Student perspectives on school-based social workers: A mixed-methods study

Abstract

Purpose

School social work, in various forms, is well established internationally and has a growing evidence base. Yet existing research focuses on professional perspectives rather than those of students. This study fills this gap by exploring secondary school student perspectives of having social workers in schools (SWIS). It was undertaken in England as part of *the SWIS trial*, which tested whether secondary school-based social workers could improve child safety and wellbeing, identify issues more quickly, and reduce the need for statutory services.

Methodology

A mixed-methods approach comprised a survey (n=1998 students) and interviews (n=27 students). Surveys included questions on awareness, understanding, interaction with and attitudes towards the school-based social workers. Interviews involved a Q-sort activity followed by semi-structured questions on general attitudes and experiences. The Q-sort characterised prominent perspectives and how many students subscribed to them.

Findings

Students were broadly positive about having a social worker in their school in the survey and interviews. Two prominent perspectives on SWIS were identified. The first (n=17) was defined by students feeling positively overall and strongly agreeing that they trusted the social worker. The second (n=4) was mixed in sentiment, defined by some anxiety about working with the social worker. In interviews, students relayed that social workers were easily accessible, offered emotional support, and acted as a bridge between school and home.

Originality

This study is the first to quantify student perspectives on having social workers at school, and evidence attitudes and experiences about school-based social work as practiced during the SWIS trial.

Introduction

School based social work is a prominent issue in many countries around the world, but in the UK it has received less attention than elsewhere. The practice is relatively uncommon, and there is limited research about how students experience having social workers in their school. In this paper we aim to address this through reporting part of a large school based social work research study in England.

The study took place at a time when education and social care providers in high-income nations faced significant challenges that continue to endure, including increasing need and complexity. In the UK the number of children in need rose by 4.1% between 2021 and 2022, and difficulties in recruiting and retaining staff accompany reduced financial support (Hayes *et al.*, 2018, Lepper, 2022, National Foundation For Educational Research, 2022, Department for Education, 2022). Children and young people are particularly affected, exhibiting downward trends in wellbeing and increasing levels of mental ill-health (Newlove-Delgado *et al.*, 2021). Mental ill-health is also more prevalent among children with a social worker, looked after children for example have much higher rates of mental health disorders (45%) than the general population (10%) (National Institute for Health and Care Excellence, 2021). Longer term, there has been a notable and sustained rise in s47 (child protection) enquiries from local authorities (LAs) across the UK, which have risen from 111.3 per 10,000 children in 2013 to 180.1 per 10,000 in 2022 (Department for Education, 2022). Rates of child protection interventions and children being taken into care are now unsustainably high (Department for Education, 2022, Thomas, 2018, MacAlister, 2021), creating a need to adapt services to better respond to increased caseloads.

In response, the social workers in schools (SWIS) programme was conceived by the Department for Education to try and safely reduce the use of Children's Social Care (CSC) services in a cost-effective manner. Whilst the political motivation was to reduce numbers of children going into care and needing statutory services, it was recognised, by schools and CSC in particular, that having a social worker in school would benefit those requiring support at lower levels of risk. For example, at the early help / early intervention level. Among the many opportunities the trial brought about, learning more about students' perspectives and experiences of school social work promised to fill a gap in the literature about the topic. In the UK in particular, student perspectives have been largely missing from the literature.

The SWIS trial (Author's own, 2023) was a randomised controlled trial which evaluated the effectiveness of the SWIS intervention on the need for CSC services, by comparing social care outcomes between schools with, and those without, an embedded social worker. SWIS was conducted between September 2020 and July 2022 in 21 LAs in England following a

successful pilot study in three LAs in England in the 2018/19 academic year (Author's own, 2020). The intervention saw social workers located within 145 secondary schools with the primary purpose of undertaking statutory social work, in addition to acting to support lower-level preventative work, and improve inter-agency collaboration between the school and CSC.

The SWIS trial also included an implementation and process evaluation (IPE), which examined how and to what extent SWIS was implemented, explored the attitudes and experiences of those involved, and examined evidence for the mechanisms of change theorised following the pilot study (Figure 1). This paper describes research conducted as part of the SWIS trial IPE.

Figure 1. Logic model representing the hypothesised mechanisms of the student pathway, from having a social worker (SW) embedded in school to reduction of young people (YP) entering care.

School social work

School social work is conducted across the world, but practice varies considerably between countries. In Australia (Lee, 2012) and the USA (Kelly *et al*., 2010) school social workers mostly perform a counselling function and in New Zealand their work is non-statutory (Beddoe, 2019). In Russia the role of school social workers is not clearly defined, although they tend not to have university level qualifications and appear loosely to fill the role of a pastoral staff member (Pushkina, 2017).

Previous research on attitudes and experiences of school social work has focussed mainly on professionals, primarily involving school staff and social workers in qualitative interviews and focus groups. Many of the issues that have been raised relate to professional identities and the challenges and opportunities of working across agency boundaries (Baginsky, 2018, Beddoe, 2019). In particular, insights into the contrast between the working practices and cultures of social care and schools have been noted, and the need for individual social workers to be well matched to schools (Gray *et al*., 2020). Indeed, these issues were prominent in interviews with professionals involved in the pilot study preceding the SWIS trial (Author's own, 2020).

Previous work based on interviews with social workers highlighted frustrations about what they feel is a disciplinarian approach from schools towards behavioural problems (Cameron, 2006). Others have emphasised the value of a more "holistic, responsive and flexible" stance (Gray *et al*., 2020). Conversely, school staff interviewed often voiced their own frustrations with CSC, around what they perceive to be high thresholds for CSC intervention, insufficient

information sharing, and a lack of clarity about what evidence is required for referrals to progress (de Haan *et al.*, 2019, Isaksson and Larsson, 2017).

The implementation of SWIS can be conceptualised as an intervention that addresses the knowledge-practice gap outlined by Kelly et al (2022) in reference to social workers in the USA. Not only did SWIS take a comprehensive approach with multiple agents (CSC and education), addressing multiple risk factors, SWIS social workers also operated across a range of threshold levels (Authors own, 2023). The early intervention and lower-level prevention work was conducted in most local authorities, and this ran alongside conducting statutory social work, although the balance varied according to local authority (Authors own, 2023).

The knowledge generated by this literature has shaped the development of school social work as a subdiscipline. However, insights from students are not well represented in research and their perspectives are largely missing from major studies. This study aims to address this gap in the literature by exploring students' experiences and perspectives on having a social worker based in their school as part of the SWIS trial.

Research Design

Research questions

To address the gaps in our knowledge outlined above, the research presented here aimed to answer the following research questions:

1. What are student's experiences of SWIS?

2. What are student perspectives on having a social worker in school?

Ethics

Ethical approval for this study was granted by the Cardiff University School of Social Sciences Research Ethics Committee (SREC/3865).

Participants and recruitment

Secondary school students (UK years 7 to 13; ages 11-18) from 133 intervention schools across all 21 LAs were invited to take part in a student survey, regardless of whether they had knowledge of, or direct contact with, the social worker in their school. A link to the online survey was circulated to designated safeguarding leads (DSLs) who circulated it to students via their normal school communication channels (e.g. email or digital bulletin board). An information sheet was included, and consent was requested by way of a tick-box before the

survey commenced. The option of entering a prize-draw to win shopping vouchers was included to encourage and reward participation.

Interviews were conducted in four LAs, selected to represent a range of s47 (child protection) enquiry rates, Ofsted (the UK inspectorate for Children's Services) ratings, geographic locations, and LA types (urban, rural, metropolitan). Three schools were selected within each LA taking into account the type of school and the threshold level of SWIS work. Students involved with the social worker in these schools were initially recruited by the DSL and/or the social worker, who identified and approached students to invite them to take part. For students <16 years of age or those older than 16 years where there was reason to seek parent/caregiver permission (e.g. in the case of learning difficulties, or where the school required this), then the parent was informed of the study in writing and was given the opportunity to opt their child out of the study. Students happy to participate and whose parent/caregiver had not opted-out of the study then met with a researcher who conducted a formal consent process at the beginning of the interview. We aimed to recruit up to five students in each school across a range of year groups. Participation was optional and confidential.

Data collection

The student survey was designed using Qualtrics software (Qualtrics, Provo, UT), and asked questions about the student's experience of having a social worker in their school (see Appendix 1). The survey was circulated to DSLs at the beginning of spring-term 2022 and left open until the end of summer-term 2022. Contact information for the prize-draw was collected in a separate database to survey responses to preserve anonymity.

Interviews were semi-structured and included some initial demographic questions (year and gender) and questions about their experience of having a social worker in the school (Appendix 2). Students were not asked about their reasons for seeing a social worker. All interviews lasted up to 30 minutes and were conducted online via Microsoft Teams.

To investigate students' perspectives on SWIS, we asked those participating in the student interviews to complete a Q-sort activity. Q-method (McKeown, 1988) is a mixed-method approach which quantifies qualitative data to facilitate the exploration of subjectivity among participants, based on correlations between different perspectives on a topic. Q-method is particularly suitable for children and young people (Ellingsen *et al.*, 2010) as it does not require the confidence and skill in verbal expression that interviews tend to elicit. Following a review of the literature on children's opinions of social workers, and findings of the SWIS pilot study, a set of statements representing the range of young people's attitudes towards social workers, known as a 'concourse', was developed (by VB, DW, PS and MM). This

concourse initially comprised a long-list of 47 statements, which were then grouped into thematic categories. Three reviewers (VB, PS, MM) then independently selected 12 statements which they felt best represented the concourse. Reviewers then combined lists and re-worded statements to improve clarity for younger readers and to ensure relevance to school-based social workers. Reviewers then collaborated to create an agreed shortlist of 14 statements (Table I) best representing the concourse of attitudes.

Table I. Fourteen statements used in the Q-sort activity

It was not possible to fully pilot the Q-sort activity, as SWIS is a novel intervention in England and students outside of SWIS schools have no comparable experience of school-based social workers. However, we tested the clarity of statements with a few secondary school age children in Wales prior to running the Q-sort to check understanding. Based on feedback from these non-SWIS students, and feedback from students in the first school to undertake interviews, we developed standard explanatory paragraphs for any questions where students requested examples or a more detailed explanation.

The Q-sort activity was conducted during the student interviews using Q Method Software (Lutfallah and Buchanan, 2019). In some cases, where access to the Q Method software was not possible, the Q-sort was conducted using Google Jamboard, an online whiteboard. In these instances, statement scores were entered into Q Method Software following the interview.

Analysis

Characteristics of schools responding to the survey were summarised according to the amount of time they had a social worker in post, types of schools and the mean number of students responding per school. Characteristics of students who responded to the survey were summarised as percentages including year group and self-reported gender. The percentage of students who were aware of the social worker, the percentage of these who had direct involvement with the social worker (i.e. answered 'yes' to at least one involvement scenario in question 8, Appendix 1), and the nature of this involvement was summarised as percentages.

The extent to which students agreed with survey statements about the social worker (in response to questions 7 and 9, Appendix 1) was compared between the following three groups of students, 1) those "not aware" that their school had a social worker, 2) those "aware" that their school had a social worker but who did not specify direct involvement and 3) those who had been "involved" with the social worker. The percentage of students who responded 'yes', 'no' or 'unsure' to question 10, "if upset, sad or worried at school I would speak to [friends / school staff / social worker]" was also calculated for each group of

students. Differences (significance level $p<0.05$) in attitudes according to gender and year group were investigated using independent samples Kruskal-Wallis tests. In addition, pairwise comparisons between each gender and year group category were conducted using a Mann-Whitney U test, with Bonferroni adjustments for multiplicity. Statistical tests were conducted in SPSS (version 27).

Each of the 14 Q-sort statements (Table I) were scored according to the position they were placed in the pyramid by each student (-2, strongly disagree; -1, disagree; 0, neutral; 1, agree; 2, strongly agree). A correlation matrix was calculated using coded data from all completed student Q-sorts, and was subjected to Principal Components Analysis. The first two principal components were then selected for varimax factor rotation following Humphrey's Rule (Fruchter, 1954). Statements that students placed in a significantly different positions in the average Q-sort for each factor (i.e. had statistically significantly ($p<0.05$) different factor scores) were identified to define the different perspectives represented by each factor. These were used to form the basis of factor descriptions.

Students consented to the interview being audio recorded. Interviews were transcribed and uploaded to Nvivo (Version 12). The interview schedule was used as a basis for deductive content analysis and initial coding of all interview transcripts. A thematic analysis of interviews was then carried out by a second researcher, themes were discussed and reviewed, and final themes were named and defined (Braun and Clarke, 2006).

Results

Survey

A small proportion (12%, 16/133) of the schools invited to take part, participated in the survey. All but one of these participating schools were mainstream provisions, and one was a pupil referral unit (PRU). Of the mainstream schools, two were single sex (girls) and none were selective entry (i.e. admits students on the basis of selection criteria, usually academic). Several schools (38%, 6/16) did not provide education beyond year 11, and school size ranged between 80 - 1570 pupils.

A total of 1998 students from 16 schools across 11 LAs completed the student survey (Table II). All 16 schools had a social worker for more than 70% of the SWIS trial period (mean 84%, sd 13%). Students in years 12 and 13 were least well represented in the sample with 6% (121/1998) and 4% (89/1998) of respondents respectively, and remained a minority following a sensitivity analysis excluding those schools who did not have students in these age groups (8%, 121/1576, and 6%, 88/1576 of responses from years 12 and 13, respectively). More than half the respondents (56%, 1128/1998) identified as a girl, (54%, 1013/1880, following exclusion of the two girls' schools).

Table II. Demographics of students who completed the student survey. Where survey gender categories were male and female we report gender as boy and girl respectively.

A total of 13% (251/1998) of students answering the survey reported having had direct involvement with the social worker in their school ('involved' herein). However, over half (55%, 1092/1998) answered that they were not aware that their school had a social worker.

Of the 251 students involved with the social worker, 86% (215/251) had spoken to the social worker directly, 58% (146/251) spoken with the social worker one-to-one, and 54% (136/251) had done so in the presence of others (Figure 2). Over 40% had asked the social worker for advice (42%, 106/251) and more than a third (37%, 94/251) reported that they had been to find the social worker to speak to them. A smaller percentage were involved in social worker-run sessions or group work (which did not happen in all schools) (23%, 58/251) and a fifth (20%, 50/251) indicated that the social worker had visited them at home.

Figure 2. Nature of involvement with social worker by percentage of students with direct involvement.

There were some statistically significant differences in attitudes between different genders and year groups within groups of students aware of, and not aware of the social worker (Appendix 3). Girls tended to agree more strongly with positive statements about the social worker and disagree more strongly with negative statements in comparison to boys and those who preferred to not report their gender (Appendix 4). The analysis generally showed a more positive attitude towards having a social worker amongst younger year groups in comparison to older year groups (Appendix 4). Despite these differences, general relative patterns of students' attitudes towards survey statements remained, hence gender and year group remain aggregated in results presented below.

Students had a positive opinion of having a school social worker overall, regardless of their level of involvement with or knowledge of the social worker. More than 80% of students in each group (involved, aware and not aware) somewhat or strongly agreed that "It's good that my school has a social worker" (Figure 3), and students who had awareness or experience of the social worker responded positively more often than those who did not (82%, 871/1065, of those not aware of social worker; 86%, 554/647, of those aware of social worker; 91%, 225/248, of those involved with social worker). Further, at least 65% of students in each group somewhat or strongly disagreed with the statement "I don't think the school needs a social worker" (Figure 3).

Figure 3. Extent to which students agreed with the statements by the level of involvement with the social worker.

Most students aware of (73%, 469/645) or involved with (86%, 215/250) the social worker strongly or somewhat agreed that they understood what the social worker does at their school (Figure 4). Half (50%, 121/240) of the students involved with the social worker agreed or strongly agreed that they saw the social worker around the school quite often, whereas the converse was true for those students simply aware of the social worker – about half (51%, 301/586) of whom somewhat or strongly disagreed with this statement (Figure 4). The majority (61%, 149/243) of students involved with the social worker somewhat or strongly agreed that school is a safer place because of the social worker being there, yet only half (49%, 119/244) felt that the school was a happier place as a result (Figure 4). Slightly more than half (53%, 123/231) the students involved with the social worker somewhat or strongly agreed that having the social worker there had been helpful for them.

Figure 4. Charts on the left of the figure show extent to which students agreed with statements, grouped by level of involvement with the social worker. Charts on the right represent the number of completed and missing responses for each group of students for each statement.

Half (51%, 534/1047) of the students not aware of the social worker in their school thought that having a social worker there would make school a safer place, and slightly fewer than a third thought that the social worker would make the school a happier place (Figure 5). These students agreed most strongly that having a social worker in school would be helpful for other students, and over a third (37%, 361/989) somewhat or strongly agreed that they thought having the social worker there would be helpful for them. A greater proportion of students aware of the social worker answered that they neither agreed nor disagreed with each statement than those involved with the social worker. The proportion of students not aware of the social worker who answered neither agree nor disagree was also greater than for each of the other groups across comparable questions.

Figure 5. Charts on the left show the extent to which students unaware of the social worker agreed with statements. Charts on the right represent the number of completed and missing responses for each group of students for each statement.

Students more frequently agreed that if they felt upset, sad or worried when at school they would speak to their friends than school staff or the social worker (Figure 6). The proportion of students who would talk to friends or school staff was similar across groups, yet the proportion of those involved with the social worker who would speak to the social worker if upset, sad or worried at school was at least 19 percentage points greater than for other groups of students. However, a third (33%, 111/251) of students involved with the social worker responded that they wouldn't talk to the social worker in this situation.

Figure 6. Extent to which students agreed with statements, grouped by level of involvement with the social worker (not aware, aware or involved). This question was a mandatory response question.

Approximately 1 in 10 students, (10%, 24/251) involved with the social worker, answered "yes" that they would talk to the social worker, but "no" or "unsure" about talking to school staff if they were upset, sad or worried at school (Figure 7). Conversely, 18% (45/251) answered "yes" that they would talk to school staff, but "no" or "unsure" about talking to the social worker. A substantial number (12%, 30/251) answered "no" or "unsure" to all options, or only answered "yes" that they would talk to friends (26%, 66/251).

Figure 7. Venn diagram to show number and percentage of students involved with the social worker (n=251) who answered "Yes" they would speak to the social worker, school staff or friends if they felt upset, sad, or worried when at school.

Student interviews and Q-sort

Students from 8/12 schools invited to participate and took part in the student interviews, including at least one school in each LA approached. Schools comprised six mainstream schools and one PRU. Five schools were rated by Ofsted as 'outstanding', one 'good' and two 'requires improvement'. School size ranged from 67 – 2144 pupils.

A total of 27 students were interviewed, of which 89% (24/27) successfully completed a Q-sort (Table III). Slightly under two thirds of students interviewed were girls (63%, 17/27), and students were represented across the full range of school year groups (years 7 to 13).

Table III. Demographics of students taking part in interviews and completing the Q-sort, respectively

We identified two distinct factors. Factor 1 defined most students (17/24), and factor 2 defined 4/24 participants (Table IV). Two Q-sorts did not load significantly on either factor (i.e. their perspectives were not well aligned with the perspective described by factor 1 or factor two), and one Q-sort loaded significantly on both factors (known as a confounded Q-sort, meaning that it was not possible to distinguish its alignment with a particular perspective) and hence was excluded from the calculation of defining statements for either factor (see Appendix 5).

The balance of genders was uneven between factors, with factor 1 describing the perspective of most girls (87%, 13/15) and about half of boys (57%, 4/7) in our sample. Factor 2 described the perspective of 43% (3/7) of the boys who completed a Q-sort, and none of the girl students. Students who defined their gender as demi-gender or non-binary were too few to meaningfully compare proportions between groups.

Table IV. Q-sort results for each statement for each of the two factors identified. Distinguishing statement values bold and underlined at $p < 0.05$ significance level. * highlights consensus statements.

Factor 1, "Trusting the SW and feeling free from judgement", was defined by students feeling positive overall about the social worker and strongly agreeing that they trusted the social worker. These students were not worried about telling the social worker that something bad was happening, or about being judged by others for speaking to the social worker in school. They felt that the social worker understood them better than any school staff.

Factor 2, "Wary of the social worker but can see their benefit" was defined by some apparent anxiety about direct involvement with the school social worker but strong agreement that the social worker acts as a bridge between their family and the school. These students felt that they did not trust the social worker, and worried about what would happen if they told the social worker that something bad was happening.

Both factors showed strong agreement that having a social worker in school meant that students could get help more quickly and agreed that the social worker would include their views in any decisions being made about them. Students generally disagreed that school and social workers should be separate and understood the point of the social worker in the school.

Four themes emerged from the student interviews. These were: 1) the social worker 'being there' and listening; 2) other kinds of support work from the social worker; 3) school-based versus home-based social work; 4) differences between the social worker and school staff.

Of the 27 students interviewed, the majority had previously understood that social workers were there to help children and families who were having difficulties and to keep children safe. However, many students expressed that since directly interacting with a school social worker they understood that social workers were also there to listen to their worries or problems:

> "they make sure I'm like safe, and they're just someone to speak to"

> "it makes children feel better, if they are struggling with mental health, or they really need someone to be there they know that there's someone there"

Overwhelmingly the students highlighted that the social worker was someone they felt they could chat with generally in addition to talking about their feelings or problems in their lives reflecting the level of trust students who aligned with factor 1 of the Q-sort felt:

> "basically we just talk about life at home, life at school, we just talk about anything really, it feels good to share how I feel"

> *"we laugh about and we make jokes, very funny, I feel safe"*

Whilst students were not asked about the nature of the work the social worker carried out with them personally, a range of examples of work beyond listening to students emerged including signposting to other services, helping improve confidence and social skills, improving school and lesson attendance, and helping with mental health issues and exam stress. Support of this nature could help students to focus on academic learning, improving their experience of schooling:

> *"...[I] feel 10 times better going to lesson…know[ing] someone's there for you"*

In relation to the social worker being based within the school rather than visiting their home, students mentioned the practical convenience of being able to see a social worker as and when they needed to, in a place where they spend a lot of time anyway:

> *"I think it does help to speak to someone who isn't really with the school, but getting to them at school, because obviously you're there every day. I think it's convenient"*

Where in the school the social worker was based was mentioned by some students as enhancing how accessible the social worker was to them:

> *"They're around the building a lot, so you see him a lot, and he'll just check on you during the day, see if you're ok"*

> *"[the social worker is] based with safeguarding, they're in the same office, so everyone really knows where they are"*

This also gave some students a sense of control over their relationship with the social worker with one student saying *"we don't have to organise what days they have to come at home … I can do that for myself… I can work around what I've got."*

The Q-sort statement about the social worker acting as a bridge between school and home was exemplified in the interviews with one student saying *"I feel like I have a sort of extra layer of support, and it also helps me connect home and school."* Whilst the issue of stigma and privacy remained for some students who did not like how visible direct interaction with a social worker was to their peers, most students disagreed or strongly disagreed with the Q-sort statement *"I feel judged by others because they know I speak to the social worker in school".* When asked about the views of others, many students did not know how their families or peers felt. Some students said their families felt positively about the SWIS intervention, again reflecting the notion of the social worker as a 'bridge between school and home':

> *"When I'm not really feeling happy in the school she [mum] can call him [the social worker] and talk to him and explain how I'm feeling and he can try to help"*

> *"my family ... know a lot more stuff about us that they wouldn't have knew if I didn't go to see them [the social worker]"*

However, the views of family members were not directly sought. A small number of students also felt that their peers valued the social worker being in the school as was reflected in the survey findings.

In-keeping with the theme of the social worker 'being there and listening' some students suggested that kind of support was not available from school staff, or the support that was available from school staff was not sufficient. The social worker was seen to not take a disciplinary approach *"They [the social worker] aren't all about restrictions all the time"* which reduced anxiety and gave students more control in what they shared with the social worker *"I can talk freely without worrying about how it might affect my school, or how they view me, or how my next lesson will go"*. Students talked about school staff being too busy to really listen such as *"We have our safeguarding [person] … but [they are] so busy all the time"*. The social worker being able to take time to listen was highly valued by many students: *"He'd drop things just to help us"*. Nearly all of the students said that they would like to continue having a social worker in school.

Discussion

This study provides a detailed insight into the perspectives of a secondary school students on social workers based at schools. Using a suite of research tools including surveys, a Q-sort activity and semi-structured interviews, we found a consensus across our Q-method and survey results that students understood what the social worker does. Student attitudes towards having a school social worker were generally very positive, the majority of students who participated in the survey agreed that it was good that their school had a social worker, and across survey data and the perspectives defined in the Q-method, students generally disagreed that school and social workers should be separate.

Most students who completed a Q-sort strongly agreed that they could trust the social worker and were not worried about telling the social worker that something bad was happening, potentially opening the door for easier disclosure of future problems. This appears, from interview findings, to have been facilitated for some students by the social worker being at school yet also somewhat separate from it, hence enabling students to speak more freely with the social worker whilst keeping their problems separate from other

aspects of school life such as lessons. Students were also less worried about talking to social workers as students recognised they did not take the disciplinary approach attributed to school staff. These students (factor 1) also felt that the social worker understood them better than any school staff which may have been enabled by the comparative availability and ability of social workers to listen to what students have to say.

However, over half of the students responding to the survey were not aware that their school had a social worker, and more than a quarter of those aware of the social worker (but who did not report direct involvement) were either ambivalent or did not agree that they understood what the social worker did, as did a small portion of those with direct involvement. This suggests that the intervention could have been better publicised and explained within schools to improve student understanding.

The Q-method did however reveal a minority of students (those represented by factor 2) involved with the social worker who held some concerns. These students disagreed that they could trust the social worker, and worried about what would happen if they told the social worker that something bad was happening. As we did not ask students to detail specific reasons for their involvement with the social worker, it is not possible to tease out whether this relates to the context of their involvement.

Rodriguez *et al.* (2020), through exploration of school social work in the context of immigrant students in the USA, introduced the idea of social workers as 'Nepantleras', or 'border-crossers', those able to bridge two worlds via critical awareness and experience of both. This could allow them to foster trusting relationships with students and improve the effectiveness of their advocacy. In this study however, students' strong agreement that the social worker acts as a bridge between family and school (represented in factor 2), was held alongside an apparent lack of trust of the social worker.

Despite some misgivings about the social worker these students, in consensus with those represented by factor 1, strongly agreed that having a school social worker meant they could get help more quickly, and that the social worker would include their views in any decisions being made about them. This is significant as children frequently report feeling excluded from, or not given sufficient information about decision-making on their behalf (Stabler *et al.*, 2020, Bessell, 2011, Leeson, 2007, Van Bijleveld *et al.*, 2015). Through not being engaged effectively, or at the right time, children's sense of autonomy can be eroded (Fern, 2012).

The mixed sentiment characterised in factor 2 is not uncommon in reports of children's views of their social workers. Previous studies, including those focused on education support (Mainey *et al.*, 2009, Hibbert, 2006) and decision-making (Stabler *et al.*, 2020) found children held mixed views. That factor 2 did not represent the majority view in the sample of students

interviewed in this study reflects well on social work as conducted during the SWIS trial as a sound approach to working acceptably with children.

Feeling stigma around seeing the social worker was hypothesised as an inhibitory context in the SWIS logic model, yet we found little evidence (beside a comment in an interview from one student) that students felt this way. Other contexts (quicker help from the social worker, frequent interaction with the social worker) and mechanisms (building trust with the social worker, feeling able to disclose) in the logic model were clearly apparent from data provided by students, yet this unfortunately did not translate into the main outcome measures (decreased referrals, section 47 enquiries, section 17 assessments, and days in care) hypothesised (Author's own, 2023). Despite this, positive outcomes related to the acceptability of school-based rather than home-based social work, and student well-being were apparent. Interviews revealed that students felt more secure knowing that they could access the support of their social worker quickly and easily if they needed to and felt that the social worker's non-disciplinary approach facilitated talking about their problems. Students also talked about feelings of safety associated with having a school social worker, and this was supported not only by survey results for those involved with the social worker, but also for those groups of students aware of, and not aware of the social worker (albeit to a lesser extent). Although this finding speaks to feelings of safety rather than safety itself, it does indicate an, at least perceived, broad safeguarding reach across the school community because of the social worker being there.

The SWIS intervention ran September 2020 – July 2022, a period of significant school disruption. Initial research plans included a substantial component of researcher presence in the schools to conduct observations. However, due to successive waves of Covid-19 restrictions it was not deemed feasible or appropriate for researchers to be physically present in the schools. This created an extra challenge in engaging with some schools and arranging interviews. For example, in one alternative provision school, where staff could not be sure from one day to the next whether, or what time, students would be in school, conducting interviews online via appointment further increased the challenge of engagement. The Q-sort activity was designed for face-to-face contact, with students sorting through physical statement cards and arranging them by hand. Moving this activity online posed minor technical issues. To support students with safeguarding or technical issues, the social worker was in the room for interviews in one school, which may have influenced responses to interview questions. However, the drag-and-drop nature of the activity meant that students did not need to verbalise their thoughts for this activity, perhaps tempering the impact of having the social worker present. Some students found certain statements difficult to interpret, but the presence of researchers as facilitators during the activity meant that

these could be explained in real time. If Q-sorts were to be used as part of a questionnaire, we would recommend further piloting of statements and the provision of more detailed definitions as a helpful guide. The Q-sort forces responses into a pre-set grid, requiring an equal number of statements to be placed on positive and negative sides of the pyramid. A small number of students did not feel comfortable placing statements in a category they felt did not represent their views and hence did not complete the Q-sort. However, most students interviewed successfully executed the activity.

Although the social worker was involved in recruiting students for interview, introducing the possibility of some selection bias, survey findings, open to all students who wanted to participate, align with those of the interviews. Younger students were more difficult to engage in conversation during interviews, however this did not negate capturing their perspectives via the Q-sort as this method does not require any verbal elaboration. Further, years 7 and 8 were well represented in survey data making up 37% of the survey participants. Older students, especially those in years 12 and 13, were less well represented. The reason for lower participation of these year groups is unclear as it could not be wholly attributed to some schools not having a sixth form.

Survey data captured the views of almost two thousand students, yet response rate, as a proportion of SWIS schools approached to participate, was low. This may be reflective of survey links not being circulated by DSLs to their student populations. The burden of research on school staff in this study was not trivial, further exacerbated by researcher remote working and a significant period of stress and disruption in the aftermath of school closures. DSLs were asked to take part in interviews and termly surveys themselves, and support student participation in interviews in selected schools. It is conceivable that the student surveys met gatekeepers without the resources to administer them. However, reasons for non-participation are unknown, and the small number of participating schools must be considered as a limitation to our understanding of students' experience of SWIS. Conducting research in schools is challenging and complex during 'normal' conditions, and this research would not have been possible without the commitment of schools to the research study. Future research is needed to improve data collection methods for school-based intervention research that reduces the administrative burden on both participants and researchers.

Conclusion

Students welcomed having a school social worker and felt that they enhanced the pastoral team. This may indicate that there is room for schools to improve their pastoral offer, whether or not they have the capacity or desire to bring a social worker into the school. In

the main trial we found that SWIS did not change rates of child protection and care interventions. Based on this finding, the Department for Education has decided not to invest in SWIS further, but the funder noted that aspects of the study, including the evidence presented in this paper, suggest that there is unmet need within schools. This paper shows that students broadly valued the intervention and found it beneficial to them and their schools, even though it may not reduce the need for statutory services. Schools may reflect on this set of findings and consider other ways in which to provide the type of support social workers offered during this trial. The findings suggest that additional pastoral capacity or more diverse professional expertise within schools may be beneficial for students.

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Notes:

Source for figures and tables: All are author's work.