Developing Partnerships between University and Local Service Agencies: Exploring Innovative Social Work Placements in Rural and Remote NSW Public Schools

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ABSTRACT

Social and economic factors contribute to health and educational outcomes for children living in disadvantaged areas, particularly in rural and remote areas. Young people residing outside metropolitan areas are not attaining comparable educational outcomes as their city counterparts, including completion of secondary school and higher education. A brief review of literature reveals core themes which support the need for an effective social work program in the school setting, being: social inclusion, innovation of practice, and facilitation of community partnerships. This case study details how these three inter-related components became a collaborative project utilising one remote town as a case example. The project focuses on wellbeing of school students via direct practice, group work and whole school community engagement strategies. Collaborative and innovative programs through a sustainable field practicum can lead to university and service partnerships in rural settings. Results include an emerging research partnership between the university and local services to address local needs, and an innovative fieldwork program for social work students.

Keywords: *Field education, Social work, Innovation, Rural, School wellbeing*

INTRODUCTION

The Social Work in Schools (SWiS) initiative developed at the University of New England was established in 2015 following the evaluation of a local pilot of placing social work students in schools. The pilot was part funded through the Federal Government Higher Education Participation and Partnership Program (HEPPP) that specifically targets low socioeconomic (SES) communities. The aim of HEPPP was to support specific schools with significant low SES enrolments through the introduction of a program to assist school students on a pathway to optimise their learning outcomes. SWiS is a field education practicum for social work students, placing them within public schools to assist in supporting the social and emotional wellbeing of public school students in regional and remote communities. The initiative is innovative in that it identifies the unique needs of individual schools and student bodies and provides a flexible adjunct to existing wellbeing staff within schools. This article explores how collaborative practice can enhance social work students' learning through analysis of a case study involving a SWiS practicum undertaken in a Central Western New South Wales (NSW) town. Written consent was obtained from each school student's primary caregiver involved in the program to record and promote the anonymised findings. The case study outlines how the innovative process of the practicum provides outcomes for both the social work students and the agency (the school) by exploring the value of partnerships within rural settings. The case study centres on a secondary school; however, the program is also established in primary and K-12 central schools.

Social and economic factors, the drivers of the social determinants of health, contribute to wellbeing and educational outcomes for children living in disadvantaged areas, especially outside metropolitan areas (World Health Organisation, 2010). These social determinants result in growing numbers of rural and remote children and young people not attaining comparable educational outcomes to their city counterparts, including completion of secondary school and higher education (Thomson, 2011). Thomson further highlights the considerable achievement gap between Indigenous and non-Indigenous students, who reside in greater numbers in non-metropolitan areas. Contextual factors contributing to these poor outcomes include limited access to educational and health services, reduced lack of stable employment in traditional local industry, unpredictable and/or seasonal family income, limited training options and reduced higher education and career aspiration (Brekke, 2015).

The case study presented here centres on three core elements that have been identified through a university–school-community partnership, being: social inclusion, innovation, and facilitation of community partnerships. These core elements are the foundation of the SWiS model. The first element involves social inclusion where schools are at the centre of young peoples' lives, in which social inclusion is factored as a high priority. While inclusive education is espoused throughout educational policy and school practices, the reality for young people who struggle within this environment may see them sidelined and/or excluded or isolated during their school years.

The second core area, innovation, argues that innovative practice is central to establishing a social work field education program within school sites because each school is unique, being a composite of the specific community factors in which it sits.

Lastly, the facilitation of community partnerships, especially with those organisations embedded within the local community providing child, youth and family services, can develop from social work practicums embedded in the school site bridging education and health and social service provision. In turn, this can facilitate community partnerships that positively serve the school and community alike.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

A narrative review of the literature was undertaken (Ferrari, 2015). Together this literature demonstrates that effective social work programs in a school setting require: *social inclusion, innovation of practice,* and *facilitation of community partnerships (embedded practice in the school)*, supporting the core areas described above. A significant limitation of the literature review is that much of the documented social work presence in the education and school setting is found in metropolitan areas. While it is likely there are similarities and some lessons can be taken from this literature, there is also likely to be considerable lack of information specific to rural and remote schools and social work practice within these environments. According to Lee (2012), there are very low numbers of social workers across Australian schools, and these numbers are estimated only through snowball sampling. Each core area is now reviewed.

SOCIAL INCLUSION

Social inclusion refers to a holistically inclusive environment that meets the needs of a diverse student body. A common concern for educational institutions is negative youth behaviour and/or student disengagement from educational settings. These can result in reduced educational outcomes, involvement in antisocial and criminal behaviour, alcohol and other drug misuse and reduced health outcomes (Cumming & Mawdesley, 2013; Jonson-Reid, 2008, 2010; Knight et al., 2016; O'Donovan, Berman, & Wierenga 2015; Pagan-Rivera, 2014; Senior, Carr, & Gold, 2016; Western & Baxter, 2011; Wilson, Stemp, & McGinty, 2011). The current education and wellbeing system is unable to address these concerns adequately (Winkworth & McArthur, 2008). Many current teachers and school staff are unable to assist students as fully as a health or social service professional given the focus on, and demands of, meeting educational outcomes, classroom management, curriculum development and extracurricular activities (Winkworth & McArthur, 2008). Kidger et al. (2016) report that, when teaching staff are overcommitted, they may struggle to establish supporting relationships with school students, and yet such relationships are identified as a protective factor against school student disengagement and poor educational and health outcomes. Similarly, a relationship exists between school staff personal wellbeing and their belief that they can, in turn, assist school students (Sisask et al., 2013). In other words, where teachers are under pressure, they may be unable to adequately support their students' wellbeing. In light of such circumstances, this environment may leave school students disadvantaged in their learning potential (Western & Baxter, 2011; Australian Bureau of Statistics [ABS], 2014a).

Supporting school students' social and emotional wellbeing within the school context may be beyond the capacity and training of education staff, however, teachers can be supported

by health professionals to attend to the broader needs of their students. As a profession, social work is well situated to support student engagement as core social work methods seek to address structural and individual factors by working from a social justice perspective (O'Brien, 2009). Social workers can positively contribute to the school in allowing all students to equitably learn and reach their full potential (Cumming & Mawdesley, 2013; Pagan-Rivera, 2014). As a result, school students will be better placed to engage in rewarding employment pathways and enjoy a higher quality of life (Wilson et al., 2011). Examples of identified concerns for school students within the school setting include, students missing class, and absenteeism, poor and or disruptive behaviour, drug and alcohol use; these are broadly termed *deviance* (Roach Anleu, 2011). This sociological term captures the idea that some students do deviate from the social norms expected in the school setting. This "unorthodox" behaviour can lead to many hours of missed educational opportunities. Other issues include interpersonal and intrapersonal issues, including bullying, friendship or relationship issues, and mental health concerns.

Missed educational opportunities may be seen as a form of abandonment, or exclusion, and lead to students falling behind their classmates. Clark (2004, p. 56) states that high school students experience "societal abandonment … causing collective anguish." Societal abandonment is experienced in institutions that are auspiced to care, but where young people experience isolation. Social exclusion is the lack of access to institutions such as education (Western & Baxter, 2011). Conversely, social *in*clusion may best occur in a school setting for young people (Winkworth & McArthur, 2008). Broadly, social inclusion refers to participation in economic and social aspects of the lived-in community (Winkworth & McArthur, 2008). The educational institution can be seen as central to the social networks for this age group, and their families.

Schools could be promoted as an ideal base in a community where family engagement can occur in a long-term manner (Winkworth & McArthur, 2008). By including alternate human services professionals within the school, such as social workers, the school provide further networks and services to promote healthy social inclusion. This socially inclusive approach increases overall quality of life and having such a worker in a school allows access to services in a normal and non-stigmatising way, thus promoting quality of life for both school students and family units (Winkworth & McArthur, 2008). Some examples of creating opportunities for families are: the inclusion of parenting classes at the school; breakfast clubs for children; and social activity groups (such as craft for parents). These creative opportunities open the door to networking for parents and children, where they mutually benefit.

Wilson et al. (2011) assert that social inclusion may be addressed through individual responsibility, falling upon the teaching staff and student alike. Here two factors are highlighted: student engagement in the academic context, and relationships. Noteworthy is the notion of student engagement in the academic context, or disengagement resulting in "suspensions, missed classes and academic failure" (Wilson et al., 2011, p. 33). These examples of social *ex*clusion highlight that students can become distrustful of the school setting, believing that it is unable to assist them. In turn, relationships of students with school staff, and adults in general, are weakened, leading to low investment in academic

pursuits. The authors also identify complex home situations as likewise contributing to this disadvantage. A holistic view of empathically supporting these school students may transform relationships to then build social capital.

Students who disengage from educational settings are able to access alternate education programs aimed to re-engage young people with learning through an inclusive framework (Wilson et al., 2011). Unfortunately, some of these are at times not recognised as valid educational institutions (Wilson et al., 2011), or are simply not available in some geographic areas. Interestingly, one of the best practice factors for successful alternate educational settings is a "spirit of common enterprise – a purposeful emphasis on school as community" (Wilson et al., 2011, p. 36). The ideal alternate educational setting would be in a community place to enable a strengthening of the ties between school and community. Indeed, locating such places on school grounds may help establish them as legitimate educational alternatives. Ideally these places would be inclusive, rather than exclusive, according to academic context and achievement. A range of qualified support staff would also support teaching staff in this setting.

Providing an alternate educational setting within the existing school grounds may additionally provide further inclusion regarding social networks and friendships of peers as a protective factor (O'Donovan et al., 2015). These authors call these *enabling spaces* in which students are encouraged to re-enter mainstream educational grounds and then classrooms. Success occurs through building the capacities of young people, and encouraging respectful relationships. In one example, respectful relationships lessened the incidents of delinquent behaviour by transforming the social norm through targeted influences (see Roach Anleu, 2011). However, Jonson-Reid (2010) notes that some peer relationships may also impede school engagement; for example, peer bullying, and other peer-to-peer disruptions, extending well beyond the teacher–student relationship. Establishing inclusive practices involves quality professional staff to support teachers to in turn enable school students to participate in social and economic activities in their school community. Providing opportunities for these factors facilitates a higher quality of life, stronger social relationships and requires innovation and partnerships between schools and local human services.

For many young people, teenage and adolescent years may be described as chaotic. According to the ABS (2014c), teens from one-parent families are known to be at increased risk of homelessness, suffer mental health conditions, experience poor health, discrimination, exposure to higher incidence of crime, and feel unsafe (ABS, 2014c), often as an outcome of low socio-economic status. Innovative programs and creative practices targeted toward addressing these issues may build capacity and resilience. These skills may, in turn, facilitate young peoples' re-engagement with a traditional education setting for renewed learning, thus improving life opportunities. In order to respond to the diverse needs of individual school students, and social issues in the community, an innovative social work approach has merit.

Innovative social work practice

Innovative models of social work practice in schools occur in areas outside Australia, including strong programs across North America and elsewhere. Within Australia, the Victorian social work in school model is well established. For example, the Victorian Catholic School in Melbourne (Testa, 2011) use a model to develop school students' resilience and coping skills toward positive wellbeing; social work students were placed at the school to provide a range of prevention and early-intervention programs. The resulting data suggest this is a successful approach but recommends a greater emphasis in the future to strengthen community engagement, which builds school/home partnerships. Similar outcomes are indicated for students reaching their full potential and accessing their full human rights (Pagan-Rivera, 2014). Thus, schools and social work practice need to take "a much broader view of the outcomes of schooling that are important for the well-being of children" (Cumming & Mawdesley, 2013, p. 305). Beyond Victoria, there is little evidence of social work services routinely sitting within the school setting.

There are considerable barriers to establishing social work in schools, which relate to broader challenges of social work being under-recognised as a distinct profession, continuing to lack the protected title status of other health disciplines (Healy, 2004). Such lack of recognition results in poor general knowledge about the social work role. Yet, cross-disciplinary collaboration may be one way in which this recognition may occur; that is collaboration between teachers and health care professionals will develop this knowledge further (Testa, 2012), and thus broaden the understanding of a unique professional skill mix, and how different professions complement each other. When these factors are embedded in the local school and in the broader community, collaborative efforts will have further reach and be more likely to be effective.

In Victoria, there are pockets of innovative practice that look to collaborate at a local level for both locals and students (Testa 2010, 2012), but they appear to be in their infancy regarding transition from community to a school setting. In the school setting social work innovation may be guarded due to a lack of recognition of the social work profession. For innovation to be effective it is best embedded within the local community; in this case, embedded in the rural school setting where the school is viewed as a key community hub.

Facilitation of community partnerships (embedded practice in the school)

Having practices embedded in the local community is a theme already noted, alongside innovative practices for social workers. Similarly, Testa (2012) makes a compelling case for the effectiveness of practices being strengthened when embedded within the school. Senior et al. (2016) extend this by supporting the embedding of human service workers within the school boundaries. Their program also establishes partnerships with local services. For instance, in their example, a worker posted in a Melbourne primary school was able to establish connections between families and local services. This approach engaged the whole family unit rather than just the individual student at school. The study proposed that embedding a social worker involving home visits and inter-agency liaison between local services was a cost-efficient way of enhancing quality services to the school community. They recognise the burden shouldered by staff, in the absence of a qualified professional, to meet the needs of students with complex needs.

Advocating for enabling spaces within school grounds would be innovative social work practice, promoting social inclusion (O'Donovan et al., 2015). The existence of such spaces could enhance opportunities for school students by re-engaging them with education and learning, especially toward higher educational attainment within the school setting. Notably, from a financial perspective these embedded approaches appear to be cost-effective; either as enabling spaces and/or alternate education, or an employed social worker as espoused by Senior et al. (2016) to extend the opportunities for students in the educational setting. As such they reflect the theme of embedding social work practices in the school grounds and liaising with local services to best meet the wellbeing needs of disadvantaged children.

For such approaches to be successful, it is important to know the local community when considering embedding professionals in a school. Disparity between rural and metropolitan areas is important to note as one gets to know the local community (Jonson-Reid, 2008). For example, a school within a metropolitan setting has access to an increased number and variety of services compared to a rural or remote school where very few human services exist (ABS, 2014b), apart from a small local hospital. However, Jonson-Reid's (2008) question is not whether we *should* interface with the community, but rather *how* we should do it. Embedding practices and partnering with local services may look different in each school or community site, and should be tailored to the needs of the community.

The social work professions' social justice perspective addresses both individual and structural circumstances (O'Brien, 2009). Thus, social work practice embedded in a school will work towards systemic change in reducing system disadvantage entrenched within the institution towards particular groups. It is by making lasting changes from inside the school gate, through social inclusion and social transformation (Gray & Webb, 2009), that a greater quality of life may be achieved, within and outside of the education setting. Such a result may be evidenced through stronger social relationships with peers and school staff working as a protective factor, and links with other services and supports. Not all school students will attain higher education qualifications, however, they should at least have the opportunity to experience a quality education. A long-term view with a structural social work approach has twin aims of alleviating the negative effects of exclusion, while also aiming to promote an inclusive society (Hick and& Murray, 2009).

Rationale for the development of the SWiS practicum

Given the potential of embedding social work practice within the school setting, as earlier described, and the need to place students from a rural social work program, the Social Work in Schools (SWiS) model was developed by the University of New England (UNE) with NSW public schools within the UNE geographic footprint through the NSW Department of Education and Communities (then) Regional Director. Together they considered how entrenched disadvantage within schools might be addressed and identified that the integration of a social work field education practicum within schools might complement school resources and help address some of the factors relevant to the social determinants identified. The SWiS practicum was identified to support students as well as both educational and professional school staff associated. A mutually beneficial concept was envisaged and subsequently piloted, refined and trialed. The remainder of this article presents this model utilising a case study from one remote NSW Public High School.

Schools initially included in the program were identified using the following criteria given the focus on the social determinants of health to assist in addressing the disparity in educational outcomes for rural secondary students:

- located in a rural area;
- high number of students from low socioeconomic status backgrounds; and
- significant Aboriginal student enrolment.

The program identified that the social work student on placement (hereafter SWiS student) would participate within the school with a distinct focus on wellbeing and complement the existing school wellbeing teams. The activities to meet this focus would include: face-to-face (direct practice), group work, and community engagement. These negotiations were vital in order that all parties involved understood their part clearly. Public school student wellbeing and educational achievement were central to each focus placement. All SWiS students have Working With Children checks in place and are made aware of their responsibilities in regard to Child Protection and Mandatory Reporting. They have also been briefed on school rules and procedures and their responsibility to liaise with their in-school (task) supervisor as well as their External Field Education supervisor. The university academic liaison supervisor also regularly liaises with the school to ensure good communication.

The SWiS student sits with the existing school wellbeing team, which has a number of mechanisms in place for student support. All schools can access a school counsellor although the allocation of counsellor time is determined by school size and the smaller rural schools can often be disadvantaged. Public schools are also expected to have Learning Support Teams, or the equivalent, in place. These teams address student welfare issues and learning support for targeted students. Schools in low socioeconomic status areas often need considerable support and they see the SWiS program as complementing other student support mechanisms.

The three goals of the SWiS program, outlined later, underscore the development of the program as well as reflections since its inception. Examples of how these program goals are implemented are given via example of the case study school. The case study school presented here is a Connected Communities school located over 1,000km from Sydney and 200km from the nearest main rural service centre. A connected community school is one that is identified within the NSW Department of Education and Communities (DEC) to improve outcomes for disadvantaged students: “Connected Communities is a new approach to address the educational and social aspirations of Aboriginal children and young people living in a number of complex and diverse communities in NSW” (DEC, Connected Communities n.d.).

1. The development of a social work field education practicum in schools

Traditionally, NSW schools have been familiar with pre-service teacher placements of up to 10 weeks. Social work placements differ – they are often longer than 10 weeks, requiring students to complete up to 500 cumulative hours and have different requirements from teacher education. A thorough orientation to the school staff about the social work

profession was required in the initial phase of the program. Indeed, the education and social work professions approach matters differently. However, these two professions can work together to assist school students in their learning. In the case example, the initial SWiS student on placement endeavoured to build relationships between the local services and the school and these relationships have been strengthened with successive social work students. Identified roles for social work students on placement focused on wellbeing both with individuals and groups of students, collaborating with current student support and wellbeing staff, and engaging the whole school community in positive wellbeing and educational ventures such as the "R U OK? Day."

In order to establish a social work practicum in a school, SWiS students were encouraged to develop their own narrative of the profession through initial supervision sessions. This exercise developed the SWiS students' understanding of the profession in a concise manner. Supervision sessions revealed that students understood the rationale and importance of this concept. Some SWiS students composed one narrative for staff, and another to share with school students. This exercise allowed education staff to grasp the nature of the social work profession in an informal manner, and they received a presentation from SWiS students at a staff meeting. Therefore, sharing this narrative with school students built rapport and interest in adult students in the school, striking up student-to-student initiated conversations about learning in general.

The rollout of the SWiS practicum was focused upon capacity for the SWiS student to build relationships with students, staff, local services and the school. The SWiS student discovered that many service workers were transient due to uncertain funding conditions of the rural setting and difficulty attracting staff to rural and remote areas. Many of these workers had difficulty developing relationships with the school due to staffing instability.

The SWiS students provided an informal "go to" for school students and staff. Each school establishes the practicum by setting boundaries within the three focal points mentioned earlier, to which the SWiS students adhere. Generally, schools that have allowed greater access for school students approaching SWiS students find that this helps build trust with another adult person in the school system but not *of* the school system. School students are more likely to discuss wellbeing issues once a relationship, based on trust, has been established. Schools have a duty of care to ensure the safety and wellbeing of students. Systems of support include access to a school counselor, student welfare committees as well as year advisors. Unfortunately, the responsibility rests upon the shoulders of the school student to seek help. Establishing the social work practicum to allow SWiS students to be informal liaison in the school is one way of bridging the education-disengagement gap.

Focusing on wellbeing strategies emphasised wellbeing of school students individually, in group work, and engagement with the whole school community. This focus strongly supports social inclusion.

(a) Individual access (direct practice)
By allowing the SWiS student–school student bond to be established and accessible, school students are able to seek assistance with wellbeing issues. These issues may be related

to types of bullying, relationship breakdowns with peers and/or at home, and general adolescent developmental distress. Other students require learning support perhaps in the classroom in which the SWiS student may sit alongside the student: talking and assisting in the classroom; making connections with education; assisting with exercises when asked by the teacher; and assisting with coping strategies to stay in the classroom. Some school students may have increased anxiety, out-of-school factors or trauma-related issues; the distress from these may lead them to exhibit inappropriate, unorthodox behaviour in the classroom. This may interfere with other students' learning and lead to removal of the instigator from the room, which then excludes them from the learning environment – and into further disadvantage. The aim of the SWiS program is to assist school students in any way possible to re-engage with learning, develop coping strategies to stay in a classroom, and be engaged in learning; thus overcoming the social exclusion many students face.

(b) Group work

Correspondingly, the role of the SWiS student's group work is important for the above reasons and more. Assisting individuals or groups of students with resilience, developing social skills, and coping strategies for improved wellbeing may be a way of helping numerous students with a similar issue. Group work may consist of mindfulness strategies, social skill development, or similar strategies for feeling less distressed in the classroom. This may reduce delinquent behaviour and allow all students to engage in education equitably.

2. Development of strong community partnerships

Initial feedback from schools where a SWiS student has been placed is that the program has developed stronger community partnerships due to its innovative nature, and SWiS students energetically seeking opportunities. The vibrant local service interagency group in the rural town where the case study took place, was already a positive one. In this township, service funding and quality of service delivery were uncertainties. This is due to the fact that much of the work in remote communities is funding-dependent, and funding fluctuates creating an uncertain future and difficulty in ensuring consistency of service delivery.

(c) Community engagement

The final focus SWiS students' have in the school is community engagement. This broad area may be limited to the school community or may involve the local community in some way. Equitable access to wellbeing strategies for all school students may be conducted through a major national day event. For example, R U OK? Day focuses on initiating a conversation and then listening to the response, encouraging support and then checking back in (R U OK?, 2017). There are many other examples of such "days" that highlight wellbeing across the school and community. In this manner, every school student receives information about where to get help, what to do, and when to seek further help if needed. This equitable access to prevention and early-intervention strategies has a long-term aim of encouraging students to seek assistance early, before matters get out of hand. It is hoped a reduction in severe, complex cases might be experienced in the school thus freeing up school staff to educate, rather than address wellbeing issues. Some local community services and supports were organised by the SWiS students to assist with making these days an all-inclusive school event, resulting in stronger community partnerships.

The SWiS program models collaborative practice in a visible manner. The practicum has a multifaceted and consultative "grassroots" (Kenny, 2006) approach by both SWiS students (on placement) and university staff travelling monthly to the town. As relationships were strengthened, the local services self-identified areas they believed needed to be addressed, such as school and community engagement, and barriers to education such as missing class and absenteeism. Collaborating and designing a series of innovative and educational workshops led to stronger interactions between local services and school, as well as potential research partnerships with the university. Key to this process was university staff members' availability, visibility and extensive, ongoing community and school consultation. Monthly supervision with the SWiS student on placement gave opportunity to network with services across the town and region, and ensured a number of operational dilemmas were overcome. These included supervision, variation of school routine and engaging the local Aboriginal community. Engaging in the vibrant local service interagency meeting led to interactions on professional and personal levels, and inviting university staff opinion on their concerns.

Networking conversations with the community led to research partnerships with the university, stemming from the local service interagency meeting. For example, the local Shire Council, researching the reach and effects of family members' drug usage upon the local community, sought a partnership with UNE, as UNE was in the community. Similarly, the local Employment Circle commenced composing a survey, with university support, for local businesses to identify targeted training for the town. Both areas of research potentially address factors determining both health and educational outcomes of children in the town. Thus, the SWiS program has the potential to invoke change across the town, leaving a strong legacy. These research projects are still in progress and the findings will make a valuable contribution for both locals and school children.

3. The capacity to enhance access to higher education

Central to the SWiS program is a focus on supporting school students to re-engage with education in a school setting. Lower education attainment is linked to poorer employment, and poorer social engagements (ABS, 2014a). An innovative way of linking learning to higher education attainment was required.

The local service interagency meeting became a place where business was shared as well as confidential discussion of problems some services were facing. Over a period of three months, service providers shared their experiences with university staff. Some common themes emerged: compassion fatigue, burnout, self-care and lack of professional supervision. Separate conversations in both settings came to the same conclusions. It was agreed that university staff compose a workshop around these locally identified concerns. The workshop entitled "How to stop flippin' your lid" was a collaborative venture between university and key stakeholders. The SWiS student was instrumental in promoting the event to school staff. The university staff facilitated the workshop to services and school staff as relationships had already been built. The university met all workshop costs. Sixteen workers from diverse services and the school attended and having both school and service providers together created stress empathy. The event was facilitated on the school grounds, assisting to embed the SWiS program and partnerships at the school. The workshop covered compassion

fatigue and burnout, trauma framework, self-care strategies, a laughing session and purposeful games with a parachute.

The survey results from all participants were positive and relationships were enhanced and consolidated on the day. The SWiS student further strengthened these relationships into stronger partnerships in the school, streamlining referral pathways between service providers and the school. This partnership continues to be refined and new partnerships have commenced as a result. Furthermore, attendees desired more information regarding a trauma framework. Therefore, the following year a "Trauma Informed Practice workshop" was facilitated twice, due to local demand. This is just one example of how local services sought the support of higher education to build capacity through the SWiS program.

Whilst on placement, the SWiS student also co-designed a complementary program for grade 6–7 school students. It was developed to enhance their aspirations toward higher education and alleviate some of the fears associated with an unknown future pathway. This program, titled "UNI-fied," aimed at unifying the concept of life-learning and aspirations; a sentiment echoed by the student-to-student bond mentioned earlier. A total of 25 school students were identified by the high school to participate in the three-day program. The UNI-fied workshops and activities centred on Strengths, Aspirations, Barriers, and Resilience. Activities encouraged students to see their strengths and aspirations, and overcome barriers while growing in resilience. The idea was that all students could complete their school education to go further and attain higher education if they desired. All young people want to *be something* both in rural and metropolitan regions (Chenoweth, 2012) and tapping into this motivation may be of assistance.

UNI-fied required more than one social work student to facilitate the program effectively. Therefore, a team of five SWiS students travelled to the school to help successfully facilitate UNI-fied. They helped present a series of purposeful play activities that included everyone, general wellbeing strategies, as well as producing a video on the theme: "Aspiration discovery." School and social work students combined to work out a plot, props, and scene composition, which was then videoed. Videos ended with a graduation ceremony as part of the plot. Rapport between school and social work students was established very quickly during this process. On the final evening of the UNI-fied program, a celebration brings parents onto the school grounds for a positive event. Parents, school staff, social work students and university staff engage together over a meal, with the school students presenting their aspirations publicly in their videos. This activity gives parents a positive reason to enter the school grounds. School staff reported the presence of some community members who had not ventured onto school grounds in a very long time.

The week following this UNI-fied visit in the rural town, the same school students visit the university campus to visualise themselves attending a higher educational setting. The SWiS students hosted the school students to a series of mock lectures across many university areas of life over many disciplines, culminating in witnessing a graduation ceremony.

UNI-fied expanded on the placement concept through intense interaction at both school and community levels, and has developed a better understanding and interaction between

the rural community and the school. UNI-fied is innovative, creative, socially inclusive and linked to community, as well as contributing to the social work presence in the school. Perhaps one of the most fulfilling aspects of UNI-fied is that these school students witnessed a university graduation ceremony whilst on campus. This spectacle firmly established for these school students that they could attain a higher education. Students visualised themselves at their own graduation, linking their video experience to reality.

CONCLUSION

The SWiS program is now well established across rural NSW and Western Sydney, and in its fourth operational year. The program enhances the connection between school and community by establishing a field education model that focuses on developing trust and partnerships between local services and the high school. The program identifies many of the social needs present in rural communities and builds strategies for school students to receive appropriate support from social work students and other agencies to help re-engage with education. Staff members, as part of the case study analysis, reported a better understanding of the social work profession and increased capacity to support school students' learning. Educationally, the program has benefited students, staff and the community. The experience so far with the SWiS practicum placements confirms the additional support is not only valued within the school but also in the community.

From an economics perspective, the SWiS program is attractive to schools with limited resources and finances. Positive outcomes to date are that three social work students have now been employed by the case study high school, alongside a qualified social worker. Other schools have collectively employed six social work students in various ongoing bases. They are generally employed as student support officers.

Collaborative and innovative programs, through a sustainable field practicum, can lead to university and service partnerships in rural settings. Furthermore, the workshops and research partnerships are importantly, self-identified by local services to address social issues. Such partnerships play an important role in student placements for learning opportunities and enhancing capacity within school wellbeing teams and services alike.

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