

Filling the gap: the Social Worker in Schools (SWiS) program from a student perspective

An Evaluation Proposal for the SWiS Program in Aotearoa

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Social Work 516

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Preface

Before beginning, I would like to offer a few ‘disclaimers’. First, I acknowledge my role as a white settler woman from Turtle Island evaluating a program that services predominantly Māori children. I think about this in relation to many of our course authors who simultaneously offer me clarity and confusion. For instance, Paredes (2011) writes that non-Indigenous researchers have two choices: learn to conduct research in ways that are non-exploitive, culturally appropriate, and culturally safe, *or* relinquish the role of researchers in Indigenous contexts and make way for Indigenous researchers (in Strega & Brown, 2015, p. 10). This is furthered by Strega (2012) when she asks: “is it ever ethically acceptable for someone that is an outsider to a community or social identity to engage in research with that community?” I have gone back and forth (and likely will continue to go back and forth), but in this situation, I am located pretty close to the outsider side of the insider/outsider continuum (Potts & Brown, 2015). At this point, I do not really know or understand what culturally appropriate or safe approaches would look like in a Māori context. This feeling was reinforced by Aveling’s (2012) statement:

As a white western woman I can bring my awareness to the fact that there are realities and worldviews other than my own and I can learn to listen to other voices, but I cannot speak about experiences I have not had...My ways of being, knowing, and doing emanate from a position of white privilege, and are always and already historically and culturally specific. *For me this answers the question of whether I, or someone like me, could do research within an Indigenous context, with a resounding ‘no’* (emphasis added, p.8).

However, I also realize that this is a practical exercise - I could very well be put in a similar situation by a government agency as a social worker in the future. Likely my employer would not respond so well to my refusal in effort to ‘make space’ for Indigenous researchers; my employment, paycheque, and reputation would require me to *just do the work*. So, how do I

negotiate this? I am going to attempt to do so by assuming that I have been living in Aotearoa and working in the SWiS program in some capacity for enough time that I have established myself within the community, built meaningful relationships, and can better conduct this evaluation with a good mind and a good heart (Thomas, 2015).

Second, and related to above, I note that a socially just evaluation would originate from the community. An anti-oppressive approach would ensure that this project was deemed necessary and useful by former students and they would determine what the evaluation process should look like. In other words, it would reflect a project Wallace (2006) describes when he posits: “Rather than asking how can we get communities to participate in research we could be asking how can we get researchers to participate in communities?” (p.16). However, if that was the case, this assignment would be a blank document. So, instead I will begin with me and not the community, but I recognize this as a limitation from the outset.

I do apologize to the reader that these tensions remain messy; my apprehension is unresolved. But then again, perhaps these racial, colonial dynamics are not meant to be tied up into a neat and tidy bow. So, here we go.

Introduction

The Social Worker in Schools (SWiS) program in Aotearoa is currently in 675 schools across the country and is available to approximately 131,000 students. Although the program has affected many students since its implementation in 1999, students’ perspectives have not been formally evaluated. While the impact on teachers, principals, school social workers, and administrative bodies is assessed in several different evaluations, students’ voices are excluded. Therefore, this evaluation proposal attempts to fill that gap by creating an opportunity for former

students to share their experiences with the SWiS program and what they feel was helpful, harmful, or ineffective (or any other attributive).

First, I will provide an overview of the SWiS program before describing both my objectives and connection to this evaluation. Next, I will present a brief literature review and consider this SWiS program ‘conversation’ in relation to this proposal and possible outcomes. I will then explain my rationale and the ethical and political context of using narrative analysis to interview former students. Lastly, I will offer an approach to assess the evaluation itself and discuss the benefits and drawbacks of my proposal.

SWiS Overview

SWiS is a community social work service, delivered in the school setting. Initially a pilot project, the SWiS program has expanded into approximately 675 schools across Aotearoa with 131,000 students served by school social workers (Roa, 2016). Originally part of the Ministry of Social Development’s (MSD) *Strengthening Families* initiative, the SWiS is recognized as a strengths-based, holistic, and early intervention program for primary-school aged children. Social workers are employed by service agencies, such as Barnardos New Zealand, and placed with one or two schools that have a “lower decile” (between 1-5) designation (Jakob-Hoff et al., 2002). During a policy shift in the mid-1990s, school communities were divided into ten levels or “deciles” based on socio economic status (decile 1 being poorer communities with significant Māori and Pacific representation and decile 10 being wealthier, Pākehā communities) (Roa, 2016). Beyond correlations made between lower decile schools and higher proportions of Māori and Pacific families, I did not find a critical race or decolonial analysis of the ‘decile-assigning’ process, but I will address this in the evaluation design section below.

Evaluation Objectives and My Connection

Objective

The purpose of this evaluation is to ask former students what their experience was like with the SWiS program. The goal is for the input from participants to influence how the SWiS program is carried out in its current capacity.

The original (and present) vision of the SWiS program is: “Enhanced life outcomes for children whose social and family/whānau circumstances place at risk their chances of achieving positive education, social and health outcomes.” The objectives are twofold: “children attending and engaged in school” and “safe, socialised children with a strong sense of identity and wellbeing” (MSD, 2016, p.7). A developmental evaluation will offer insight into whether these objectives are relevant in today’s context. Likely the data will support, challenge, and/or disregard this vision and intended outcomes. The perspective of students who participated in the program during their primary school years will contribute to the existing literature and provide recommendations for adaptations. This project would demonstrate to school social workers how their work impacts students and the longer term effects of their work. It could also be interpreted by funders as to evaluate the ‘need’ of the program.

My Connection

I am implicated and biased because I both participate in and benefit from the SWiS program. I am a white, cisgendered able-bodied woman who has the privilege of travelling to Aotearoa to participate as a school social worker. While I received welcome from my Māori and white supervisors, I initiated the connection and will benefit from the resources, time, and mentorship provided to me. It is important to recognize that I do not have any automatic right or

entitlement to be there or to do this evaluative research. Therefore, every stage of the evaluation process will be affected by my social location as a white manuhiri (guest) living and working in Awakairangi. This positionality affects how I will engage with interview participants and how I will interpret their stories; I aim to acknowledge my biases throughout, because as Absolon (2012) states, “my voice is present and my experiences are not neutral” (p.21).

Literature Review

The literature I reviewed is primarily from Māori and Pākehā (white New Zealander) academics, with one formative evaluation conducted by the MSD in 2002. From this review, several themes emerge within the ‘conversation’ about the SWiS program: non statutory/statutory social work distinction; role ambiguity; and Māori onto-epistemologies. Here, I provide both a summary and connection to my evaluation for each topic.

First, several authors consider the importance of distinguishing school social workers from those involved with child welfare (Jakob-Hoff & Belgrave, 2002; Hollis-English & Selby, 2014; Roa, 2016). Prior to implementing the program and throughout its development, Hollis-English and Selby (2014) note the significant public education efforts to inform school staff and families that school social workers were not statutory; the message that they do not have the power to remove children was frequent and clear. Paradoxically, some of those researchers also discuss the importance of having trained social workers in schools in relation to the *Vulnerable Children’s Act* (2014), which positions teachers as key professionals to respond to child maltreatment. These researchers suggest that the school social workers play an important role in assisting other school staff in making child protection reports. Related to this, it would be curious what the interviewees share about their understanding of the school social worker’s role,

and if they felt that their participation was voluntary. While the MSD is clear that they are non statutory social workers, it is unclear how this is explained and communicated to students, especially considering some are as young as five years old.

Second, tensions, miscommunication, and role ambiguity are commonly recognized as potential barriers for effective SWiS placements (Chapman, 2010; Bedoe & de Haan, 2016; Mooney, 2012). Roa (2016) discusses the confusion school staff, students, and their families had in distinguishing school social workers from other professionals when the program was first implemented. In order to respond to these challenges, researchers reiterate the importance of relationship building with school staff (especially the principal), students, families, and community members. This discussion suggests a potential disconnect with school social workers and it would be interesting to note whether this affected or impacted any students' experiences, particularly those who participated in the first few years of the program.

Third, Māori culture, history, and language is referenced throughout the research by both Māori and Pākehā researchers. Roa (2016) assesses the effectiveness of Kaupapa Māori Theory (KMT) in the SWiS program and builds on Graham Smith's (1997) work to demonstrate how this approach has the potential to: resist hegemonic colonial dominance; be accountable to communities; and transform conditions for Māori people (Roa, 2016, p.14). Roa (2016) ultimately finds that KMT enables school social workers to develop rapport with children and their whanau in practice. For instance, social workers in Mooney's (2012) study highlight the importance of "genuine and meaningful interaction" with children and youth and they explain how they use humor, honesty, awhi (embrace), nurturing, music, and food to build this rapport (p.55).

However, alongside the familiarity and flexibility, Mooney, Roa, and Hollis-English & Selby (2014) stress awareness of self and power relations. Further, the interviewees in Mooney's study state that school social workers need to achieve "peace within the self" before being able to recognize "peace within practice"; a social worker must be "comfortable in their own skin" before they can build rapport (p.54). From the interviews, it will be helpful to distinguish whether the school social worker that the participant worked with was Māori, Pasifika, or Pākehā and how their social location in relation to the participant's social location may have impacted their experience. If the participants worked with a Māori school social worker, the literature would suggest that their approach may have been more creative, adaptable, and involved the student's whanau extensively.

Notably, none of the literature reviewed offers a students' perspective on the SWiS program. Therefore, this evaluation design discussed below attempts to honour participants' voices and considers their experiences and knowledges as valid and important.

Evaluation Design

At risk of romanticizing narrative research with a cute metaphor, I will introduce my development evaluation design using narrative methodology and interviews in relation to cooking. Fraser (2004) suggests that narrative researchers may be likened to chefs who do not adhere to strict, traditional recipes. Patton talks about developmental evaluation as a model where cooks (researchers) go to the supermarket with their guests (participants) to decide on a meal together and allow for adaptations and decisionmaking. I think these metaphors are helpful as they clearly identify the evaluator's subjectivity and presence, breaking down the traditional researcher-subject relationship. However this does not negate or dismiss the power dynamics

present and the privilege I hold. For instance, Strega (January 23, 2017) discusses the importance of building rapport and relationship with interview participants - taking time and going for coffee. Yet, she reminds me that no cup of coffee exists without context, without history, without politics.

Developmental Evaluation

Put simply, Michael Quinn Patton (2012) describes a developmental evaluation as “something that supports and improves a project”. With this approach, it is important to recognize when a program is not working or needs adjustments; revisions are not a sign of failure, but rather a sign of effectiveness and success. It does not silo the program from people, place, politics, or history and will create space for fluidity, context, and change. It is emergent. The outcomes and stories provided by participants will offer the policymakers and service providers a chance to reflect on whether their original vision and goals (identified above) are being met, are relevant, and if they should be adjusted for current students (Patton, 2012). There is room for unintended consequences, both positive and negative that might arise from participants’ narratives. While I will be interviewing individuals, Patton explains that people do not encounter programs alone. Rather, I should be aware that people self organize and build relationships and this affects their experience.

Further, I do not pretend that I am objective; I will be embedded into the program and this evaluative process. My social location, politics, worldviews impact every stage - from writing this proposal to conducting the interviews to analyzing the data. A developmental evaluation allows me room and expects me to be honest and upfront about my positionality with myself, the participants, and the intended audience.

Methodology: Narrative Analysis

The intention of doing qualitative, interpretative research is “to give those who read the research a feel for others’ social reality by revealing or illuminating the meanings, values, interpretive systems, and rules of living they apply” (Strega, January 9, 2017). This aligns with my intent to interact with previous SWiS participants directly and share their stories in a way that best captures and respects their truth(s). I am not looking to make grandiose, universal claims about the SWiS program, but rather contribute to the conversation about the SWiS in a way that is subjective, critical, and socially just. Participants may have very different, conflicting, or similar accounts of their experiences and that is okay. A narrative analysis approach recognizes that “facts are context specific actions that depend on the interpretations of particular people in a social setting” (Strega, January 9, 2017). I understand that knowledge is never neutral and not everything is knowable to me. However, this does not mean that I would be a passive researcher. Instead, I will be looking for context, dominant discourses, resistance, and change within and between these stories (Potts & Brown, 2015, p.20). I will consider these stories in full, including how they are told and what is left unsaid.

Fraser (2004) offers seven overlapping phases of narrative analysis that I will outline here and note reflections for myself to consider throughout this evaluation:

Hear the stories

- What are my emotions throughout this process? How are they impacting my interpretation and understanding of these narratives? (Fraser & Jarldorn, 2015)
- Am I deeply listening, with more than just my ears? (Hart, 2010)
- What assumptions, biases, worldviews, and dominant discourses am I playing into? The participant?
- Have I asked for or found translations for Māori concepts or words?
- Have I provided the opportunity for participants to ask me questions? Are there any topics that are ‘off limits’? Why?

Transcribe the interview material

- I plan to transcribe the material myself - how much time will this take and do I have the necessary resources?
- I plan to send the transcripts back to participants for their review, have I made them accessible enough? What will I do with their feedback?
- I will be as detailed as possible in my transcripts, noting break-offs, pauses, inflection.

Interpret individual transcripts

- Are there discernable ‘main points’ or themes within someone’s interview?
- Am I imposing my own assumptions and beliefs in effort to categorize their narrative?
- What words/phrases/tones are used? What could this signify in terms of their meaning making processes?

Scan across different domains of experience

- How are intrapersonal (mind-body) and interpersonal experiences presented?
- How do people regard social structures, like the SWiS? Is the SWiS program discussed in relation to other programs or institutions?

Link personal and political

- Are dominant discourses taken up? How so? Is there resistance here? Or is there no other way to describe their experience? (Brown, 2013)
- What do the stories say about the (multiple) lived experiences of class, gender, race, sexual orientation, age, dis/ability, religion and/or geographical locations? (Fraser, 2004)
- What do the participants think about my analysis?

Look for commonalities and differences among participants

- What are the common themes across interviews? What are the differences? I would like to avoid fracturing stories and instead aim to ensure they remain largely intact and quoted in full, keeping the words in context.
- Have I ensured that the stories which reveal harmful or negative experiences with school social workers are fairly and adequately portrayed (especially considering this would likely be funded by the MSD)?

Write academic narratives about personal stories

- Did the participants end up answering the question: ‘what was your experience like with the SWiS program?’ If not, should the evaluation objective be altered?
- Am I implicated in the final project? Are my biases and positionality clear? (without taking up too much space)
- I plan to have the final drafts circulated again to the participants for their review. It would depend on the feedback I received, but I would have to be clear from the beginning what the limitations in their feedback (if any). This would largely depend on timelines and the ability to edit, change or alter stories as participants see fit (Thomas, 2015)

Method: Narrative Interviews

I propose conducting ten interviews with former students who participated in the SWiS program between 2005 - 2010 and who are now who are 18 years of older (age of adulthood in Aotearoa is 18). At the time of the program, they would have been between 5 - 13 years old. Therefore, it would be estimated that the age range would be between 18 - 25 years old. The date range was selected because it allows time for the program to become established after being piloted in 1999, and after 2010, most participants would be too young. The level of participation in the SWiS program is important and would require a benchmark as a minimum amount of time with the school social worker (e.g. 5+ visits over a school year). At this point, I have not been able to get an accurate idea of how this information is recorded or how caseloads are managed between school social workers, so this would be determined once I have firsthand experience in the program. I am assuming that I would have the support of the MSD to access this information and make the initial contact with the potential participant.

My goal is for the interviews to be as unstructured as possible. I would like to enter the interview room without a prepared question list, initiating the conversation with: “tell me about your experience with the Social Worker in Schools program” and nothing further (Strega, February 27, 2017). However, because it will have been a significant time since the participants were engaged in the SWiS, they may need some prompting (Seidman, 2006). If this is the case, I would consider asking what was going on for them during their time with the school social worker; what support was provided by the school social worker; and any short or long term consequences from their participation. I recognize that asking these questions assumes there was something tangible, measurable that occurred. In this way, almost any question could be

considered as “leading” because it is prioritized, it assumes that there will be or should be an answer.

Here, I would like to note my positionality working with Māori, participants in relation to my methodology. The SWiS program is targeted at lower decile schools which also have a higher representation of Māori and Pasifika children. Although this correlation is largely left untroubled in the literature, the racist and colonial practices, policies, and beliefs would be considered in this evaluation. However, as a white non-New Zealander I do not feel it is appropriate to use an Indigenous research methodology. I hope that by selecting narrative analyses and interviews, this may align with Indigenous storytelling methods that would allow for these nuances and contexts, without appropriation. Morelli and Mataira (2010) provide principles as critical for establishing relationships within Indigenous organizations and institutions that I found particularly helpful when considering my relationship to the interview participants. For instance, “letting go of the role of expert, being comfortable in the learner role”; “trusting the process, not needing to control it”; and “willingness to commit to establishing long-term relationships by providing assistance or support as needed” (p. 7).

Logistics

At the outset of the evaluation, I would consider the potential barriers to participation and attempt to alleviate these as much as possible. For instance, if someone is living in poverty, it is often more complicated than just a lack of money (Wallace, 2006). They might not have a bank account or transportation to deposit a cheque or they may not be able to work legally while receiving income assistance. Wallace (2006) suggests providing wages for participation, child care and caregiver expenses, food at all interviews¹, and bus tickets/taxi vouchers. Supports and

¹ Good food! What is requested by the participants?

payment will be made clear before the interviewee consents to the process. I feel that it is important they know they will be compensated and can plan accordingly. While I know that some researchers suggest this may cause people to only participate for the monetary incentive, I would not want people to decide they are not able to participate due to financial constraints (Coy, 2006, p.425). The living wage in Aotearoa that is current to the time of evaluation would be used to pay participants by the hour for their time, including interviews and any review they conduct (currently \$19.25/hour). As for the location of the interviews, I would aim to be as accommodating as possible while ensuring comfort and confidentiality. Lastly, there is a potential for people to require additional support or resources and being reconnected with the MSD might instigate (or hinder) this. I would be prepared to offer referrals, information, etc. if requested by the participant.

Political and Ethical Contexts

Politics

As Patton (2012) explains, evaluations are always political. Learning about and considering the historical and ongoing colonial dynamics between Māori and the white settler communities is integral to this evaluation. The SWiS program is a government funded program guided by the MSD's strengths-based and family-centred approach. The training, tools, and resources available for school social workers in English with some Māori concepts. I think it is in an important distinction to note that the foundation of the program is a western, eurocentric framework; materials are translated from English to Māori and not vice versa. While reading the SWiS "Service Specifications", I felt that the program reflected "practices of whiteness", defined

by Jeffrey (2005) as a set of beliefs and social work practices that uphold white dominance while being presented as neutral and unbiased.

However, after reading evaluations and research by several Māori authors, it seems that many Māori school social workers report being able to practice with an Indigenous worldview as their starting place. In several evaluative interviews, participants share that they maintain and uphold an Indigenous approach in a way that benefits both Māori and non-Māori students. Their role as a school social worker is considered advantageous because it provides access to the supports and resources required to practice using traditional, cultural approaches. While there are still constraints on practicing within a dominantly eurocentric institution, I would be remiss if I did not trouble and complicate my original assumptions. I hope that the narrative interviewing and analysis might allow for some of these nuances to be discussed.

Ethics

Interviewing former students will require following the research and confidentiality protocols set forth by the MSD. I will submit for ethics review using this conventional channel, but I will also seek guidance from Māori social workers and community members for appropriate ethical considerations that adhere to Indigenous ways of conducting research. While again, I am cautious of being tokenistic or appropriative, I learn from Māori researchers such as Mooney (2012) and her Indigenous ethical framework. She uses the following principles to guide her work and I find them particularly powerful when thinking about my own research: aroha ki te tangata (a respect for the people); kanohi kitea (presenting yourself face-to-face); titiro whakarongo... korero (look, listen... speak); manaaki ki te tangata (share and host people, be

generous); kia tupato (be cautious); kaula e takahia te mana o te tangata (do not trample over the mana of people); and kaula e mahaka (do not flaunt your knowledge) (Mooney, 2012, p.52).

Evaluating the Evaluation

“How will I know whether or not the researcher has done this research - from beginning to end - with a good mind and a good heart?” (Roger John and Robina Thomas quoted by Strega, January 30, 2017). To answer this question, I have developed a few questions that could be asked by me, the interview participants, and the audience/readers, along with some logistical questions about the SWiS program. Together, if answered affirmatively, I think these would indicate whether the evaluation had been done in a good way (although I recognize this is just the beginning of what could be a very comprehensive list).

Me:

- Did I engage in the ‘active intellectual work’ described by Ladson-Billings (2000) to dismantle and disrupt my colonial, dominant eurocentric worldview?
- Did I remain self-reflexive and honest about my biases and assumptions (especially during uncomfortable moments of confronting my privilege)?
- Wallace (2006) asks: “at what point do you plan to leave the research process?” Have I been clear about my timelines and long term commitment to the participants? Can I be contacted in the future? Did I stay to ensure the ‘action’ component of the evaluation was initiated or implemented?
- Was it made clear who ‘owns’ the data? This will depend on the funding structure of the evaluation, but regardless should be transparent from the beginning.

Participants:

- Was my story captured accurately? Was my feedback requested and incorporated? Did I have enough time to offer my revisions to the transcript or draft?
- Was I compensated for my time? Did I receive supports in an accessible, non judgemental way (e.g. were they offered to me rather than me requesting them)?
- Was I respected by the researcher and anyone else involved?
- Was this process helpful/meaningful/engaging/beneficial/interesting/useful in some way for me?
- Were timelines and expectations of the evaluation project communicated clearly?
- Were my rights and confidentiality explained in a transparent and accessible manner?
- Were my preferences regarding communication style, location, topic of discussion, etc. considered and incorporated?
- Was I able to ask questions to the evaluator?

Audience/Readers:

- Was the content easy to read and understand?
- Are the stories told by participants' largely intact? Is the 'flow' or nature of the conversation readable?
- Can I get a sense of the person's emotions, feelings, and/or meaning making?
- Is the social location of the researcher clear?
- Is there a balance between the writer being a 'witless relativist' (someone who erases impact of social structures and socio-political contexts) and 'social determinant' (focuses so much on social structures and cultural context that individual agency is lost) (Fraser, 2004, p. 182)?

SWiS Program:

- Has the information from the participants' experiences been shared with current school social workers and policymakers? Has it been incorporated into training material for new school social workers?

Benefits and Drawbacks

With qualitative research, I feel that some of the drawbacks could also be considered benefits. For instance, the relatively small number of participants interviewed (10 out of 131,000/year) is extremely low and in positivist, quantitative research it would not be considered a 'valid' sample size to produce any 'truth claims'. However, the small number of participants allows for rich, thick narratives to be developed and heard. In these stories, emotions are provoked and felt. Thomas (2011) provides an example through her storytelling work, explaining that these stories tell experiences about racism, rather than offering textbook definitions. If listeners and readers *feel*, there may be more impetus for change, for action. Yet, this leads back into a potential drawback or 'caution' as identified by Fraser and Jarldorn (2015). They write about the emotional complexities with narrative methodologies, especially in relation to the researchers' responses to participants' stories. Overall, I think that narrative methods are particularly powerful and impactful, but this power and impact is twofold. They offer depth, insight, emotion, but they also can be taken up and out of context. Perhaps Thomas King (2003)

offers the best summation when he writes, “Stories are wondrous things. And they are dangerous” (p. 9).

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