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Strengthening Support to Families: Basing a Family Support Worker at a Primary School in Melbourne, Australia

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Abstract This mixed methods study examines the benefits of basing a family support worker (FSW) at a primary school in Melbourne, Australia. The school has a number of high needs families requiring extensive support from school staff. Pre and post intervention data was collected on the time spent on social problems in the school community. These included managing students with behavioural and emotional issues, providing support and practical assistance to parents with problems and liaising with agencies to access support for students and families. Pre and post intervention Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaires were completed by teachers whose students and families were clients of the FSW (n = 8) and compared with non clients (n = 10). Semi-structured interviews were held with FSW clients (n = 6), class teachers (n = 3) the assistant principal, principal and the FSW. Employing a FSW showed a reduction in the amount of time spent on welfare cases for teachers, and therefore a monetary saving for the school. Qualitative data collected from school staff and FSW clients was overwhelmingly positive. Having a FSW based at a primary school provides savings in teacher time, and expenses to the school. Teachers are freed to concentrate on education and the parents valued the relationship provided by the FSW.

Keywords Schools · Cost-effectiveness · Teachers · Families · Vulnerable children

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Literature Review

Bronfenbrenner's (1986) ecological model is useful in understanding how a child's immediate family experiences and systems-level family dynamics are linked to school behaviour. Bronfenbrenner (1986) postulates that what happens in a micro system, such as the home in which a child lives can influence what happens in the meso system, including the school or a playground, and what happens in a school or a playground can in turn influence interactions at home. If we want to understand what influences a child's behaviour, we need to look at the ecological systems surrounding that child and intervene at all levels. The ecological model sees environments, from the family to political structures as part of the life course from childhood through adulthood.

In line with Bronfenbrenner's model (1986) there is extensive literature that confirms the importance of involving the family in order to provide effective school-based programming for students with emotional and behavioural issues (Australian Government Department of Families Community Services and Indigenous Affairs, 2006; Eber, Suga, Smith, & Scott, 2002; Fox, Dunalp, & Cushing, 2002; Gauntlett, Hugman, Kenyon, & Logan, 2000; McCain and & Mustard, 1999). Children who exhibit challenging behaviour in class frequently come from homes with high needs families who also need assistance (Australian Education Union, 2012; Webb & Vulliamy,

2010). A submission by the Australian Education Union (2012) to the senate inquiry into teaching and learning identified that, in New South Wales, there have been significant increases in the number of students with high needs in mainstream classrooms since 1977. This includes the number of students with emotional disturbances, autism and moderate intellectual disabilities (Australian Education Union, 2012). However, as the principal job of schools is to provide education for the students, teachers often do not have the time, training or capacity to provide assistance to these families in the way it is needed (Australian Education Union, 2012; Easthope & Easthope, 2000; Webb & Vulliamy, 2010).

Like many teachers around the world, teachers in Australia report that their workload has increased dramatically in the last 10 years. Not only do they report an increase in workload, but also an increase in complexity in the roles that they are required to fill (Kyriacou, 1987; Easthope & Easthope, 2000; Australian Education Union, 2012). Kyriacou and Sutcliffe (2011) argue that teachers' experience of stress results from demands placed on them which they were unable to, or had difficulty meeting. Teachers report that they are dealing with very vulnerable children and families. They need specialized assistance to cope with serious social and emotional issues. School staff are frequently drawn away from their core business, of teaching and school administration to respond to these 'high needs' families (Webb & Vulliamy, 2010; Australian Education Union, 2012; Huffman, 2013). A number of sources identified that teachers are being confronted with an ever-increasing number of children with complex needs (Barrett, 2014; Desloires, 2014; Victorian Principals Association, 2012). Although many of these children exhibit high levels of need, they do not meet the criteria for extra funding and therefore struggle alone in the classroom (Victorian Equal Opportunity and Human Rights Commission, 2012).

Growing evidence has emerged from a wide research base of the importance of promoting positive family and community experiences for young children (Australian Government Department of Families Community Services and Indigenous Affairs, 2006; Fox et al., 2002; Gauntlett et al., 2000; McCain and & Mustard, 1999). The importance of childhood prevention and early intervention programs is based on the premise that the early years of life of a child's development are crucial in setting the foundation for lifelong learning, behaviour and health outcomes (Australian Government Department of Families Community Services and Indigenous Affairs, 2006; Gauntlett et al., 2000; McCain and & Mustard, 1999). Problem behaviours are addressed most effectively when children are young, through the avenues of family-centred early intervention services. There is also evidence that these early intervention measures will ultimately be cost-effective in providing long-term savings to governments through early intervention in the child's life (McCain and & Mustard, 1999). An evaluation of the 'Sure Start Family Support Outreach Service' (Taylor, 2014) and 'Cost Effectiveness of Early Intervention Program' for Queensland (Queensland Council of Social Service Inc, 2007) has demonstrated the effectiveness of intervention in vulnerable children's preschool years.

The Department of Education and Training Victoria (DET) currently employ Student Support Services Officers (SSSOs). The purpose of SSSOs is to "assist children and young people facing a range of barriers to learning, to achieve their educational and developmental potential through the provision of specialised support at individual, group, school and network levels" (Department Education and Training, 2012a, p. 0.8). SSSOs are co-located together in multidisciplinary teams in networks. To access the Student Support Services Program, schools refer wellbeing issues and cases to their Network Student Support Services Coordinator. All referrals are then prioritised and allocated to student support staff according to greatest need (Department Education and Training, 2012b).

Background

In this paper we present a small study exploring the benefits of having a family support worker (FSW) for 15 months, based at a primary school in a lower socio-economic area of Melbourne, Australia. Both qualitative and quantitative data on process, outcomes and costs were collected to address the following question: Does having a qualified, experienced FSW based at a primary school save the school staff time, and money and provide an enhanced quality service to the school community?

The primary school discussed in this article is situated geographically in the middle of the former Community Renewal area. Community Renewal projects were a 6 years initiative aimed at addressing disadvantage in eight urban communities (Department of Human Services, 2015). The average household income in the area is lower per week than the Victorian average and the area faces a number of challenges. On the Australian Early Development Census (AEDC) (Australian Early Development Census, 2015a, b), children at the school are more than twice as likely to be emotionally and socially vulnerable than children in neighbouring areas.

EACH Social and Community Health (EACH) is a large multi-site community health centre. In 2009 EACH and the school signed a 3 years partnership document, renewed in 2012, agreeing to work with the school using the Health Promoting Schools (HPS) model (World Health Organisation 2015). As part of the partnership agreement, EACH

provided the school with a senior health promotion officer (HPO) to work with the school community to plan, implement and evaluate health promotion initiatives identified by the school.

During the 6 years of involvement EACH has had with the school, the school has experienced improvements in classroom behaviour, student safety, staff morale, connectedness and student motivation as identified on the DET Student Engagement and Welfare annual surveys. These gains were attributed to the whole school frameworks of the HPS model, restorative practices and the KidsMatters programs that the school introduced. Although these programs were successful in changing the culture and climate of the school, they did not make an appreciable difference to the most challenging students and their families. There remained within the school a small group of high needs students and their families who required extensive support. These students come from all year levels and regularly presented at the principal's office due to extreme disruptive behaviour in both the classroom and playground, aggression towards other students and teachers, defiance and stealing. Some children appeared unkempt, arrived with inadequate clothing, no lunch and were regularly late or absent from school. In discussion with the principal, the families of these children had identified issues in regards to family violence, drug and alcohol abuse and housing difficulties. These families and children took up a disproportionate amount of the teachers, assistant principals (AP) and principals' time.

Like all State primary schools, the school has access to the DET SSSO. Currently the school has a department psychologist for 1 day a week, a speech therapist for half a day a week, and no social worker. Dependent on the size of the school, DET allocates a certain amount of hours to access the services of department professionals. The principal has explained:

> We would like to have a department social worker as the school has a high amount of children who have being identified as vulnerable on the Australian Early Development Census. Compared to the rest of the region, these children are 'vulnerable' in the emotional and social domains and 'at risk' in the communication domain. We have limited resources so decided to use our allocated hours to engage a speech therapist and psychologist.
> School Principal (personal communication November 2015).

As well as the services described above, the school referred many families with complex needs to EACH, which provides a large range of services including counselling, drug and alcohol workers and housing assistance. Some parents did take up the referrals and accessed the services offered by EACH, however the school found that for the most-disadvantaged families, keeping an appointment time, accessing transport, and sitting in the waiting room presented major barriers to their participation. To fully meet the needs of complex families, DET advocates that schools form partnerships with organisations such as EACH to benefit the outcomes of their students. Many schools are now working together and with a variety of organisations to find new ways to meet student needs, while allowing teachers to focus on education (Department Education and Training, 2013).

To address the needs of these families a project reference group was formed made up of representatives from the school, EACH, the local City Council, the Community Renewal project and the Department of Human Services. Due to the complexity and chronic nature of many of the problems facing these families, after considering many other models offered by DET, the school decided to create the position of a FSW role, the aim being to provide school-based support for these disadvantaged families and to lighten the burden on the teachers. The position was funded jointly through EACH, and the Department of Human Services as part of the Community Renewal Initiative.

The advantages of employing a FSW directly to the school compared to accessing a SSSO department social worker included firstly, the FSW role description was very specific to the needs of the school and included doing home visiting, and having experience in family court work and drug and alcohol counselling. Secondly, as the FSW was not funded by DET, the school was able to keep their allocation of the speech therapist and the psychologist who worked collaboratively with the FSW. The FSW was also at the school for 3 days a week whereas the medium size of the school population meant that the school was ineligible to have a department SSSO social worker for 3 days a week.

Method

Participants

The participants were made up of clients of the FSW, school teachers, including the Principal, and the FSW who worked at the school. Clients of the FSW were high needs/high risk families who require extensive time and support from school staff and were therefore referred to the FSW. The FSW had a target of engaging with 20 families. For FSW clients to be eligible to participate in the research, they needed to have visited the FSW at least twice and be happy to be interviewed by the researcher. Twelve clients fitted this criterion. Out of these clients, six agreed to be

interviewed for the research. The six clients who participated in the interviews were all females. Five were mothers, and one was a grandmother. Two described themselves as single parents, two as living with partners, one married and one divorced. Four of the mothers had children at the school where the FSW was based. Three class teachers were nominated by the AP to be interviewed from the group of eight school teachers who had students in their class whose families were clients of the FSW. There are seventeen class teachers at the school. The Principal and FSW were also interviewed (See Fig. 1 for Participant Flow Chart.).

Intervention

The independent variable in this study was the presence of the FSW with the dependent variables being: time saved by the school staff, and the behaviour of the students as measured by the Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaires (SDQ).

The FSW was an experienced social worker with extensive experience in family centred approach and authorization to perform home visits. They were an employee of Anglicare, the welfare division of the Australian Anglican church, providing services such as foster care, parent education and counselling (Anglicare Victoria, 2014). The FSW was seconded on a part-time basis to provide support based at the school on 3 days a week. The FSW was also available to take clients from the surrounding community referred by agencies such as the local kindergarten, community house or through self-referral.

The model for the FSW was tailored directly to the needs of the school and the surrounding area. The school stressed that they needed a professional with experience in

Fig. 1 Participant flow chart

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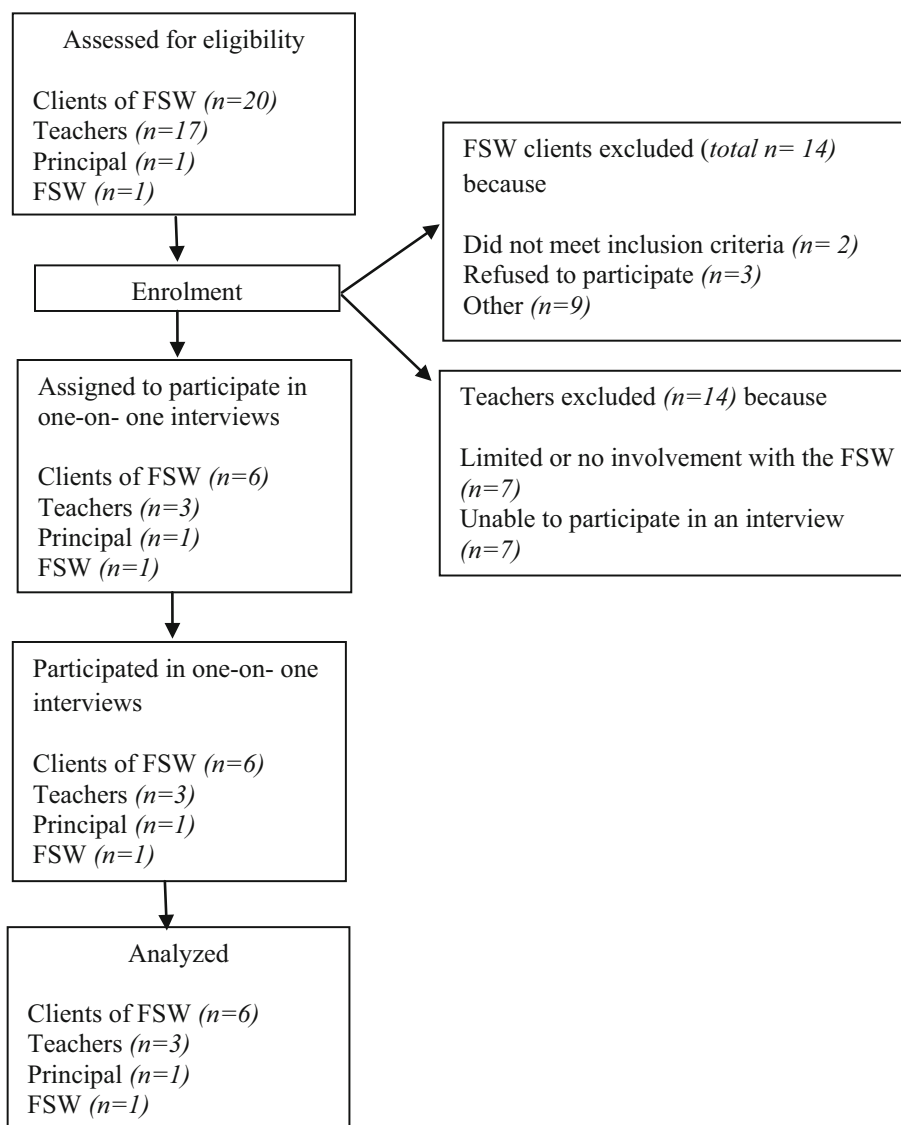
child protection issues and outreach capability to visit parents who have limited or no contact with the school. The position included casework support and counselling, case management and case co-ordination, home visits and office based support. The position also allowed for facilitated group work interventions and assisting the school to develop community partnerships.

Procedures

To evaluate the benefit of a school-based FSW we conducted a pre-post evaluation, this included a cost-effectiveness analysis, semi-structured interviews to capture the perspectives and experiences of school staff and FSW clients in relation to the intervention as well as administering pre-post SDQ to the children who were clients of the FSW. Specifically the cost- effectiveness of diverting families with social problems away from the school staff, principal, AP and class teacher to a FSW with welfare qualifications and experience was evaluated. All of the interviews were recorded and transcribed, except for one interview where the parent objected to the recorder, notes were taken.

School Staff

Pre and post intervention data in regards to time spent on welfare activities were collected from the principal, AP and class teachers at the school. Welfare activities included: child protection issues, supporting students with behavioural problems, supporting parents with personal problems and liaising with agencies in regards to these issues. Process data on intervention delivery were collected from the FSW. School staff provided all student-related data; no data were collected directly from students. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with 3 class teachers, the FSW, the school principal and the school AP. Examples of questions to elicit discussion included: What has been your overall impression of having a FSW based at the school; Discuss the time saved, or not saved by having a FSW based at the school.

Family Support Worker Clients

Over the 15 months, the FSW had a case load of 20 clients (families). The FSW invited parents from eligible families to participate in the study. Families with very short interventions, less than three sessions, or a lack of engagement were deemed ineligible. The FSW asked parents for their permission to pass contact details on to the researcher. Six clients agreed to be interviewed and were interviewed in a private room at the school, or in one case, a client's home. Three of these were referred to the FSW by school staff,

the fourth saw the information in the school newsletter. Two of the clients who did not have children attending the school were referred by social services and their doctor. The researcher visited one of these carers at her home to conduct the interview, the other came to the school to be interviewed.

Instruments

The data collection instruments used in this research project were:

- The pre and post intervention time capture- to measure time saved by the school staff in diverting welfare cases to the FSW.
- Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire—to measure changes in student behaviour.
- Semi-structured interviews with FSW clients, the school principal and teachers to determine the quality and satisfaction with the program.

Pre and Post Intervention Time Capture

This instrument measured the amount of time classroom teachers, the principal, AP, and other staff such as the school chaplain and teachers' aides, spent on children and families in regards to behaviour and welfare issues, the variable being time. The time capture instrument was developed by the researcher and the AP as no appropriate validated tool could be found. To validate the measure the form was piloted with two teachers for 2 weeks before the study. The teachers provided advice in regards to the form and changes were made accordingly. Pre- and post-intervention time data were collected for multiple weeks (weeks 1, 2, 5 and 6 in term 4, 2012 before the appointment of the FSW and weeks 1, 2, 6 and 7 in term 4, 2013, when the FSW was based at the school). The aim of the time measurement was to determine if having a FSW based at the school, diverted families with social problems away from the school staff, principal, assistant principal and class teacher to a FSW and therefore freed other school staff to concentrate on their roles, saving time, and money. The AP took the responsibility for collecting this data. Notes detailing the 'incidents' that reported time was spent on were also recorded.

Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire

The SDQ is an established, brief behavioural screening questionnaire for 3–16 year olds (Goodman, 1997). The SDQ was used to measure student behaviour pre and post the intervention. All of the versions of the SDQ ask around 25 psychological attributes, some positive and some

negative. For this study the 25-item questionnaire for completion by parents and teachers of 4–16 year olds was used (Goodman, 2012). Class teachers of 18 students identified by the school as high-needs completed the SDQ pre-intervention and again post-intervention. Of the 18 students identified as high needs, 8 were clients of the FSW, or their families were clients of the FSW, over the 15-month intervention period and 10 had no contact with the FSW over the intervention period. Those with no contact with the FSW included students who were referred to the FSW but chose not to take up the service and those with no incidents over the intervention period.

Semi-Structured Interviews

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with the school staff, FSW and clients of the FSW to determine the satisfaction with the program. The variables being measured were perception of saved time for the teachers, benefits and quality of the service. The interview schedule was compiled from questions used in the Sure Start Family Support Outreach Service evaluation (Taylor, 2014) with input from the AP. Recommendations by Esterberg (2001) were followed in constructing the interview schedule and conducting the interviews. Demographic information in regards to gender, partnership status and referral pathway to see the FSW were collected. The interviews were semi-structured interviews and for the clients of the FSW the following questions acted as a guide for discussion: (1) Could you please describe the type of support you were hoping to gain from the Family Support Worker? (2) Did you have to wait long to see the Family Support Worker? (3) How many times did you see the Family Support Worker, how much time did the FSW spend with you? (4) Would you have liked more or less involvement with the Family Support Worker? (5) Have you always been able to contact your FSW when you need to? (6) Has the FSW linked you to any other services? (7) Can you discuss how the FSW has benefited or not benefited your family and the reasons for this? (8) Thinking about the support you have received from the Family Support Worker, if the FSW had not been at the school, who would you have gone to?

The FSW was asked about her overall experience of being based at a primary school. Questions included: (1) What has been your overall experience of working as a FSW based at a primary school? (2) In your opinion how has the FSW benefited the school? (3) Do you consider there has been any draw backs in having the FSW at the school? (4) Can you provide any suggestions for improvements? (5) In your opinion what impact has your presence at the school had on freeing up teachers time to

concentrate on teaching and administration rather than social/emotional issues? (6) Have you been able to provide the teachers any resources/ideas etc. to increase their capacity to provide assistance to vulnerable families? (7) Do you have any other information, or thoughts that you would like to share in regards to this experience? (8) What are your recommendations for the future?

Teaching staff, including the principal were asked; (1) What is your role? (2) What has been your overall impression of having a FSW based at the school? (3) In your opinion how has the FSW benefited the school? (4) Do you consider there has been any draw backs in having the FSW at the school? (5) Can you provide any suggestions for improvements? (6) Discuss the time saved, or not saved to teachers through having a FSW based at the school. (7) How much impact has this had a freeing up your time to concentrate on teaching and administration rather than social/emotional issues? (8) Do you think having the FSW at the school has increased your capacity to assist families in need? Specifically in regard to: Increased community awareness and how to access key agencies, improved partnerships between the school and other organizations? (9) In regards to the children in your class room and their families who have been using the services of the FSW have you noticed any changes, improvements etc.? (10) Please provide your thoughts on the FSW FSW in relation to these families.

Data Analysis

Quantitative methods used included: the examination of the hours, percentage time and equivalent cost savings for selected school staff, standard deviation and paired t tests were used to calculate SDQ results for children who were identified as high-risk for use of the FSW. Qualitative methods included semi-structured interviews analysed using grounded theory.

Pre and Post-Test Time Capture

Weekly time use in pre and post-intervention periods was calculated based on the average reported time across the multiple weeks of reporting. Unit costs for the time input of principal, AP, classroom teacher, teacher aide and FSW were taken as the mid-point of salary scales for each occupational group in Victoria, Australia in 2013. Parent time was valued at the average Australian wage. All unit costs included on-costs to reflect the cost of superannuation, work cover and leave entitlements. All costs were reported in 2013 Australian dollars (Table 1).

Table 1 Unit costs for professions

Element cost	Annual salary	$ Per hour	On costed annual salary	Description
Parent	$50,075	$32.30	$63,826	The 2012 average weekly total earnings for a full time employee was $963.00
Principal	$155,076	$78.21	$155,076	Level 3 Range (5–4) this is the mid-point between min and max for Principal level
Assistant principal	$119,610	$60.32	$119,610	Level 1 range (2–4) this is the mid-point between min and max.
Classroom teacher	$69,373	$44.60	$88,423	Accomplished A-5 (middle band of experience teaching staff) For teaching staff we will assume that they have some level of experience
Teacher aide	$61,608	$39.60	$78,526	Education Support Level 2 (3–3) this is the mid-point of the salary ranges
Family support worker	$61,407	$39.47	$78,269	SCHADS (School, community, home care and disability services) Level 6 PP3—SW3 year 3 due to experience

Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire

SDQ data were scored according to the instrument guidelines, with a total difficulties score of 14 + used as a cut off for abnormality scoring (Goodman, 2012). Pre- and post-intervention scores for the students who were clients of the FSW or whose families were clients of the FSW were compared to those of the students who were non-clients of the FSW. As a small study in one school we did not intend for this comparison of student data to provide statistically significant results, but rather to provide an indication of the level of functioning of the students who were deemed likely to use the FSW pre-intervention, and who used the FSW post-intervention.

Semi-Structured Interviews

Qualitative data from the eleven semi-structured interviews were coded by the primary author and the results verified with other authors. Data was open coded, for common themes, employing grounded theory methodology (Saldana, 2013). Following coding, subject and objective memos were kept as an audit trail. Codes were then analysed through the memo writing to identify patterns, categories and themes. The thematic categories identified were, for the Parents/Guardians: emotions, failure, and support, for the School Staff the categories were emotions, and appreciation (see Fig. 1.) The evolving model was shown to the teacher informants for modification. Direct quotes are used to represent the most common types of responses received.

Results

Time Capture and Intervention Costs

Comparing the pre and post-intervention time use data shows a reduction in the amount of time spent on welfare cases for all school personnel and parents, with a total school time of 6.8 h per week saved (Table 2). In this particular time capture, 100 % of the teacher aide's time was re-invested in working with other students. In this snap shot, this was only 20 min a week; however in other circumstances the FSW has the potential to relieve the teacher's aide of significant social work demands. The classroom teacher's time was reduced by 88 %. The overall saving in school staff time was $509 per week (Table 2). This compares to the cost of the FSW time (3 days per week) of $975 per week. From a provider or budgetary perspective, the net cost of the FSW was therefore $466, as much of the cost of employing a FSW was recouped through reduced school staff time spent on welfare cases. If the additional reduction in parent time is included, the net cost of the FSW falls to $323 per week from a societal perspective, as the combined reduction in time costs to school staff and parents recoups most of the cost of employing the FSW. This upfront net intervention cost needs to be weighed against the additional benefits generated by the work of the FSW, in terms of outcomes for students, their families and longer-term cost-savings that will flow to government departments and society from any improvement in child development outcomes.

Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire

The SDQ data from this intervention captures aspects of the behavioural outcomes but has also shown positive changes in the number of events within this age group of students.

For the group of 18 students as a whole, SDQ scores at pre and post data collection show that very few students are low risk, therefore the majority of the students are serious cases. Between pre and post-intervention data collection there is some improvement in SDQ scores, with mean SDQ total difficulties score falling from 22.1 to 16.7 and 22 % of

Table 2 Per week, reduction in hours, percentage time, and equivalent cost savings

Reduction in 2013	Principal time	Assist. prin. time	Class teacher	Teacher aide	Total school time	FSW time	Parent	Child
Average hours per week pre-FSW	2.4	4.2	2.0	0.2	8.8	0	6.8	0
Average hours per week post-FSW	1.0	0.8	0.3	0.0	2.0	24.7	1.5	0
Change in hours per week	−1.4	−3.4	−1.8	−0.2	−6.8	+24.7	−5.3	−5.3
% Time reduction	60	81	88	100	77	N/A	78	78
Equivalent cost saving per week Additional cost of FSW	$111.89	$205.27	$79.28	$8.80	$508.65	$975.00	$132.79	$–

students moving from "case" to "non-case" on the definition of abnormal score (Table 3).

Comparing the group of 8 FSW clients to the group of 10 non-clients shows no statistically significant differences between groups in this small single-school study. Both groups, on average, improved over time although in both groups at least half of students still showed abnormal scores post-intervention, which indicates the ongoing level of difficulties in this group.

Semi-Structured Interviews

The objective of the interviews was to discover from the teachers, clients and the FSW perspective, the benefits and drawbacks of having a FSW based in a school. The core category identified by both the clients of the FSW and the teachers working with the FSW was that both groups needed assistance with difficult issues and the FSW provided this assistance. A number of overarching themes relating to this core theme emerged. (Table 4)

Parent/Guardians Emotions

A key theme mentioned in all of the parent/guardian interviews was that the interviewees all experienced the emotions of desperation, extreme anxiety and worry. For example one mother stated "I was going into depression,

hitting my children, couldn't manage them and couldn't cope". Similarly another parent stated "I hit a brick wall, I just didn't know where to turn". And again: "I was at my wits end, and thought, well I may as well give it a go. I've tried everything else'.

Parent/Guardian Failure

When clients were asked what other services that had accessed before the FSW arrived at the school, all talked about the difficulty of accessing appropriate services, and of long waiting lists. A mother explained her difficulties:

> I tried the local GP who referred me to a paediatrician. He just said to watch her. I tried (another service), they couldn't help because she was a child, and it's only for adults. I also tried (another service), but they told me that they were too stretched and didn't have any room. (FSW client interview 3)

Two parents reported that they have engaged with services that had little effect, 'I kept on seeing him, but nothing was changing, I was wasting my time and money'.

Parent/Guardian Support

In addition to the failure to access suitable assistance for their children and themselves, five interviewees out of the

Table 3 SDQ scores for children identified as high-risk for use of family support worker services

Group	N	SDQ total difficulties score at pre-intervention		SDQ total difficulties score at post-intervention		Change	
		Mean (SD)	% Above cut-point	Mean (SD)	% Above cut-point	Reduction in mean score*	% moving below cut-point
All students	18	22.1 (6.3)	83	16.7 (8.3)	61	5.3	22
Clients of FSW	8	20.0 (6.5)	75	16.4 (9.8)	50	3.6	25
Non-clients of FSW	10	23.7 (6.0)	90	17.0 (7.4)	70	6.7	20

* *t* test on difference between clients and non-clients for change over time 0.46 (not statistically significant)

Table 4 Qualitative themes

Category	Thematic category	Key ideas
Parents/guardians	Emotions	Desperation, extreme anxiety, worry
	Failure	Failure to access suitable assistance, despite many attempts, frequently over long periods of time
	Support	Support for themselves and in dealing with professionals, attending appointments and dealing with paperwork
School staff	Emotions	Feelings of relief and gratefulness for assistance with on-going challenging issues presenting in the class room
	Appreciation	Appreciation of the skills and knowledge of the Family Support Worker in dealing with the families

six indicated they greatly appreciated the practical and emotional support the FSW provided. This gave the clients more confidence to attend the services they had been referred to, and deal with the paperwork and the professionals involved. Having an on-going caseworker who they could develop a relationship with was seen as important. A client explained:

> I've had so many workers who have chopped and changed. I have a relationship with (her); I haven't had a relationship with other workers. She's been someone solid. When she comes to my home I can be honest, can open up. (FSW Client 2)

Five out of the six clients felt they had no friends or family that they could rely on to assist with their problems or accompany her to appointments. A client explained "Sometimes she accompanied me to appointments. It is great to have someone who can go with you to support you, someone who is on your side. It's hard to go to these people alone."

The provider/client relationship was seen as very important. Providing emotional support was part of the success of the program: "I enjoy seeing her and don't hide from her. At first I didn't want her in the house, but I now feel comfortable with her. I have a relationship with (the FSW) which I haven't had with other workers". Two of the interviewees who had children at the school had approached members of the school staff looking for practical assistance. "I asked the AP a bit, but she doesn't know the services the way (the FSW) does, she's a teacher".

Clients appreciated that the FSW was able to work holistically with the entire family. The majority felt uncomfortable sharing problems, other than those concerning their children, with the teaching staff. However they all realised that the problems concerning their children at school were all part of wider problems. One client explained "I've talked to the assistant principal and she is great, but I didn't want to talk to her about my problems. The thing is that it is not just about my son, it's the whole thing".

Clients also valued the early intervention aspect of the FSW program. They all felt their situations would have continued to deteriorate to a crisis point, if the FSW had not intervened. An interviewee commented on the direction she was headed in before the FSW intervened "I would have had to put up with the situation. I would have sunk lower, had more grief with DHS, (Department of Human Services) my daughter might have been removed"

The four interviewees who had children at the school valued the accessibility of having the service based at the school. Comments included 'It means that I don't have to go anywhere else. Because (she) is at the school I can drop in and see her. If I have a problem I can see her straight away'. Clients appreciated that the FSW could come to their home, '(She) is happy to come to my home. I have trouble getting out of the house; I didn't have to go somewhere to see her'.

School Staff Themes

School Staff Emotions

The overarching theme expressed by the teachers in the interviews was one of relief. Teachers were spending extensive amounts of time on challenging children and in some cases, their family members.

> The time saved for me last year in particular with (name of child) was enormous. The situation that I was dealing with in my class room was immense. If the FSW had not taken on this family the teacher would have had to do it. The teacher last year spent many hours dealing with this particular family. (Class teacher)

Teachers reported being able to spend time release on lesson preparation rather than dealing with welfare issues, or finding suitable services for families in need. A class teacher explained, "My time was freed up to teach rather than dealing with issues associate with this family". Another teacher commented, "The parents come to speak

about their children, but you find out that the issues are around housing, domestic violence and mental illness. I don't have the time or skills to deal with these things".

School Staff Appreciation

Teachers also appreciated the knowledge and skills that the FSW bought to the school. The principal commented that, "the FSW has benefited the school as the teachers know that they can go to an expert who is experienced in this area. She has contacts and the knowledge about working with these parents". The teaching staff valued having the FSW based at the school as she was available immediately to intervene in crisis situations. The principal remarked "At times she intervened when a child would have been sent home from school. She has intervened in crisis situation and was able to give the mother advice that has kept the child in school." In one instance the FSW was able to withdraw a disruptive child out of the classroom, allowing the teacher to resume teaching. The only downside to having the FSW in the school is the perception that the school has a high number of welfare issues which it is unable to deal with.

> When you tell the parents that have a FSW at the school they assume that the school has a lot of problems and welfare issues. They think the FSW has been placed there, rather than the school being proactive in applying for one. (Principal Interview)

Discussion

This mixed methods study examines the benefits of having a FSW based at a primary school, the aim being to explore if this initiative saves the school staff time, money and provides a quality service to the school community. The results support literature that describes the pressures that teachers feel under to meet the needs of high needs students and parents (Australian Education Union, 2012; Easthope & Easthope, 2000; Huffman, 2013; Kyriacou, 1987; Webb & Vulliamy, 2010). The results also confirm past recommendations in relationship to the benefits of having social workers based at schools (Huffman, 2013; Barrett, 2014). The qualitative comments also express the desperation that parents feel in trying and failing to obtain assistance and the need for emotional and practical help in doing so.

The time capture, in which staff members recorded the amount of time they spent on welfare issues before and after the arrival of the FSW, is to our knowledge, unique in Australian literature. A number of papers have contributed to insights into the nature of teacher's work, (Kyriacou,

1987; Easthope & Easthope, 2000; Webb & Vulliamy, 2010) however none have attempted to quantify the time teachers spend each day on welfare issues. The time capture indicated the hours saved per week by school staff through diverting students to the FSW, which added up to around one school day per week and a cost saving of $508.65 per week. These savings recoup much of the cost of employing the FSW. There are many other future cost-savings suggested in the qualitative data in regards to improved outcomes for families. There will be further benefits to other students in the school that flow from the increased time school staff now spend on other tasks. These benefits and associated cost-savings to health and welfare sectors are difficult to monetize, however according to the qualitative data, are indisputable.

In the report 'The Cost Effectiveness of Early Intervention Programs for Queensland' (Queensland Council of Social Service Inc, 2007) research on cost benefit analysis of early interventions programs, demonstrates the characteristics of succesful programs. These included that progams were; focused on the families at risk, flexible, supported service intergration and provided partnerships between agencies and services. These finding were echoed in the Strengthening Support to Families (SSF) project. The SSF program built on the universal programs provided by the school ensuring that vulnerable children and families were identified and were offered the range of interventions which matched their needs. Having a welfare agency employed social worker based at the school, ensured effective school-agency working, and information sharing so as to optimise resources.

The results from the SDQ results are difficult to interpret given the low number of children in this study. Although it was not possible to predict pre-intervention which students would use the FSW, very few of the students in either group were scored as low risk on the SDQ. Many of the students that did not see the FSW were offered FSW support but chose not to take up the service. Comparing students who did and did not use the FSW in terms of their pre- and post-intervention SDQ scores does not suggest that the FSW is associated with behavioural improvements. These data provide a useful baseline for a future larger-scale trial that will be needed to assess whether FSWs can improve short-term behavioural outcomes for students.

This qualitative data affirms the importance of continuity of care. All of the clients interviewed highly valued the on-going relationship with the FSW rather than seeing a different worker each time. Continuity of care, relationship development and emotional support is reported as being essential in successful family support programs (Powell, Batsche, Ferro, Fox, & Dunlap, 1997; Scerra, 2010; Taylor, 2014). Having the FSW on site provided an

early intervention aspect to the work. There is also a wealth of literature that stresses the importance of treating the family as a whole unit, (Australian Government Department of Families Community Services and Indigenous Affairs, 2006; Eber et al., 2002; Fox et al., 2002; Gauntlett et al., 2000; McCain and & Mustard, 1999; Powell et al., 1997; Scerra, 2010) rather than working just with the child.

Implications for Social Work

These findings have implications for school principals, social workers and in particular educational policy makers. Australian teachers are currently under stress from both directions. They have a greater number of high needs children and families to deal with, combined with pressure for their students to acquire high NAPLAN scores (national assessment tests) (Independent Education Union of Australia, 2013). If Australia is to stop the decline in students' achievements in maths and reading, schools need to be better equipped to deal with high needs families (Tovey & Patty, 2013). Teachers need to be released back to teaching and social work professionals need to take over the more complex intractable cases that teachers are now managing. Close to 50 % of Australians who graduate as teachers leave the profession within the first 5 years. Many cite the difficulties of dealing with "kids and all their issues, the things that go on between them and their parents, and behaviour management" (McMillian 2013, p. 2).

It should also be noted that the FSW who participated in this project was a highly qualified senior social worker, with experience in family centred and ecological approach, with authorization to perform home visits. Findings from the successful High/Scope Perry Preschool (Schweinhart et al., 2005) program warn of the dangers of compromising the standard of family centred programs and expecting similar results. The FSW was also based at the school 3 days a week and therefore able to develop a relationship with both the school staff and the clients. This continuity of care was highly valued by both the staff and clients. Having the FSW based at the school also provided easy access for clients and teachers when urgent discussions were needed, and the FSW was on also hand to deal with crisis situation. In this pilot the school was also free to determine the FSW's position description based on the needs of the school. For this school, the ability of the FSW to provide an outreach service and visit parents in homes meant that some of the neediest parents who previously had limited contact with the school were engaged in a significant manner. Having a FSW based at a school means that the school can reach beyond the universal prevention programs offered to the community and target those

families most in need. A number of clients who successfully engaged with the FSW had received numerous previous referrals to agencies and professionals however had never acted on these.

A study by Webb and Vuliamy (2010) identified that when teachers were invited to identify additional provision for their schools one of the highest priorities was given to a "social work trained home–school support worker on the school staff to provide case work involving home visits and inter-agency liaison for those pupils with the most challenging behaviours" (p.180).

Policy makers need to acknowledge the burgeoning social work responsibilities shouldered by school staff and cease viewing school social workers as an extra resource that schools need to apply for. High needs schools would benefit from having a permanent social worker who is part of the school staff and can respond to students and families with complex needs. These high risk families and children need assistance before they reach secondary school and the problems they are grappling with become intractable. If Australia wants to maintain its place as a world leader in student performance and halt the current slide the priorities and choices are clear.

Limitations

The findings of this study should be considered in the context of some limitations. The FSW had a caseload of 20 clients, however only 6 were willing and eligible to participate in the qualitative aspects of the evaluation. Due to the limited number of clients agreeing to interviews, the perspectives of some of the clients was lost, with risk of bias. Due to lack of evaluation resources, the qualitative data were not coded independently by two researchers, which is the recommended practice. The sole researcher did receive coding advice from a senior academic specialising in qualitative data and coding results were discussed and agreed with other authors. Limitations on evaluation resources also prevented a full social return on investment predicting cost to families and society from being undertaken. The cost-benefit analysis was limited to school time saved and outcomes as a result of this.

As no standardized measure could be found to record the time staff spent on school welfare issues, the time capture tool was developed by the researcher and the AP to meet the needs of the study. As the study involved a single school setting and one part-time FSW, the small sample sizes lead to questions regarding the generalizability of the findings. These need to be tested with a larger trial. There were also difficulties in predicting, pre-intervention, which children would or would not use the FSW. This could be overcome in a larger trial by collecting whole-of-class data.

Conclusions

The major conclusion of this study is that a FSW based at a primary school provides immediate savings in terms of teacher time, and cost to the school and community. These savings recoup much of the cost of the FSW. The qualitative data indicates that having a case model service provides a high degree of satisfaction and reaches those families at greatest risk. Having a FSW based at the school has benefited the teachers in freeing their time to concentrate on education and relieved them of the responsibility of managing challenging family issues.

Compliance with Ethical Standards

Ethical Approval All procedures performed in studies involving human participants were in accordance with the ethical standards of the institutional and/or national research committee and with the 1964 Helsinki declaration and its later amendments or comparable ethical standards." The study procedures were reviewed and approved by the Deakin University, Melbourne, Australia, Human Research Ethics Committee (Approval 2012-318) and by the principal of the participating school.

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