme does not extend to the TPU due to the decile rating of Freyberg High School. Therefore, in addition to providing early childhood education for children of students attending the TPU, the LGTT has also assumed responsibility for providing social support services to students. To this end it was thought a social worker who would engage students 'in the context of their whanau, educational community and wider community' could best provide support. Key tasks identified for this social worker were: involvement in intake planning; liaison between the teaching staff in each programme; undertaking needs and strengths assessment for students; provision of support, advocacy and brokerage services; and follow up regarding non-attendance (LGTT memorandum, n.d.). In February 2008, Methodist Social Services was contracted to provide the services of a social worker for 20 hours per week. This service is funded by the Trust, which secures grants via contestable funding applications from both central government and philanthropic sources.

Literature review

Drawing on the substantive literature review presented in the formative evaluation report, attention here is focused upon social workers in New Zealand schools, research on teen parenting programmes and New Zealand research on teen parent units.

Social workers in schools in New Zealand

Smail (2004, p.1-2) draws attention to the link between educational opportunity and broader outcomes (such as socialisation, economic position and societal status), and to the potential contribution of social work in schools to the educational and social outcomes of students. In New Zealand, the SWiS programme was developed in 1999 as part of Strengthening Families, a government-funded initiative that seeks to ensure that families have access to appropriate support services. This initiative involved the following government agencies: Child, Youth and Family Service (CYF), that provided funding and contract management; Te Puni Kokiri (Maori Development Ministry); and the ministries of Health, Education and Pacific Island Affairs. The SWiS initiative provides school-based social services that seek to enhance the social, educational and health outcomes of students (Chapman, 2010, p.7; Evaluation Associates & Massey University, 2002, p.15).

Key characteristics of the SWiS programme can be summarised as follows: involvement in the service is voluntary; there is a focus on early intervention and prevention; emphasis is placed on low decile (1-5) primary and intermediate schools; efforts are directed towards the special needs of Maori and Pacific children and families; intervention is based on a holistic approach involving students, their family / whanau and other agencies; and emphasis is placed on a strengths perspective (Chapman, 2010; Evaluation Associates & Massey University, 2002; Smail, 2004).

Reporting on perceptions of the effectiveness of SWiS, Chapman (2010, p.2) identified the following factors as being important to the social worker's success: that the school principal be well informed on the role of the social worker; that the social worker develops effective

networks with core services in order to provide a 'wrap around' service to students; that the social worker operates in partnership with the employing agency; that the potential isolation of the social work role is mitigated by the development of a supportive team structure; and that client engagement is voluntary.

SWiS was introduced in secondary schools in 1999 with 12 social workers located in four pilot areas. The following year the programme was extended with a further 70 social workers appointed to schools throughout New Zealand (Chapman, 2010; Smail, 2004). The service is funded by CYF and contracted to a range of community organisations.

Social work in secondary schools has the following characteristics: the focus of intervention is with the individual student, and family / whanau are only involved with the consent of the student; assistance can be provided with regard to a range of issues such as education, health, family relationships and social skills; and students may also participate in groups and programmes (for example, cultural groups and programmes to address addictions) (Child, Youth & Family, 2011).

Clearly, funding constraints have placed limits on the availability of SWiS services at both primary / intermediate and secondary school levels. While the use of decile ratings provides a rationale for targeting which schools will receive services, it is apparent that many other students could also benefit from assistance. The employment of the social worker at Whakatipuria TPU represents a local initiative taken in response to perceived student need at a school that was ineligible for direct SWiS services.

Research on teen parenting programmes

Concern regarding teen parenting is evident in most Western countries. International research suggests that many problems usually associated with adolescent pregnancy and parenting can be diminished by social support and school-based programmes providing counselling, health care, health education and education in child development to the young parents (Williams & Sadler, 2001). In particular the research shows that teen parent programmes offering childcare support can influence both parent and child, contributing to: improved health care for the child; and to advantages such as improved grades, a decrease in repeat births, fewer mental health issues and improved likelihood of high school completion for the parent. They may also enhance the parent-child relationship and decrease the incidence of child neglect or abuse (Williams & Sadler, 2001). Teen parents participating effectively in such programmes are in effect role-modelling positive parenting outcomes for the next generation of otherwise potential state dependents. According to Corcoran (1998), therefore, comprehensive programmes for pregnant and parenting teens offering health, educational, vocational, and counselling services and life skills training lead to long-term positive outcomes.

In New Zealand, Wylie, Stewart, Hope & Culshaw (2009) reported on practices targeted at meeting the needs of teen parents and their children. Drawing from this comprehensive report, the importance of social support to teen parents is of relevance to the present paper. Young parents can be at high risk of social isolation and the value of programmes (including teen parent units) that are able to bring them together was identified. It was also noted that the value of such interaction extended beyond the immediate purpose of the activity, and reference was made to significant mental health benefits (Wylie et al. 2009, p.8).

New Zealand research on teen parent units

The Education Review Office (ERO) (2007) completed an evaluation of 17 teen parent units (including Whakatipuria TPU). The report is an aggregation of information drawn from previous reviews that considered: the quality of curriculum provision; the quality of governance and management; and the quality of health and safety provision. While the question of the provision of social work services was not directly engaged, the relevance of such services was clearly noted as follows: '...the quality of education provided to students in teen parent units could be improved if staff ... helped students seek community and government assistance to meet the pastoral needs of their students' (Education Review Office, 2007, p.2).

Poelzleitner (2007) explored the social support context of the students at Whakatipuria TPU, interviewing 20 students and two staff members to identify issues that affect student attendance and achievement at the TPU. Three key themes emerged from interviews with the students. First, the importance of social support was identified, with family members (identified by 55% of students) and partners/boyfriends (35%) being the main sources. It was also noted that to be effective, supportive relationships should be trusting, caring and non-judgmental. Second, the students expressed some clear aspirations regarding the future for both themselves and their children. Seventy-five percent of students identified having healthy/well-educated children as a core focus for the future. Other strongly held aspirations related to financial security (65%), home ownership (65%) and tertiary education (60%). The third theme related to the difficulties/barriers that were perceived to affect goal attainment. The two primary barriers identified were financial difficulties (85%) and a lack of family supports (70%).

The TPU staff identified a number of social issues they felt unable to address fully but which they considered to impact on students. These issues included: managing crises and dangerous situations; advocacy; support; transport; and meeting cultural needs. The staff advocated strongly for the appointment of an on-site support person. On the basis of these responses from students and staff, Poelzleitner (2007) presented a range of recommendations regarding the provision of social support at the TPU, including: that a support worker be located on-site; that a holistic approach be adopted, focusing on whanau development and delivered in a culturally appropriate way; and that the support worker role should include crisis intervention, counselling and advocacy.

In 2008 Methodist Social Services conducted an evaluation of social work services via a questionnaire provided to students at the TPU. The students reported high levels of satisfaction with services received and drew a positive association between receiving support from the social worker and being able to participate in their study programme. Furthermore, the receipt of social work support was identified as assisting students in their role as parents; for example, resolving financial issues and reducing levels of stress (Methodist Social Services, 2009).

In a report on sole parenting in New Zealand completed by the Ministry of Social Development (2010), the importance of family in providing 'social, emotional, and practical support' was highlighted along with the role of teen parent units and other services. Those who attended a teen parent unit or received support from other community-based services saw these organisations, and the adults they had contact with through them, as a key to moving forward with their lives.

Collins (2010) reported on a follow-up study of resilience in teenage mothers. Nine of the 13 participants had attended a teen parent unit. The significant role of the unit was noted as follows: those who had attended a teen parent unit experienced a comprehensive and intensive service that provided opportunities to continue their education, gave focus to their lives, provided access to skilled and competent adults, and provided a range of on-site services for themselves and their children (Collins, 2010, p.3). Further, Collins commented that the social support provided to the students attending the unit enabled them to 'get on with their lives'. The importance of 'ongoing and dependable support' provided in a non-judgmental manner was emphasised (Collins 2010, p.33).

In 2010, ERO reviewed Whakatipuria TPU, focusing upon the quality of student support and the physical and emotional safety of staff and students. It was concluded that: (1) the memorandum of understanding between Freyberg High School and the community trust outlines a clear vision for the teen parent unit of, 'innovation, caring and excellence'; (2) the strategic directions of the host school are reflected in the teen parent unit strategic documents; (3) goals and targets are closely aligned; (4) an ethos of collaboration to improve outcomes for students is evident (Education Review Office, 2010, p.3).

However, notwithstanding the employment of a social worker on a permanent basis, no mention was made of the contribution of social work support at the TPU. The only mention of actions taken to address the pastoral needs of students was as follows: 'A wide range of outside agencies is suitably referred to for pastoral care and support.' (Education Review Office, 2010, p.3).

In 2011, updating the 2007 report, ERO released an evaluation of teen parent units. It was noted that 'students often have a wide range of personal needs that have to be met before they can effectively engage in education' (Education Review Office, 2011, p.1). Furthermore, the relationship between educational achievement and the meeting of other needs was emphasised: teen parents are at high risk of under-achievement because of the difficulty of combining education with their responsibilities as parents. Some of the main challenges for these students include disruption to their schooling, being emotionally unprepared for parenting and loss of social contact with their peers (Education Review Office, 2011, p. 7).

One of the conclusions of the 2007 ERO report was reiterated, namely that the quality of education for teen parents could be improved if 'staff helped students seek community and government assistance to meet their pastoral needs instead of teachers undertaking a mainly pastoral role' (Education Review Office, 2011, p.8).

It is of interest that the ERO evaluation framework does not specifically address the issue of meeting the pastoral needs of students. The failure of the ERO report to acknowledge the contribution made by the provision of social work support services at teen parent units where such services are made available through the efforts of partner trusts falls outside the ambit of this paper.

Conclusion

The provision of social work support in New Zealand schools is supported by central government and now spans primary, intermediate and secondary schools. However, access to

SWiS by students who would benefit from social work support services is limited by the decile-based targeting system. While the efficacy of social work intervention in schools is subject to ongoing evaluation, on the basis of available evidence it can be concluded that the benefits of this work are recognised by clients, service provider, and funders.

International research demonstrates emphatically that teen mothers respond positively to wrap-around support at their high school. It is imperative that these mothers are encouraged to remain engaged with the school and are simultaneously offered parent education and childcare. When this has been offered it emerges as a strong indicator for better outcomes for all concerned. The role of a social worker involved in on-site problem solving, health education and counselling has been shown to be important and necessary for the success of teen parents, both as young mothers and later in life. These findings are supported by New Zealand studies.

Drawing upon the above review, three points can be made regarding the provision of social work support to teen parents. First, that such support is linked to educational achievement, social skills development (e.g. parenting, self-confidence) and outcomes for children (e.g. greater security). Second, in the teen parent unit context, key social work tasks include advocacy, counselling and family intervention/support. Finally, that social work support is linked to meeting clients' needs, e.g. relationship issues, parenting, housing, income and legal matters.

Method

The information presented in this paper was collected as part of a formative evaluation of the provision of social work services at Whakatipuria TPU. The research participants comprised three groups: first, 16 students enrolled at the TPU (all female); second, three staff employed at the TPU and early childhood centre; and third, the School Director responsible for the TPU, and the Chairperson of the early childhood centre governance board.

The first two groups are directly involved in the daily operations of the TPU and it is by examining their perceptions and issues experienced that an understanding can be developed with regard to the contribution of social work support to the achievement of student outcomes. The third group, involved in the management and governance of the TPU, is able to provide an 'external' perspective founded upon in-depth knowledge of the TPU's aims and objectives.

Data was collected from research participants via structured interview schedules designed for each of the three groups. The schedules comprised questions regarding the purpose and nature of social work support in the TPU context, and how this support could be improved.

Research findings

Substantive points drawn from the participants' perceptions and experiences regarding the role of the social worker at the TPU are presented in five sections as follows: the current role of the social worker; the link between social work support and attitude towards school work; the link between social work support and general coping; the link between social work support and parenting; and suggestions for improvement in the provision of social work support.

Table one. Student characteristics (who completed the background questionnaire - N.20).

Age	N.	Ethnicity	N.	Children	N.	Relationship Status	N.	Living Arrangements	N.
16	3	Maori	9	U 12 mths	11	Single	8	Own with child	5
17	4	European	10	1-2 years	9	De facto	8	With partner	9
18	5	Other	1	3-4 years	6	Married	1	With family	3
19	5					Not stated	3	With others	2
20+	3							Not stated	1

The current role of the social worker

Eighty-seven responses were received from the 16 participating students to questions regarding the role of the social worker. These responses were grouped under the headings of advocacy (64% of responses) and personal support (36%).

Responses with regard to advocacy concerned the social worker in an advocacy role on behalf of the student. Five areas of advocacy were noted: Work and Income New Zealand (WINZ) – issues included benefit entitlements, food and emergency needs grants; accommodation – issues included liaison with Housing New Zealand and resolution of disputes with landlords; food – the social worker assisted students with obtaining emergency assistance from WINZ and access to city food banks; Inland Revenue Department – regarding child support payments; and financial – issues included budget advice and management of debts.

Personal support concerned the social worker's provision of individualised support to the student. Four areas of support were noted, namely: counselling/support – characterised by the social worker listening to the student, maintaining a non-judgmental attitude and offering unconditional positive support; parenting – students valued the opportunity to discuss issues regarding their role as a parent and support to develop additional coping skills; one student mentioned receiving support regarding anger management; and another disclosed an incident of domestic violence.

The social worker identified crisis intervention, advocacy, counselling and working with whanau as the primary components of the social work role. Most of the advocacy role was characterised as involving practical issues such as resolving benefit entitlements, housing issues and legal matters, while an individual counselling approach addressed more personal issues such as relationships, parenting and stress. The social worker used counselling skills and discussed options with her clients, empowering them to take action and make informed decisions. A key objective of intervention was to assist the students to 'settle back into school life'.

For the Head Teacher at Nga Rito the primary benefits of having a social worker at the TPU related: first, to providing support to students in their role as parents 'so that they can be happy at home'; second, to being an advocate for students in relation to issues such as housing and income support; and finally, she observed that the TPU was a 'happier and calmer place' largely because of the influence of the social worker.

The Chairperson of the Trust identified a range of tasks undertaken by the social worker: 'WINZ, housing, police, court and social impact issues'. In meeting these social needs of

students the 'the load of the [teaching] staff' was thought to be reduced, enabling them to concentrate on meeting student educational needs.

The link between social work support and attitude towards schoolwork

Fifty-six percent of the participating students identified a positive relationship between receiving social work support and their attitude towards schoolwork. One third of these students perceived an association between social work support and a reduction in stress, an increased ability to focus on their studies and their ability to maintain a positive attitude.

The Head Teacher at the TPU claimed that prior to the appointment of the social worker many students were in a 'state of crisis' and the demand on teachers to respond to student crises meant that 'teaching came last ...[and this was] reflected in achievement'. Following the social worker's appointment a difference in the attitude of students was noticeable. They were able to see the social worker and issues were quickly resolved.

The School Director considered that the social worker had contributed to the development of a positive culture within the TPU that was reflected in improved schooling, a significant improvement in the most recent ERO report and the creation of a culture of learning.

The link between social work support and general coping

Seventy-five percent of the participating students identified a link between receiving support from the social worker and their general coping, while 20 percent advised that they had not accessed any services from the social worker. The types of support identified by students who had received social work assistance were listening, solving problems and the provision of information.

The link between social work support and parenting

Fifty percent of the students commented on how receiving support from the social worker exerted a positive effect on their parenting ability, while 25 percent stated there was no relationship between the two. The effects identified were: feeling more 'in control' as a parent; enjoying spending improved time with the child; child was more settled; and spending more time bonding with the baby.

The Head Teacher at Nga Rito also noted a positive association between the work of the social worker and the relationship between mothers and their tamariki. In particular, it was noted that: there was a 'flow-down' effect between the mother being more settled and the quality of the relationship with the child; the mother and child's basic physical needs were being met; and that the child's emotional needs were being met.

Suggestions for improvement in the provision of social work support

Staff at the TPU, the School Director and the Trust Chairperson were invited to comment on how the provision of social work support could be improved.

The Head Teacher at Nga Rito referred to the distinction between the role of Nga Rito staff (to teach) and that of the social worker (to provide support to students) and suggested that the social work role be made full time (currently 20 hours per week).

The Head Teacher at the TPU did not make any specific suggestions for change, but observed that: the social worker had formed effective networks within the community,

which made resolving issues 'a lot easier' for students; and that teaching staff enjoyed a collaborative relationship with the social worker, in particular with regard to the resolution of student issues.

The School Director suggested a need for greater role clarity, clearer objectives and assessment of outcomes for the social worker position.

Discussion of findings

The findings are considered in relation to, first, the construction of social work support in the TPU; and second, the characteristics and key success factors for SWiS. To what degree does current practice align with the substantive points identified in the literature review?

Social work support in the TPU

The findings regarding the provision of social work support are congruent with the key features identified in the literature review; in particular, that teen mothers are likely to respond positively to wrap-around support.

Social work was believed to be linked to educational achievement, social skills development and positive outcomes for children. For social work intervention and educational achievement the link perceived was indirect via the development of more positive attitudes, stress reduction and the management of crises – all of which enabled students to better focus on their schoolwork. The social worker's major contribution for teachers was to the attainment of a more settled learning environment. Given the key social work tasks undertaken it can be inferred that the main areas of social skill growth related to the development of problem-solving capacities and parenting skills. Positive outcomes for children were noted with reference being made to parents spending improved time with children, the meeting of the child's emotional needs and enhanced parent/child relationships.

In the TPU context, key social work tasks included advocacy, counselling and family intervention/support. Advocacy was noted in 64 percent of student responses regarding the role of the social worker, and their construction of counselling is congruent with the definition provided by Chang, Scott & Decker (2009, p.xxv.) as '... the many activities engaged in by practitioners when working to facilitate change with individuals, families, and groups'. There was clear evidence that the social worker provided students with support and intervention that focused upon enhancing the students' parenting skills. The social worker identified 'working with whanau' as a core component of her role.

Social work support was linked to meeting clients' needs. The key social work tasks identified by both students and the social worker were characterised by responses to issues/needs raised by the students. The social worker was characterised most strongly as an advocate and a support person. In particular, value was placed on the social worker's ability to listen, maintain a non-judgmental attitude and to offer unconditional positive regard and support.

While there is evidence of core social work practice approaches/models (e.g. a holistic approach and strengths-based practice) a strong, shared understanding did not emerge from the responses of the participants (it is acknowledged that the construction of practice was not the focus of the evaluation).

Characteristics and key success factors for SWiS

While the social worker's employment at the TPU was not part of the SWiS programme, there was a high level of congruence between the practitioner's approach and core characteristics and success factors associated with SWiS.

A first characteristic of SWiS, early intervention and prevention, was evident in the social worker's effort to address issues raised by students in a timely manner to avoid escalation of the problem and to reduce any negative impact upon the learning environment. The second characteristic, a holistic approach, was evident in the use of an ecological framework that included engagement with a broad range of agencies and organisations within the community. Finally, while not mentioned specifically as an underlying practice approach, there was clear evidence that the social worker's practice reflected the strengths perspective.

Chapman (2010, p.2) identified a range of factors associated with the effectiveness of services provided by SWiS, of which four are considered here. First, that school management should be well informed regarding the role of the social worker. The School Director commented that there was a need for greater role clarity, which points to the importance of processes to facilitate collaboration and communication between different groups involved at the TPU. An associated point to consider, in regard to role clarity that did not emerge from the evaluation, concerns the relationship between the social worker and other support roles in the broader school environment, for example, counsellor. Notwithstanding the fact that the social worker was not an employee of the school and that her role was focused exclusively upon students attending the teen parent unit, the opportunity could exist for the social worker to work in conjunction with other helping professionals. A second factor concerns the development of effective networks in order to provide 'wrap around' services. The social worker utilised an ecological model of practice that involved family / whanau and a broad range of agencies and organisations within the community. This is a strength associated with the social worker being part of a community-based NGO. The third factor associated with effective SWiS services relates to working in partnership with the employing agency. The social worker is employed by Methodist Social Services (MSS), which is contracted to provide services to the LGTT. The potential exists for the social worker to experience a degree of role ambiguity unless there is effective communication between all stakeholders involved with the TPU. Both the School Director and Trust Chairperson noted this issue and thought it could form part of any review of the social work role. Finally, Chapman noted that the potential isolation of the SWiS social worker should be mitigated by a supportive team structure. At Whakatipuria the social worker is effectively part of two teams: as one of the team of professional staff associated with the TPU where the social worker participates in meetings regarding the functioning of the TPU; and as an employee of MSS where she receives supervision and training relevant to the social work role. The manager of MSS attended monthly liaison meetings at the TPU. These meetings were attended by staff from the TPU and Nga Rito and this was an important mechanism for both communication and ensuring that the social worker was receiving appropriate support.

Conclusion

The proposed outcome of the evaluation was to identify possible aspects or areas wherein improvements might be required for the delivery of social work support services (provided by the MSS social worker) in order to maintain or improve the achievement of student outcomes at Whakatipuria TPU.

On the basis of the current findings and discussion two conclusions may be drawn. First, that a relatively high degree of consensus exists among key stakeholders regarding (a) the purpose of social work services (i.e. that they contribute towards educational achievement, social skills development and outcomes for children), and (b) the range of tasks associated with this service (advocacy, counselling and family intervention / support). The experiences of the students reinforce the importance of the role of the social worker, not only in terms of the students' ability to complete their studies but also regarding their role as parents. Second, that there is less clarity regarding the social work practice framework that informs the delivery of social work services.

The following suggestion is made with a view to enhancing the delivery of social work services at the TPU. A review of the foundational social work practice framework should be completed, which focuses on developing models of assessment and intervention, and joint planning protocols (between the social worker and teachers). This review would consolidate the present role of the social worker and provide a platform for the ongoing development of the focus of social work support at the TPU.

Finally, this focus of social work practice could be extended beyond the provision of services at the TPU to the family as the focus of social work intervention (based upon a construction of family well-being). Further, in light of the proportion of students who were in a relationship with a partner, a consideration of the role of the fathers / partners could provide direction regarding the provision of social work services to the family / whanau.

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