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CREATING A COMMUNITY OF CARE IN EDUCATION:

the work of a primary school to mitigate social and
economic disadvantage in education in New Zealand

A thesis presented in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor
of Philosophy

in

Sociology

Massey University, Albany,

New Zealand

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2016

ABSTRACT

The failure of education services to ensure equitable outcomes for all groups of children has been an enduring problem for educators and policy makers in New Zealand. More recently, primary schools have become the focus of policy to ensure that children from low income, Maori and Pasifika homes achieve in formal education at levels commensurate with their peers. This research explores the work of a single low-decile primary school and its community in New Zealand as it navigates the choppy waters of political ideology, education policy and the educational needs of its students.

This research takes a critical realist perspective, which argues that real consequences attend success or failure in formal schooling for individuals, and these can be described in both qualitative and quantitative terms. However, a critical realist approach is also substantively concerned with uncovering structural conditions that lead to success or failure in education, insisting that this knowledge is vital in achieving transformative change. The research therefore makes use of existing quantitative data and employs a variety of qualitative research methods, to piece together an account of the work of the school. This approach allows the school to be placed within local contexts, which shape its responses to the needs of its school community, while also supporting an examination of the effects of wider systems and institutional practices that structure its operations.

Descriptions of the work of the school in this research reveal its intensely relational nature conducted in nested communities of interaction: within the school; within localised communities and neighbourhoods; and within national structures and institutions. Concepts of ideology, social justice and an ethic of care are used as a framework to evaluate the research findings, which in turn coalesce around three issues: attendance; achievement; and behaviour. Crosshatching an issue-based account of the work of one low-decile school with this conceptual framework allows

the complexity of the educational project to be revealed. These complexities notwithstanding, the research also opens up possibilities and spaces for action at the level of the school, the family, the community and the state to support the shared goal of redressing educational inequalities.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This research grew out of my concerns and questions about the differences in educational outcomes for some groups in New Zealand. However, my continued efforts in researching this topic, have been sustained by the advice, encouragement and practical assistance of others, without which I could not have begun this project, much less carried it through to completion.

My supervisors, Associate Professor Ann Dupuis and Professor Cluny Macpherson, have provided a bedrock of support, upon which I could depend for wise counsel and practical support. I have valued immensely, their patience and forbearance in helping me to negotiate the twists and turns of conducting the research, and most particularly their support for me in my difficulties in carving out a coherent narrative in the writing. In every instance in which I felt overwhelmed by the difficulties I faced, their patient questioning and suggestions helped me to refocus and continue with renewed and hopeful confidence. I feel so fortunate to have had the quality of supervision they provided, and to have had the opportunity to work through this process with them.

I owe a debt of gratitude to the participants who took part in this research. Their commitment to the interview process was inspiring, as were the accounts they gave of their experiences in education. These accounts and the encouragement I received from them, acted to sustain my motivation in continuing with this project.

I give thanks to my family. Their ongoing encouragement and support enabled me to complete this research. My sisters and my mother, continued to make it possible for me to continue onwards, creating space for me to work in addition to practical and financial assistance. My daughter Geraldine, patiently listened to me discuss the research in detail and provided reassurance that it was indeed possible to manage the workload and to make my way through difficulties. My son-in-law, Rakesh, provided

immediate technical support through a several computer crises that threatened to overwhelm me at critical junctures. In all, I am so very fortunate to have received their loving care, and that they were available to me when I needed them most.

I want to also acknowledge my friends Lynda and Erin. They both kept me grounded in the real world during the long periods when I worked in isolation. Lynda helped me to edit this writing, applying her typist's eye to grammar and sentence construction. Erin kept me sane through difficult times. Their friendship continues to sustain me, and I am enriched by it.

Finally, I want to acknowledge the support of Massey University, not only in supplying me with excellent supervision and wonderful library services, in living at such a remove from the university, but also in providing me with financial support. I could not have considered undertaking this research without it, or sustained the final push toward completion. I feel astounding lucky as I approach the completion of this work, that they gave me the opportunity to pursue this research.

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