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**An exploration of teacher engagement practices with families  
of primary aged students categorised as at risk of educational  
underachievement**

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

Master of Arts

In

Sociology

at Massey University, Palmerston North,

New Zealand

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2016

## **Abstract**

Current education policy in Aotearoa New Zealand signals that parents of students who are 'at risk' of educational underachievement should be drawn into the educational field to assist those children to reach the outcomes specified by the normative National Standards framework. An 'educationally powerful relationship' is advanced as being the optimum way to link home and school.

Framed in this way, the home/school relationship emerges as an instrument of governance. The re-calibration of education-as-governance represents an emergence of teacher/parent relations as a means to address at-risk sub populations. Caught up with the administration of 'at-risk' families, the work of the teacher reflects capital(ism) in its tendency towards a crisis in social reproduction more generally. Identified by Nancy Fraser, this crisis refers to both the undermining and the overuse of the capacity of actors to establish emotional bonds, and of the contradictions that consequently emerge. Similarly, in the field of education, the emotional capacities of teachers are put to work to meet bio-political ends of producing productive populations.

This research asks teachers to talk about their experiences of engaging parents of 'at risk' children. Using an inductive methodology, underpinned by a Foucaultian theoretical framework, data was generated by conducting semi-structured open-ended interviews in the Marlborough region. Findings point to a series of further contradictions at the site of the school. The following contradictions speak of the discontinuities inherent in the work of the teacher.

Constituted to provide universal education, schools have established corrective mechanisms with which to address student underachievement. Accommodating the effects of adverse home conditions, teachers predominantly rely on in-school learning. Teachers try to be approachable yet may find themselves acting in ways that are

inconsistent with their knowledge of family systems because of administrative requirements associated with the operation of National Standards. School management systems may disrupt tentative relationships with parents amplifying the tendency for parental involvement to diminish as children advance through the school years. It transpires that institutional practices work against the establishment of an effective home/school relationship, thereby illustrating the contradictions within Fraser's crisis of social reproduction.

## Acknowledgements

I am grateful to my supervisor Dr. Warwick Tie, for his expertise, wisdom, knowledge, and guidance during this project. I have struggled at times to get words to paper. Thank you for your writing tips. Your emails, always thought provoking, seemed to arrive just at the right time to help me push forward.

I would like to acknowledge the contribution of the study participants, without whom this project would not have been possible. By sharing your experiences, you have opened up the complex environment of the school and given a glimpse of what happens 'behind the scenes'. Thank you for your time and your candour.

Finally, I must thank my family who have been an invaluable source of strength throughout this learning journey. It has not been easy. While there have been many highs there have been just as many lows. To our children, Eamon and Michael who have encouraged me and believed in me. To my husband Alec, who has always shown unwavering support not only for this project but also throughout our relationship. You are a fine man indeed.

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# Chapter One-Introduction

## 1.1 Introduction

It is generally accepted that parental involvement in a child's education will lead to positive educational and social outcomes for the child and the family (Hara and Burke 1998). While parents give time to assist the work of the school and to share skills so as to supplement existing educational provision, levels of parental involvement can be inconsistent. This may particularly be the case for children who might not attain academic achievement in concert with their peers (Lareau 1996). Educational discourse in late modernity focuses on the need to draw parents of children 'at risk' of educational underachievement into the pedagogical space.

In 2015, the Education Review Office (ERO) released a report entitled *Educationally Powerful Connections with Parents and Whānau*. By way of addressing educational underachievement, the report provides exemplars of innovative practice that have been initiated by schools across Aotearoa New Zealand, in order to encourage parents to participate in their children's education. Taken in isolation, accounts of this kind may be persuasive. What such accounts cannot speak to, however, are the oftentimes-complex circumstances teachers find themselves having to negotiate. Nor does it allow for fuller analysis of the socio-political milieu, in which the operations of governance may not be immediately apparent, particularly as governance comes to function at the level of institutional settings.

This research seeks to address these omissions by exploring the ways in which teachers try to reach this seemingly reluctant cohort of parents. It enquires into the strategies teachers use, difficulties they encounter, and how the responses teachers get from parents informs the ways in which they are inclined to progress. It becomes evident, both from teachers' accounts and from the literature pertaining to home/school engagement, that parents of children who are 'at risk' of educational underachievement have particular challenges in their own lives. These challenges may



become obstacles to the types of engagement practices common within schools. The subtext of this thesis therefore is the effects of social disparity characteristic to contemporary society.

Teachers provide a service to society. It is accepted that they take part in the socialisation and preparation of young people for their adult roles (Durkheim 1956). In Aotearoa New Zealand, the expected scope of teacher expertise extends beyond the academic role, to include attitudes and behaviours conducive to favourable pastoral and social outcomes for their charges (Whitehead, Ryba, and O'Driscoll 2000). An exploration of teacher practice would be remiss to ignore the emotional labour in the interpersonal work of the teacher.

Indeed, it is to the emotional work of teachers that attention must be drawn. The pass over intent of governance in late modernity seeks to capitalise on the emotional labour of teachers by way of addressing risk at the level of society: in so doing, a fondness for statistical measurement, comparison, and estimation of risk proliferates (Nadesan 2008). Within the education sector, this tendency is expressed with the introduction of new terminology, for example 'at risk' and 'parent engagement', by scheduled school auditing practices, and by the responsabilising of staff in order that they meet in a consistent yet autonomous manner, specified management outputs (Ball 2003). It is within this climate that American sociologist Nancy Fraser, for whom capitalism signals an inherent 'full range of crisis tendencies,' warns that 'activities of provisioning, care-giving and interaction that produce and maintain social bonds', vital for human social connection-making, become taken for granted, and remain unacknowledged (2016, p.101). This thesis therefore seeks to understand the ways in which teachers accommodate to what Fraser says is 'the present crisis of social reproduction' in which the teacher-role is expected to contribute to the meeting of the bio-political end of producing productive populations, while the task of governance seemingly passes over the effects of such on teacher subjectivity (ibid, p.100).

## **1.2 Research objectives**

The aim of this study is to gain access to the reflections of teachers on their work as it is carried out within an increasingly managed workplace. I endeavour to find out the ways in which teachers make sense of what they do and how they use their insights to make public the oftentimes unarticulated expectations and experiences of institutional life. I aim to ascertain in what ways concepts such as 'home/school partnership', 'at risk', and 'ready to learn', influence teacher practice, and identify how these constructs are put to use. I will describe how teachers strategize in order to meet bureaucratic expectations that parents be participants in the educational success of their children.

Through an exploration of teachers' reflections on school practice, it will be possible to show the ways in which biopolitical governance becomes actualised at the local level of school environments through the teacher-role, as responsibility for population management is tacitly passed to those who are involved in the field of education. A brief account of the changes to educational policy is required to locate the current ideological stance in respect of education. By understanding the historical antecedents to current expectations of teacher practice, it becomes possible to know how the conditions that are characteristic of the present time have emerged.

## **1.3 Educational reform in late modernity**

Social democratic practices that had informed the political landscape after World War Two were becoming increasingly unpopular by the 1980s and saw the demise of welfare liberalism as a common ideal (Codd 2005). Political discourse that once articulated education as a social good became increasingly irrelevant as the political climate in Aotearoa New Zealand changed rapidly. A push toward the adoption of neo-liberal ideology simultaneously saw education positioned as an adjunct to economic prosperity, and brought about a distancing of the teaching profession from debates on education policy (ibid). Instead teachers 'were repositioned as state workers' (ibid, p.195). As such 'reforms would focus on parental choice, decentralisation, management, governance and accountability' (ibid, p.196). The change to teachers'

roles and to their identity was to have a profound effect on the way members of civil society would relate to teachers, and the ways in which teachers would experience teaching (ibid).

Seeking an appraisal of state service provision, the Labour Government commissioned an 'examination of the administrative structures of primary and secondary schooling' (Gordon 1992, p.28). On the recommendation of the Picot Report in 1988, the restructuring of education saw the introduction of Boards of Trustees (BoT); the belief at the time being that school operational matters were best dealt with at a local level by parent elected members and school personnel (ibid). Matters of national educational significance would be communicated by the adoption of a school charter, and school performance was to be assessed by a new 'review and Audit Agency' (ibid, p.28). While the reforms had an appearance of reducing government involvement and increasing community participation, school principals, now became managers charged with meeting national educational outcome expectations. Government also wanted to 'improve educational outcomes for Māori and for students from low-income families' (Mutch and Collins 2012, p.170).

During the intervening years, education has experienced many policy and curricular reforms (Mutch and Collins 2012). The beliefs about parent involvement have also shifted during this time, particularly in relation to the participation of parents in assisting their children to achieve educational outcomes (ibid, p.171). While couched as 'collaborative goal setting', schools must engage with parents, in formative and summative assessment meetings, and report student achievement data to the Ministry of Education (ibid, p. 172). More recently, a nationwide system of reporting has been advanced as a mechanism capable of reversing negative trends in educational achievement.

#### **1.4 National Standards**

National Standards, as a nationwide system of reporting, was introduced in 2010. The aim of the initiative was to implement a countrywide system of common assessment

criteria for children in primary education. Children in years 1-8 have their academic progress measured against expected educational milestones specific to their year group cohort. A sliding scale of achievement criteria describes student accomplishment as being above, at, below, or well below the literacy and numeracy standard being assessed. At the time of implementation, the Minister for Education stated that 'many of our students are among the most successful in the world' ... yet ... 'nearly one in five of our young people leave school without the skills and qualifications they need to succeed' (Ministry for Education n.d. a, p.1). National Standards will allow for the provision 'of sound information about how students are progressing' ... and ... 'early identification of students who are falling behind' (ibid, p.1).

The construction of normative milestones works to differentiate students into groups, make visible those who require additional assistance to remain within the prescribed range of achievement, and responds to the purpose of bio-political governance to know the populace through 'continual, systematic and wide-ranging assessment' (Tait 2013, p.94). As an extension of this assessment regime, parents are required to know of their child's progress such that they might assist the child to meet those educational targets (Ministry of Education n.d. a). An 'educationally powerful connection' is, in this vein, described as one in which 'parents, teachers and students all understand their rights and responsibilities, commitments and obligations...to help the student succeed' (Education Review Office 2015, p.5).

The term 'at risk' in this sense defines children who are failing to make expected educational milestones. It is a common tendency of such governance to construct a category of person who requires extra monitoring during a particular stage of development (Tait 1995). 'At risk' defines a liminal stage of progression between one state and another. In the context of education, being 'at risk' pertains to a grading on a scale of achievement criteria to meet recognised accomplishments, which in the case of National Standards testing constitutes a move, from 'below' the standard to a status of being 'at' the standard.

The practices of the school extend the workings of governance by installing the logics of assessment and normalisation within the private domain of the home; in this way, governance exerts indirect influence upon social relations to address the ends of such logics (Rose and Miller 1992). The education sector accomplishes this by talking about parental engagement in a specific way. The Education Review Office assesses the efficacy of school practice in this respect.

### **1.5 The Education Review Office**

The frequencies of ERO visits are reflective of the capacity that a school has to meet the states regulatory standards. Review audits are usually carried out every three years. Such audits are undertaken by the Education Review Office (ERO). This body is responsible for auditing and evaluating the quality of school and teacher practice in early childhood, primary and secondary education sectors, throughout Aotearoa New Zealand (Education Review Office, n.d.). ERO reports are public documents. In addition to audits, ERO also collate data and produce reports on 'matters of national interest' (Mutch and Collins 2012, p.167). In order to meet the expectations of governance such reports, 'which are often supported by case studies of best practice', work to invite self-responsibilising behaviours of education professionals and the lay public alike (ibid, p.168).

To effect sustainable change and improve student performance, each school is expected to participate in processes of self-review. Such systems of ongoing internal audit are intended to complement the external evaluations undertaken by ERO. A recent methodological change in the way ERO carries out work has, in the terms used by the State Services Commission, proven beneficial for schools in monitoring their own performances (State Services Commission 2012). ERO has moved away from punishing schools for underperformance and, instead initiates discussions with the schools involved on how those institutions might themselves change their practices (ibid, pp.24-25).

Insofar as ERO enacts the logics of bio-political governance through its management of in-school performance appraisal, it too is subject to internal and external audit practices. ERO must meet and maintain pre-determined performance criteria to demonstrate its capacities to undertake the evaluative work required of it (State Services Commission 2012). Taking account of this close connection between the actions it takes with regard to others, and those enacted upon itself, the relationship between ERO and governance cannot be viewed as impartial. The focus of the auditing processes becomes school performance, with a recurrent indicator of such performance being student underachievement. In this way, any adverse social conditions that are external to the school, that impact negatively on student wellbeing and academic performance, fall out of view to those charged with managing the educational field.

### **1.6 Social conditions in contemporary Aotearoa New Zealand**

In relation to the general social situation, whose existence the auditing regime needs to disavow in order to function, the Salvation Army releases an annual State of the Nation Report, which documents the conditions of social life that vulnerable groups in Aotearoa New Zealand are likely to experience. Such reports aspire to 'advance an alternative debate around social inclusion and social justice' in the pursuit of social progress to that of the debates typically sponsored by state officialdom (Johnson 2015, p.5). One such report, *A Mountain All Can Climb*, indicates that almost 'twenty percent of New Zealand children' are likely to experience material and economic insecurity within their family unit (Perry 2014, in Johnson 2015, p.15). In addition to the broad socio-economic conditions which give rise to poverty on this scale, a lack of agreement amongst officials on definitions of child poverty may allow precipitating circumstances to prevail (Johnson 2105). For example, if the incumbent government chooses to favour research that uses less stringent criteria relating to poverty, data used to inform social policy will reach fewer people and have limited effect.

The kinds of negative social conditions experienced by families across Aotearoa New Zealand correspond to the extent to which socio-emotional wellbeing may be

compromised (Johnson 2015). Crime and recidivist criminal activity is reducing, while in-family assaults are increasing (ibid, pp.35-38). Income disparity is growing emphasising a gap between the 'poorest paid sector (hospitality) and the highest paid sectors (financial sector)' (ibid, p.57). Children in families become vulnerable to the effects of adult participation in alcohol or drug consumption and or gambling activities (ibid, pp. 65-68). Housing security cannot be guaranteed and accommodation affordability may be inconsistent with family income (ibid, pp.78-80). It is apparent that this broad appraisal of socio-economic and social conditions may be likely to lead to an increase in sources of family stress.

Research of this kind suggests that disadvantaged children live in disadvantaged households. Moreover, disadvantaged parents can be the most reluctant to interact with the schools of their children (Cotton and Wikelund 1989). Marginalised parents often have low self-esteem which may make it difficult to accept that they can make a difference to their children's learning (Bandura 1986). In addition, adults with low self-esteem are more likely to have had poor experiences of school themselves, such that these experiences become a barrier in their children's education (Lareau 1996, in Hill and Taylor 2004).

### **1.7 School funding**

In apparent recognition of the effects which low incomes have on educational outcomes, the state allocates funding to schools based on the decile system, which 'indicates the extent to which the school draws its pupils from low socio-economic communities' (New Zealand Post Primary Teachers Association 2013). The scoring mechanism – a system which ranks schools on a scale of 1-10 – is informed by statistical modelling of the demographic of households in the community adjacent to the school, taking into account occupation, income, household crowding, qualifications, and receipt of benefits (The Great Decile Debate 2011)

While the decile system was introduced to secure funding streams for poorer communities, and to mitigate negative educational outcomes, its use has seen a set of

new and now commonly-held assumptions to develop. The decile number a school receives has become synonymous with the quality of teaching, and of school success (Eaton 2011, in *The Great Decile Debate 2011*, p.5). In the absence of school zoning parents are not required to send their children to the local school, and many have taken the opportunity to send their children to higher decile schools in the belief that they will receive a better education (ibid, p.5).

For this reason, lower decile schools often struggle to get staff, and are unable to benefit from the support of parents in the same way as other schools (Gall 2011, in *The Great Decile Debate 2011*, p.7). It has already been established that schools rely on parental contributions, both financial and in kind. The departure of parents with greater resources can negatively affect school capacity to provide learning opportunities and resources for students. Schools rely heavily on fund raising initiatives. Lower decile schools tend not to have parents who have wider community connections.

Children who struggle at school require extra support to meet learning requirements. Children with high needs may receive individual funding from the Ongoing Resource Scheme (ORS). This funding usually provides for additional teacher aide or specialist support (Ministry of Education 2012). Other funding streams may be accessed for diagnosed learning or behavioural conditions (Ministry of Education n.d. b). Schools can choose to allocate funding and employ teacher aides for non-specialist roles available for whole school support. If schools choose not to make use of this provision, children at risk of underachievement may not receive extra educational support at school or at home. School indicators show that in respect of educational outcomes, there is a notable achievement gap for young people who attend lower decile schools as opposed to higher decile schools, which for Johnson 'remains a source of some concern ... given the clear links which exist between poor educational outcomes and poor life opportunities' (2015, p.29).



It is against this backdrop of educational reform that this project seeks to understand the requirement upon teachers to bring parents of 'at risk' children into the pedagogical field. As governance enlists the emotional capacities of teachers to this end, the importance of such capacities are reinforced by external auditing practices by embedding the measurement of related practices within auditing cycles. While the school becomes the site of educational advancement, societal issues that may limit educational outcomes and impact negatively upon socio-emotional or physical wellbeing, do not appear as measurable variables, within the devices used to audit performances.

### **1.8 Chapter outline**

Having provided the background to the study and given an indication of the trajectory of the research, Chapter Two explains the theoretical paradigm used to both inform the line of questioning presented to the teachers and to interpret the research findings.

Chapter Three provides further context through an appraisal of the literature relevant to this field of study. It serves to reintroduce matters relevant to social inequality, which tend to escape mention in bio-political discourse.

Chapter Four explains the methodology used to generate the data for this research. It outlines the rationale for and the process followed to recruit participants for the study and situates the project within the wider philosophical tradition of sociological research. It acknowledges limitations to the research.

Chapter Five offers an analysis of the data, and provides an account of the teachers' responses relating to the types of students who are 'at risk' of educational underachievement. It identifies how teachers approach and implement parent engagement practices. It highlights the types of situations commonly encountered within the educational field in this respect and shows the ways in which the emotional

capacities of teachers become a means by which bio-political governance functions with families of children judged to be 'at risk'.

Chapter Six examines the findings in light of those circumstances revealed through data analysis. It discusses a series of contradictions as they play out in the pedagogical space. These anomalies in fact work against parent engagement. As a consequence, teachers can recurrently find themselves entering states of fraught negotiation with parents. Implications for further research are discussed in light of these emergent contradictions.

Chapter Seven concludes this thesis. It makes links between governance and society, and refutes any suggestion that life circumstances associated by poverty can be resolved by education policy that seeks to address the educational underachievement of 'at risk' students, and which at a local level, enlists the emotional capacities of teachers.

## **1.9 Conclusion**

Undertaking an examination of the relationships that informs school practice can prove beneficial for accessing a deeper understanding of the circumstances that teachers must negotiate. Teachers are assumed to have the requisite skills and knowledge to reduce the risk of educational underachievement through their interaction with the family unit. The extent to which this is likely to happen speaks to the effects of parent engagement upon teachers, and the ways in which teachers now negotiate the unforeseen contradictions brought about by the requirement to engage.

Problems in society come into school. It is regrettable that negative social circumstances go unrecognised at the level of biopolitical governance, as being a factor in poor educational attainment to which government intervention ought to respond. In the absence of such, teachers must accommodate the often times complex circumstances that families experience. This thesis establishes that systems within the school, the engagement practices used by teachers to access families, and socio-

economic disparities of late-capitalist society may in fact deter rather than encourage parental involvement, inadvertently creating the same types of unequal life chances for children that their parents might have experienced, despite any desire to the contrary.

## Chapter Two-Theoretical Framework

### 2.1 Introduction

Having provided background context to this study, this chapter details the theoretical framework that was used to inform the course of questioning presented to the teachers, and to provide a means with which to interpret research findings. French theorist Michel Foucault writes about the forms of power by which it has become possible to influence and regulate the population of western societies. By providing a lens which makes visible the ways in which systems of governance enhance desirable qualities within a population, Foucault shows how those same qualities work to reinforce such systems and make populations amenable to productivity and regulation. While Foucault did not write specifically about education, his work comprises a suite of concepts suitable for academic inquiry into the use of education as a mechanism of bio-political governance.

Theoretical positions used in the academic enquiry of education have tended to offer a perspectival account of educational matters. Over time, specific traditions of thought have come to the fore for the explanation of social phenomena. For example, scholars have focused on what schools do in respect of meeting broader societal needs (Parsons 1937), how schools work to reinforce existing societal inequalities (Bowles and Gintis 1976), or how teacher and student interaction practices make visible structural limitations within the education system pertaining to the maintenance of stratification (Willis 1977). However, an enquiry informed by a singular theoretical lens – functionalist, conflict-oriented, interactionist, and so on – cannot sufficiently account for the complex and contingent circumstances that teachers have to negotiate. The use of Foucault's work enables more nuanced analyses to develop of how we are 'made' and 'unmade' in everyday situations. Foucault allows us to appreciate 'the techniques and practices by which we are shaped as particular types of individual' (Tait 2013, p.4). In this vein, this enquiry, which examines teacher's reflections on the interaction practices they use to engage parents of 'at-risk' students, can help to produce insights into how 'government at a distance' works to shape conduct and

ways of thinking in both teachers and parents. Consequently, an overuse of the emotional capacities of teachers produces unanticipated outcomes at a local level.

Instructive for this enquiry is Foucault's concept of 'governmentality'. The concept speaks to the manner by which government is bound up with mechanisms of population regulation through the deployment of 'bio-political power', and through practices of 'responsibilisation'. The mechanisms through which populations become known produces a state of 'power/knowledge'. That state becomes not only a mechanism upon which expertise draws for the enacting of governance but also a resource for localised and intermittent resistance. It provides release from routine role-dependant practices, making room for lay and professional actors to engage in alternative behaviours not generally associated with that role.

## **2.2 Governmentality**

Foucault's work gained popularity in the 1970s and 1980s as a critical response to perspectival ideology (Walshaw 2007). Established traditions of thought such as functionalist, conflict-orientated or interactionalist theory speak to the importance of structure and agency for shaping societal possibilities. In moving away from those established theoretical traditions, Foucault advanced the idea that civil society is regulated by discourses that produce knowledge about people, systems of meaning, and relations of power. Walshaw says that for Foucault 'reality is ultimately unknowable ... because truth claims are socially constructed systems that bring with them their own contradictions' (ibid, p.3). The language we used to describe objects and events, and ascribe meaning to them, thereby dislocates rather than locates subjects in stable positions. Foucault thereby rejects essentialist practices of category-definition, and instead allows for 'redefinition of the self, which is constantly in process' (ibid, p.3).

When Foucault talks about the governance of a populace, he describes a practice that involves the observation and monitoring of the 'conduct of conduct' (Foucault 1982, pp. 220-221). The systems that the state puts in place embed practices within the

population about how things should be done. The normative expectations, which inhere within those practices thereafter, function as a benchmark to assess and monitor the population in respect of its performance of those same practices (Dean 2010). To this end, the individual is shaped by a multiplicity of institutional, local, and familial influences. Actors, having knowledge of these systems understand how they work and, moreover, they usually comply.

Actors are also encouraged to 'monitor and regulate their own behaviour' (Danaher, Schirato, and Webb 2000, p.xii). Offering further explanation, Fitzsimmons (2011) says that government is concerned with conditions of the mind that render actors capable of being influenced (mentality), and in broad terms the main attributes of governmentality becomes a shared normative end to which these influences should be directed. A desirable quality in the populace therefore is an ability to effectively self-govern.

### **2.3 Bio-political power**

The concept of bio-political power, or biopower, illustrates how Foucault thinks in respect of the management of human resources at the level of the population. Seeking ways to mitigate the dangers of risk in society, governance has come to focus on the intimate aspects of the lives of lay citizens. Professional expertise is used to put in place basic information and instruction through the encouragement of normative practices of daily conduct thereby setting in place a guide for 'how things should be done'. Such a requirement has become necessary because of an increasing urgency in late modernity to maximise the productive capacity of a population (Nadesan 2008). Representative of the ways in which bio-political administration works, orientation towards the family has shifted from it being 'the model for government' to the 'instrument' of government (Fitzsimmons 2011, p.90). The development of statistical measuring reconstructed the family unit into a suite of variables suitable for measurement, control, and surveillance.

Biopower is useful to capitalism because the work carried out in social institutions, to shape and encourage lay actors to accept ways of thinking and working becomes indispensable to the economy. Successful population management practices link 'market, population, and state in relation to common sets of problem-solution frameworks' (Nadesan 2008, pp.2-3). Calculations concerning matters of population management are facilitated by computer technology, which give 'power over life' (Fitzsimmons, p.129). Bio-political administration values data collection. Consequently, biopower establishes the validity of knowing the population through measures of statistical regularity and deviation using such information as a base line for future strategic management.

Professional expertise becomes central to the bio-political administration of populations. Professionals who have mastered knowledge of corrective measures can suggest self-regulatory programmes through which the individual and their extended network might enhance their general welfare and productivity. Professional expertise is thereby put to use to adjust competence levels by constructing and measuring indicators of specified outcomes. Through the interpretation of data sets, professionals can make an approximate calculation of those indicators, and appraise the success of particular strategies. Further strategies may be deployed as a consequence of revisions to the type of expertise required to meet outstanding outcome expectations.

The significance of biopower for this enquiry is that teaching can be seen as a field of expertise that intercedes between home and school to enhance the educational attainment of students deemed to be 'at risk'. Through the sharing of professional knowledge and pedagogical techniques, it is expected that teachers will show parents how to carry on educational instruction in the home environment to bridge learning gaps. In this way, teachers are positioned to reduce the risk posed to the population of student underachievement.

## 2.4 Responsibilisation

Responsibilisation works to produce the types of 'conduct of conduct' conducive to meeting the desired outcomes of biopower. As the 'conduct of conduct', responsabilisation is applicable to the tasks enacted by lay and professional persons alike. Firstly, the term refers to the inclination of an individual to modify their own conduct in relation to behaviours which involve risk: people who engage in effective self-management practices are responsible citizens (Foucault 1993, Rose 2007). Secondly, responsabilisation refers to the manner by which professional actors can invoke desirable qualities within another person or persons within the capacity of their professional remit. Referring to this type of social control, Lemke points out that governance effects 'direct intervention by means of empowered and specialised state apparatuses', for example by school process in respect of family engagement as well as the development of 'indirect techniques for leading and controlling individuals' (2000, p.12). Responsibilisation would therefore not be possible without an accompanying discourse that constructs the individual as someone who can effect change where change is required.

Self-aware citizens who act in a manner corresponding to the logics of bio-political governance or to specific institutional expectations are well thought of. Within the late modern period, moral character and rational decision making are conflated to 'construct responsible subjects whose moral quality is based on the fact that they rationally assess the costs and benefits of a certain act' (Lemke 2000, p.12). Rational decision-making projects an imagined situation in which possible outcomes have been well considered prior to any strategy being implemented in their resolution. By contrast, those individuals who choose not to comply with social conventions or expectations are characterised unfavourably, perceived to have limited capacity for normative behaviour compliance, and typically viewed as 'bad subjects who are judged to be risky' (Nadesan 2008, p.213).

Matters are not as straightforward as this image of the responsabilised citizen suggests, however (Fitzsimmons 2011). The possibilities for a routine responsabilisation of



subjects depend upon the existence of a specific constellation of power and knowledge. Discussing the educational environment in a manner which gestures to this point, Fitzsimmons suggests that teachers participate in their professional activities in two modes: through thoughtful consideration, and through the inculcation of systematised management practices such that these become 'second nature'. The managerialist preference for pragmatic decision-making brings this inculcated knowledge to the fore. As a consequence, teachers who use 'discursive and conceptual' resources to analyse problems and find solutions are systematically disadvantaged (ibid, p.103). Alternatively, the preference for decision making 'in the moment' relies on teachers using prior knowledge of school systems and personnel in ways which reinforce existing regimes of authority. Foucault styled this dynamic concept more generally as a situation of 'power-knowledge'.

## **2.5 Power-knowledge**

The value of the concept of power-knowledge for an enquiry into school practice is that it highlights how the emotional capacities of teachers become caught up with the strategic deployment of power. It highlights how self-reflective knowledge on the part of the teacher becomes a power capable of being deployed for the purpose of bringing parents into the pedagogical field, thereby reducing the systemic risk posed by their under-achieving children. Notwithstanding its value, the relationship between power and knowledge as suggested by Foucault teeters on the cusp of being tautological. Emblematic of that tautological condition, Foucault says that 'power is everywhere ... because it comes from everywhere' (1998, p.93). Foucault links the manifestation of power to the production of knowledge, at the same time as indicating how knowledge is used to manifest power (Gordon 1980).

Offering a degree of useful clarification, Gordon (1980) dissects the dense knot of power/knowledge into three elements. Firstly, the concept presupposes a pre-existing ontological state upon which the very possibility of each and all discourse depends. This sense of surety enables the ERO for example to unreflectively present as 'fact' the idea that parents want to be involved in the educational space. A second dimension

involves normative implications of that ontological position. By way of illustration, schools might simply expect that parents respond to school invitations to be involved in the education of their children on account of the assumption that this is what parents desire. Finally, the third dimension is that known effects will predictably follow from the power invested in the ontological conviction and associated normativity: a relationship will be established between home and a named person within the field of teacherly expertise to whom all educational concerns may be referred. Having made such a connection, the school has knowledge of home systems and can use such knowledge to pre-inform home communications, thereby establishing a working power/knowledge nexus.

In a similar way as expressed by Gordon, the 'conditions which make knowledge possible' lie with struggles to sustain the ways in which existing patterns of governance are legitimated (Marshall 1996, p.121). Schools tacitly participate in the status quo to the extent that they position people to be 'governable' (ibid, p.121). Insofar as attempts to have parents participate in the education of their children is assumed to be right on account of its truth being asserted, teacher practice too is subject to normative comparison. The managerialism associated with bio-political administration values the production of results and teachers may engage in practices to comply with school expectations.

In order to meet those management expectations, teachers are required to use skills and knowledge more normally associated with social reproduction. So suggests the work of Nancy Fraser when applied to the analysis of education as biopolitics (Fraser 2016). Given that the ends to which teachers' capacities are put concern less the individual student 'at-risk' and more the alleviation of risk posed by the under-performing student, the existence of a systematic contradiction emerges: the productivity of the population depends upon the exercise of a capacity to interact with care, which itself has little if any value ascribed to it within the domain of productivity. The emotional capacity of actors becomes subsumed by the bio-political imperative and the overt managerialism of late modernity (ibid, p.100). By drawing attention to the disregard of capitalism to emotional effort in general terms, Fraser's work provides

an opportunity to open up matters of governance enacted at a local level within the school, which push teachers to work in ways that seek to accommodate and address management expectations. In this iteration of education this falls to the identification of 'at risk' students, and the co-option of parents as a means by which students' educational underachievement can be addressed.

## **2.6 Conclusion**

This chapter has outlined the theoretical framework of Michel Foucault, which was used both to inform the course of questioning presented to the teachers and to interpret the research findings. The concepts of governmentality, biopower, responsabilisation, and power/knowledge were defined, and the significance of these concepts for this project was established. The work of Nancy Fraser was introduced, as framework for understanding contradictions within current education policy around parental engagement. That policy simultaneously depends upon, yet refuses to acknowledge the emotional capacities of teachers as necessary to the achievement of bio-political ends. The following chapter reviews the exiting literature pertaining to managerialism in education and the home/school relationship.

## Chapter Three-Literature Review

### 3.1 Introduction

Having described the theoretical framework which informs this project, this chapter introduces the field of existing research within which the present work sits. This as a field links educational spaces and the social, paying special attention to the ways in which the logics of biopower frame education as a calculable domain. The emotional capacities of teachers become an important resource upon which governance draws in this reconstruction of education, with an ancillary effect of that reframing being a marginalisation of social disparity as a factor in educational underachievement. To appreciate the conditions that teachers find themselves now working in, it is necessary to situate teacher practice as a necessary component of the work of governance.

### 3.2 Managerialism in education

Traces of historical concerns about the socio-political role of education can be found in current education policy. Responding to fears about the negative effects of an unruly populace at the time of the colonisation of Aotearoa New Zealand, mechanisms by which the population might be made more manageable were set in place. While at school, children would be encouraged to adopt particular outlooks and skills through educational instruction set in place by a national curriculum (McKenzie 1983, in O'Neill, Clark, and Openshaw 2004). The law enabling this was the Education Act 1887 a piece of legislation, which introduced compulsory education as a form of 'social control and wider social change' (O'Neill, Clark, and Openshaw 2004, p.28).

Over one hundred years later, educational matters continue to be of concern. However, the discourse of neo-liberal ideology has shifted education from being presented as a common good (albeit to serve the leadership requirements of the dominant social group), to education being a 'private' enterprise (O'Neil, Clark, and Openshaw 2004, p.34). Teachers would now have to relinquish a perceived stronghold on education, to serve the needs of 'consumer interests' (ibid, p.35). Encouraged by an

opportunity to make education more responsive to the needs of the economy, the Tomorrow's Schools initiative in the 1980s saw rapid changes to educational policy that effectively shut out any public or teacher contribution (Sullivan 1993). While intended to offer 'greater empowerment of children parents and the community' in the pursuit of individual goals, the process was poorly conceived and implemented (ibid, p. 154). The changes were confusing from the beginning and according to Sullivan, unable to reconcile a 'liberal progressive' ideology with New Right consumerism' (ibid, p.155). Teachers inadvertently became a managed service provider accountable for student results, yet still had to maintain relationships with, and strengthen community bonds.

Enquiry into these two pre-requisites of teacher performance-related criteria underpins the methodology for the ERO report *Educationally Powerful Connections with Parents and Whānau* (Education review Office, 2015). For ERO, a deep assumption exists that teachers will establish and maintain contact with their parent cohort to progress student achievement, in line with National Standard achievement expectations. The report presents a series of 'success stories', that follow a set narrative: an obstacle in the home/school partnership is identified, overcome, and the 'at risk' children involved experience a positive change in learning outcomes. The misleading simplicity, and narrative construct on which this report relies, cannot adequately represent the working reality that teachers encounter, or provide insight into the negative consequences of the intensification of workplace expectations.

Drawing attention to the shifts in teacher subjectivity associated with the operation of bio-power, Stephen Ball, a noted scholar in the Sociology of Education, critically evaluates teaching practices in light of increasing pressures within the education sector in the United Kingdom. Ball contends that teachers experience 'alienation of the self' when they cannot reconcile their own values and beliefs in relation to the performative, functional role that they are expected to carry out (2003, p.221). This leaves teachers questioning what they are doing, becoming despondent, and having a diminished sense of self-respect. Referring to that sense of dislocation, Ball describes the required functionality now expected in education as resulting in 'inauthentic

practice and relationships' (ibid, p.222). The requirement to participate in engagement practices by any means, and to account for those practices by way of enforced self-disclosure, means that teachers become accomplished at impression and performance management, to their own detriment.

The expectation that teachers continually achieve externally-constructed performance criteria intensifies this negative effect on teacher subjectivity (Ball 2003). In the discourse of managerialism, Ball contends the principal is charged with setting the tone for interaction, for the fostering of relationships with staff, and for the creation of school culture. Members of the school must reflectively manage themselves in order to meet institutional expectations that increased performativity markers are achieved. Consequently, teachers have a sense that they are always being observed in the school environment, and the damaging effect of such practices compound the sense of uncertainty that teacher experience at work, for example by the introduction of 'appraisal systems, target-setting, and output comparisons' (ibid, p.219). The issuing of explicit directives to meet performance criteria can push staff to engage in unhelpful or indeed damaging practices, which none-the-less satisfy performance requirements because 'initiative and problem solving are highly valued' (ibid, p.219).

Discussing the school inspectorate in the United Kingdom – the Office for Standards in Education, Children's Services, and Skills (OFSTED) – Ball (2003) offers a set of insights, which might equally apply to audit practices in Aotearoa New Zealand. Ball suggests that schools will think strategically and employ tactics conducive to review-cycle requirements. By way of explanation, Ball proposes that there are particular areas of interest that OFSTED will comment on in each review cycle, becoming the criteria upon which assessments will be made. The school administration will work to address those criteria and present the school in a favourable way to meet audit expectation outcomes. Such occurrences are seemingly inevitable as institutions participate in 'fabrications...driven by the priorities, constraints, and climate set by policy environment' (ibid, p.224). Being caught up with the meeting of outside expectations reveals the school environment to be overwhelmed with the need to comply, which is recirculated within the school as enhanced managerial oversight.

The effects of biopower are generally dispersed within society: for Silbey (2011) contingency management creates a requirement upon knowledge workers that they be independent, creative in thought and action, yet also practical in application. Such qualities are just as valuable in education (Ball 2003). Providing an example of situation management, Silbey (2011) suggests that by thinking on their feet, practitioners find ways to circumvent pressing issues while still ostensibly following expected protocol. The construct 'sociological citizen' is a pragmatist who is an active agent of change, and who is prepared to bend the rules, and think 'outside the box' to 'meet organisational goals' (ibid, p.3). Sociological citizens therefore find solutions to problems by 'working it out' themselves. The difficulty with strategizing in this pragmatic manner however is that strategies are non- discursive practices (Foucault 1980): any plan independently actioned might satisfy the needs of the institution, and while the individual may be lauded for getting a result, it may eventuate that unintended consequences transpire. In the context of education therefore, the setting in place of teacher self-initiated arrangements may have unintended consequences in the establishment of long-term relationships between home and school.

### **3.3 School expectations of the teacher**

The 'responsibilised' actor working to meet an expected standard of institutional engagement demonstrates the operation of bio-power. Martyn Denscombe situates the school as a place of work, and uses the concept of 'competent membership' – often used in the sociology of organisations – to explain the 'work context' of teachers (Denscombe 1980, p.279). Denscombe chose this conceptual framework because of a desire to shift the focus of educational research away from descriptions of the 'outcome' of teaching, to an explanatory understanding of 'why' teachers do what they do (ibid, p.279). That said, Denscombe is aware that interaction practices are inherently influenced by political imperatives, both inside and outside the school.

To be a 'competent member', teachers must be aware of the formal and informal performance expectations in their school (Denscombe 1980, p.280). Denscombe suggests that teachers need both an intuitive and interpretive disposition to

participate fully in school life. By way of anticipating negative feedback from peers or managers, teachers tend to be pro-active in the self-management of workload and students, so that they can be thought of as being a responsible and accountable practitioner. Denscombe suggests that the classroom environment provides a space for teachers to demonstrate this competence in the absence of overt observation or critique.

Denscombe describes this pre-empting of institutional expectations, as 'situationalism' (1980, p.284). Teachers learn that their working environment requires that they quickly adapt to meeting context-specific, normative institutional expectations. Such skills form through an inculcation of management stipulations conveyed to the staff and are learned in situ within the school environment. Foucault's work therefore sets the scene for this enquiry: to understand the ways in which institutional requirements impact on the possibilities for parent engagement by teachers and the resultant effects on teacher and parents alike.

### **3.4 School expectations of the child**

The operation of bio-power in education draws children into a state of having to meet normative expectations around behaviour and interaction. Outputs require that children quickly learn how to meet given standards within the learning environment. As a consequence, children who begin school with a working knowledge of the education system and a stable home background are seen to progress in normatively prescribed ways (Hamre and Pianta 2001). Hamre and Pianta were involved in a longitudinal study in the United States, which followed a sample cohort of 179 children through kindergarten to the end of middle school, namely, children in the age group three to thirteen. Hamre and Pianta were interested to see how kindergarten teachers perceived and projected the educational success of children over time, based on the teachers' relationship with the child in kindergarten. Hamre and Pianta signal the significance of teacher judgement in this pursuit, which speaks of the readiness of how effectively children can be responsabilised into the student-role.



The authors' research indicates that having a secure relationship with a primary care giver can point to how well a child will progress at school. Consequently, positive attachment behaviours in respect of making a connection with their teacher will assist a child to adjust to the classroom environment. Those children who have unfavourable home circumstances may form an attachment to a positive adult role model in school, furthermore, teachers are inclined to make exceptions for students with whom they have an affinity. In this way, Hamre and Pianta (2001) show the ways in which power/knowledge works to inform teacher practice. Teacher judgement exercised through the emotional capacity of teachers allows for exceptions to the demands of bio-power.

With research indicators that are informed by students' prior knowledge of school systems and the prospect of successful socioemotional adaptation, Hamre and Pianta (2001) advance the idea that the relationship between teacher and student in kindergarten is a significant marker for later school predictors in relation to positive school adjustment, behaviour compliance, and grade attainment over time. Children who had difficulty with settling in to kindergarten, and who have trouble with maintaining normative behaviour expectations remain disadvantaged, in respect of social acceptance within the educational space, and educational attainment throughout their school experience. Research findings from this study suggest there is a significant disparity in terms of gender in that boys were more likely to experience negative educational outcomes than girls were in their early school years, however, this decreased as children reached the end of middle school. The link between family, society, and school operates to differentiate children and families in terms of 'pre-responsibilisation' prior to the child commencing school.

### **3.5 School leadership**

It has already been established that the school leader is the person around whom all other school personnel manoeuvre. The principal must demonstrate a willingness to meet the requirements of governance and bring staff on board to meet those same demands. It has also been established that governance requires that effective

community relations be established. Accepting that home/school engagement is important, yet approached in an inconsistent manner across schools, Barr and Saltmarsh (2014) held focus groups with parents across a variety of geographical locations, and education providers in New South Wales, Australia. With parent engagement lying 'in the messy, ambiguous, and complex area of school management', Barr and Saltmarsh contend that competing interests within the school and community, need to be disclosed if any meaningful change to home/school interaction practice is to happen (ibid, p.4).

In light of recent policy changes, in Australia, that expect the principal to take charge of school efficacy, capacity, and community relations, Barr and Saltmarsh wanted to find out about the kinds of experiences that parents had with their children's' schools. Barr and Saltmarsh conclude that 'it all comes down to the leadership'; the role of the school principal is imperative to fostering a productive home/school relationship (ibid, p.1). Parents overwhelmingly respond that the principal sets the tone for whole school interaction practices. For parents, engagement is made easier when the principal is receptive to having parents on site, and is a keen advocate for parental involvement across the school.

Yet, according to this research, principals are becoming more aware that the school has a public image, and recognise that school performance can be critiqued. The effect of policy changes that promote managerialism in Australia, as in New Zealand, may inadvertently thwart effective home/school relationships. This is because a push toward principal autonomy and 'individualised transformational leadership', has been introduced at the same time as parent engagement is expected to contribute to student learning outcomes and school governance (ibid, p.3). Accordingly, so conclude Barr and Saltmarsh, parents who are perceived to have a greater community presence, or have the ability to facilitate additional resourcing for the school, may experience unconscious preference.

In response to this situation, the research suggests that principals concede that it is not always possible to have equitable relationships with the parent community, and for a variety of reasons. Self-initiated parent engagement practice reflects prior knowledge of schools on the part of parents; conversely, poor personal experience of schools, as well as difference in socio-economic position can make parents reluctant to engage with school (Landeros 2011, in Barr and Saltmarsh 2014, p.3). Irrespective of the requirement to engage parents and be accountable to governance, this research conveys that an inconsistency in approach is evident, both in respect of the schools' approach to parents, and with parents' engagement practices with the school, particularly for groups who experience social isolation or marginalisation. Contact with school, for indigenous parents, for example can exacerbate 'the feeling of being an outsider who is expected to 'fit' with the demands and expectations of the school' (Saltmarsh and Barr 2014, p.9). While bio-power seeks to draw parents into school, any potential relationship encounters a range of barriers, which have been variously informed by parent experience, inequality, or cultural difference. Within this current educational paradigm, the school may be able to afford little recourse.

### **3.6 Communication systems**

The instrumentality of biopower to know the population through statistical regularities and systems of administration is evident. Knowledge gained through the exercise of such measures in the field of education, is put to use through the teacher-role. It is through this expertise, that the school is able to convey normative standards to the school community. A responsibilised practitioner must encourage parents to adopt an outlook that meets the needs of the school.

That is why when educational matters are discussed it is often the case that most scrutiny is directed at what teachers do (Vanderstraeten and Biesta 2006). However, Vanderstraeten and Biesta seek a shift in thinking, and wishing to contribute to a philosophical discussion about the ideologies that inform the purpose of education. They assert that education, being a proactive and social activity, must be about enabling change. In the absence of critical enquiry, educational matters become a

matter of administration, solely focused on outcomes, as an effect of teacher practice. What comes to be displaced is the task of looking at the 'process' of education as a wider societal goal (ibid, p.164). Seeking to challenge the influence of bio-power, Vanderstraeten and Biesta, contend that 'the social organisation of modern education' requires closer attention (ibid, p.167).

Posing the question 'is it possible to understand education as a process of communication', Vanderstraeten and Biesta contend that much of the communication in which schools engage is consistent with the transmission metaphor (2006, p.165). Administrative practices ensure that parents get information quickly and efficiently; parents are expected to respond accordingly when asked. The main concern with the transmission model, for the authors is that 'it assumes that the meaning of the information is attached to the information itself' (ibid, p.165). While textual documentation achieves the aim of information dissemination, each recipient may interpret the meaning of the words on the page differently. Referring to the work of Dewey, a noted educational scholar, the authors suggest that only through participation, and with 'cooperative and coordinate action', can the route to successful educational outcomes be negotiated as a social activity (ibid, p.166). To that end, Vanderstraeten and Biesta ask that schools reflect on 'the structure of social practices', in respect of 'how meaning can be shared and co-constructed' and, on 'how cooperation can be established among the different participants' (ibid, p.168).

Regrettably, the types of interactions that have a potential to bring parties closer together, for example to exchange views or ideas, have limited relevance within neoliberal policy ideology unless they are enacted to meet specific governance-related ends. The expectation that teachers focus on student learning outcomes and test results pushes teachers towards classroom instruction and behaviour management techniques rather than teaching (Biesta 2012). The deep assumption informing the governance of the educational space is that responsibilised students should be keen to learn and will behave well. The conflation of student learning potential and normative behaviour expectations, so preferred by bio-power to effect gains in student achievement, therefore signals to governance that 'education is the key instrument for

restoring authority' (ibid, p.35). In this pursuit however, education as an instrument of social change is firmly suppressed.

By way of reinforcement, the 'often restrictive ... organisational nature of schools' may act as a barrier to parent engagement, particularly when schools seek to enforce the authority of the powers by which they are themselves conferred (Lazar and Slostad 1999, p.160). Outputs, such as attendance, and the maintenance of behaviour management conventions may be primary reasons for which teachers reach out to parents. The requirement to keep control of the student population, by co-opting parents to reinforce school expectations, may inadvertently obscure the importance of parental assistance in reaching student achievement outcomes. Responsibilisation may have its disadvantages, consequently, as parents who have their competence called into question, internalise negative commentary from the school regarding their own 'self-efficacy', parents may be disinclined to help with academic outcomes through a perceived lack of knowledge (ibid, p.161).

Demonstrating the subtle influence of bio-power informing home/school communications systems Graham-Clay wonders whether teachers may struggle to 'maximise effective communication with parents' because of a lack of skills, knowledge, or technical ability (2005, p.117). Implying that technical competence will assist with the meeting of expectations that parents be successfully engaged, Graham-Clay advocates the use of a universal language to help with the breaking down of barriers. While an openness on the part of schools to receiving parental feedback makes parent feel they have a voice within the educational space, Graham-Clay inadvertently reinforces the requirement of governance to responsabilise the lay community, and omits to mention that the encouragement of parental participation assists in this pursuit. Schools work to be pro-active such that all lines of communication are kept open, but the only concession Graham-Clay makes is that schools would do well to consider whether all information is handled in a confidential manner in order to minimise any perceived lack of sensitivity by parents. While Graham-Clay expresses a truism that may be of concern to parents, and school

personnel alike, bio-power denies any possibility to the contrary since it is this additional information upon which bio-power relies.

Addressing the oft-unacknowledged emotional capacity of teachers as vital to the work of the school, and of significant importance as an instrument of governance, Hargreaves shares the findings of a study carried out in response to 'educational change' in Canada (2000, p.811). Elementary school teachers thrive when they can display empathy to their charges and receive 'psychic rewards' (Lortie 1975, in Hargreaves 2000, p.817), and when they use 'emotional bonds as foundations for teaching and learning' (Hargreaves 2000, p.817). For example, by making learning fun, encouraging questioning, and showing pride in achievement, teachers build emotional bonds with children, which work to sustain teacher practice.

Hargreaves' research findings suggest that disparity in teacher experience with regard to this dynamic, namely that elementary school teachers are more likely to have this experience than secondary school teachers. Secondary school teachers for whom 'professional norms guiding interaction' creates a distance between teacher and student, potentially makes this working environment less rewarding (2000, p.825). In so saying, Hargreaves reveals how the processual effect of institutionalised learning and the cumulative effect of prior responsabilisation by the gradual inculcation of normative expectations in elementary school, work. Pedagogic techniques that bring teachers emotional rewards also work to encourage children to be self-managing learners. Students in secondary school by implication should have already mastered that skill.

Teaching, 'in many ways has become an occupation with a feminine caring ethic that is trapped within a rationalised and bureaucratized structure' (Hargreaves and Goodwin 1996, in Hargreaves 2001, p. 1069). Accepting that Hargreaves and Goodwin seemingly submit to a normative gender stereotype and inadvertently suggest that all teachers are women, they do express an intent, commensurate with biopower, to maximise teacher performance. Teacher performance, in respect of meeting the demands of

biopower, is enabled through the teachers' ability to know the child and the family. Therefore, problematic to teacher-parent interaction, social distance brings its own challenges as Hargreaves indicates. Whether emotional bonds can be sustained depends upon the ability of teachers and parents to develop mutual understanding. The operation of social distance within the relationship between teacher and parent may inadvertently support the teachers' views, which tend to be 'socio-culturally biased' (Levin and Riffle 1997, in Hargreaves 2001, p.1063). For example, parents can be misconstrued as being uncaring, unsupportive, or disinterested in their child's schooling, if the teacher perceives there is a lack of home support. Conversely, positive affirmation from parents is likely to restore a sense of teacher self-efficacy. It becomes apparent that the extent to which teachers are able to responsabilise parents resonates not only with their sense of self-efficacy but also with how they will be perceived within the pedagogical environment as able to bring parents on board.

Subject to the political forces at work in the school, any perception about unequal power relations that favour parents may leave teachers unsure about their own significance in school. As a consequence, teachers may reinstate social distance as a way to protect themselves (Hargreaves 2001). In order to create that sense of distance teachers may engage in a process of 'emotional masking'; that is teachers may adjust their emotional investment in accordance with calculations they make regarding the perceived benefits or drawbacks of any particular interaction practice (ibid, p.1074). For example, in an intensified workplace environment when interaction practices are perceived to be functional or routine, actors may maintain social and temporal distance by constructing and deconstructing emotional proximity (ibid, p.1060). In this way, teachers can capitalise on their knowledge of school protocols through the making of adjustments to the situation in which they find themselves.

### **3.7 Parent characteristics and neighbourhood stress**

One bio-political mechanism of governance is 'to know' the family because of the strategic possibilities that family life plays in the appraisal of the populace, and for its development. Such an appraisal offers information about the ways in which social

adjustments, frequently through the introduction of educational social policy programmes, become implemented to change life outcomes. Reporting on a programme of this type in the United States, Waanders, Mendez, and Downer (2009) discuss Head Start, a Government initiative that provides literacy assistance in kindergarten to children who live in low socio-economic families. It is anticipated that participation in the Head Start programme will have several positive effects, because 'parent involvement in education can be a key protective factor that fosters cognitive and emotional resilience in the face of multiple stressors' (Garmezy 1991, in Waanders, Mendez, and Downer 2009, p.619). Waanders, Mendez, and Downer (2009) say that little is known about teacher/parent relationships in general because the effects of school and home environments, as indicators of child development, have been researched as separate entities. These researchers seek to contribute to a growing field of research in educational psychology that 'studies the link' between home and school in this early years reading programme (2009, p.619).

Research findings of this kind suggest that parents are more likely to come into school if they believe in their own ability to make a difference to their child's learning. Parents are less likely to have an association with school if they experience economic hardship, live in a socially deprived area, or have fewer social connections. Findings also suggest that teachers find it more difficult to connect with parents who experience environmental stressors, and who have infrequent contact with school (Waanders, Mendez, and Downer 2009).

Wanders, Mendez, and Downer indicate that previous research has revealed practical considerations to be barriers to parent teacher interaction in pre-school, such as work commitments or family dynamics. The authors argue that their research approaches home/school relationships in a subtly different way to reveal the oftentimes, complex circumstances that families experience, and the attitudes from school that manifest because of those conditions. Consequently, the authors recommend that schools focus less on the benefits of parent interaction to school outcomes, and look to provide a range of interaction possibilities to welcome parents. It has been established that governance seeks to minimise risk in society. The provision of early year's intervention



programmes therefore work to minimise that risk, in this case, by preparing children to start school, and through the encouragement of parents to participate in the educational space by gradual inculcation into the school the environment. The responsabilisation of parents however cannot address the underlying social circumstances that have created their initial reluctance to participate in school.

### **3.8 Teacher education**

In a similar way as policy works to bring parents into the pedagogical field to meet student-learning outcomes, teacher education seeks to responsabilise teachers into meeting the needs of governance by offering instruction in this pursuit. Reflecting on an intent to meet a 'policy and educational ideal', and anticipating that building an effective home/school relationship is an essential component of pedagogical practice, Saltmarsh, Barr, and Chapman, indicate that there is a dearth of empirical evidence to address concerns about the involvement of teacher training in the preparation of beginning teachers for parent engagement (2015, p.69). Nevertheless, contrary to anecdotal evidence, that undergraduate study does not equip student teachers with the skills and knowledge to successfully interact with parents, Saltmarsh, Barr, and Chapman found that while parent engagement is confirmed to be part of course work, there is lack of consistency in approach across providers. For example, some providers include parent engagement in compulsory foundation courses, while other providers leave the choice to students by way of selecting elective papers. Furthermore, due to the 'complexities at work in the coordination of pre-service programmes' differences in student placement experience can mean that there is scant opportunity for any meaningful practical consolidation of parent engagement techniques in the workplace, unless it is directly addressed by an assigned teacher educator on placement (ibid, p.72).

According to the authors, and contrasting with primary and secondary education, early childhood teacher training is awash with educational and practical opportunities to build capacity in teacher-trainees in respect of parental engagement. This leads Saltmarsh, Barr, and Chapman to wonder whether a non-standardised approach to

parent engagement in the primary and secondary education sectors might contribute to the decrease in parent involvement over time. While communication with parents is a necessary part of the teacher-role, and they say that a considered and consistent approach would be of benefit, these authors concede however that, 'it remains unclear how greater consistency can be achieved' (ibid, p.81). Saltmarsh, Barr, and Chapman (2015) inadvertently highlight the expectation of governance, as explained by Ball (2003) that the principal be the focus for home/school interaction practice within the school. An implicit understanding that managerialism will intervene may go some way to explain the discrepancy in education provision in the absence of a coherent approach to the home/school relationship in the tertiary education sector in Australia.

### **3.9 Home/school relationships**

Underestimating the complex social forces at work in the school in respect of bio-power, and providing evidence of what Vanderstraeten and Biesta (2006) claim is a misinformed myopic focus on what teachers do in the educational space, Keyes (2000) suggests that parent/teacher relationships are founded on normative assumptions and the inculcation and projection of role-specific identities. Therefore, the parent/teacher relationship is based on common beliefs about the correct way to be a parent or a teacher, which both parties respectively enact when they meet. Having reviewed the literature on 'parent/teacher partnerships', Keyes, an American educationalist, concludes that the capacity of any home/school relationship depends on how well parents and teachers get on, and how 'parents and teacher view their roles' (2000, p.107). The effectiveness of home school relationships therefore, seems to rely on compatibility and normative role differentiation. It should be unsurprising then, for Keyes to suggest that teachers might become anxious about parental engagement, because relationships 'occur by assignment rather than choice' (ibid, p. 108). For Keyes a home/school relationship might be described as 'good', if there is 'an absence of conflict' leading to a recommendation that an exploration of ways to find common ground would be mutually beneficial for both parties (ibid, p.108).

While having a similar outlook on life may help the relationship, Keyes (2000) claims that parents and teachers are less likely to think similarly, as perhaps previous generations did. This finding is supported by Burke (1999, in Keyes 2000, p.108), who says that increased social mobility might produce differences between the socio-economic profile of the teachers and those of the student and parent cohort. Citing this as a barrier to communication, other societal factors such as changing family dynamics and affinity associations can also mean that schools do not have a 'consistent adult' as a conduit between home and school (Keyes 2000, p.109). Furthermore, in an increasingly busy social climate, families, and teachers have other demands on their time. For this kind of setting, Keyes suggests that stress-free communication would be of great benefit. Bio-power however cannot adequately accommodate free time to address such matters, as teachers and parents' alike work to meet the demands of governance. The inherent contradictions of bio-political governance work against effective relationship-making capacities, which in and of itself compounds communication difficulties.

Further emphasising the complexities of home/school partnerships, Keyes describes the kinds of differences within the educational setting in respect of 'role construction' for professional and lay personnel (ibid, p.110). While teachers have been professionally trained to educate, a 'parent-focused' teacher, most often encountered in the kindergarten setting seeks to 'empower parents and give parents teaching roles' (ibid, p.111). 'School-focused' teachers believe that school and home constitute different social spaces; in this situation, teachers hold responsibility for the child's education (ibid, p.111).

For Keyes, the construct of a 'partnership-focused' teacher has emerged, from a growing awareness that the combined effort of home and school can in some way benefit the child (2000, p.112). Nevertheless, schools can 'give off' signals to parents about appropriate engagement expectations (ibid, p.112). Equally, parents can create the wrong impression. For example when a formal communication is extended by the school, in failing to attend, parents break the convention of reciprocity, which may inadvertently set the tone for overall school perception of parent involvement.

Notwithstanding the apparent certainty with which advocates of parent/teacher interaction speak, Bempechat (1992) says that educators still do not know of the types of interaction practices that prove most beneficial. For Bempechat, schools continue to use the same types of interaction practices that have been implemented over time, and continue to express the same types of concerns about parental engagement. Across settings and school contexts, socialisation initiatives remain the predominant mode of trying to enable growth in child academic capacity. However, Bempechat hints at a lingering discontinuity between teacher intent, and teacher investment with educational initiatives. Citing a study by Walberg, Bole, and Waxman (1980, in Bempechat 1992, p.37) in which parents entered into a learning contract with a school to incentivise and support student learning across home and school, Bempechat notes that a reduction in teacher interest negatively affected student achievement. By way of comparison, when teacher investment remains constant student achievement continues to progress. Consequently, if teacher interest wanes, student outcomes cannot be supported by family involvement alone. Bempechat speaks of the influence of bio-power in that an expectation exists that the emotional capacity of teachers is put to work to initiate and sustain educational outcomes.

Pointing to a more direct insistence of governance to responsabilise parents, Crozier (1999) discusses parental involvement in secondary school in the context of the English and Welsh education system. In that setting parents are required to sign a compulsory contractual agreement between home and school, to ensure student academic and behavioural standards are maintained. Changes within this education sector were initiated to redress the perceived deficit of parents, as a form of rebuke by governance for not taking sufficient account of the educational or behavioural competence of their children. Governance intervenes as a form of risk management by way of increasing the methods of responsabilisation available to influence student outcomes, and to take account of parental complicity in this pursuit. That said, Crozier wants to find out if contracts have any place in education, and asks whether teacher, parents, or students actually want parents to be involved in educational matters at all.

While schools benefit from parental involvement, Crozier (1999) asserts that schools have reservations about articulate and influential middle-class parents who act in self-regarding ways. Working-class parents, on the other hand, who generally act in accordance with school expectations, are perceived by school personnel as being disinterested or unsupportive of children and the school. Crozier suggests this is because working-class parents may be more likely to comment on behaviour management practices meted out to the child. In respect of student voice, Crozier's research indicates that students like having parents involved in a supportive capacity, but are ambivalent about parents following school instruction to check on the completion of homework. Attendance at parent-teacher conferences was thought to be beneficial by the vast majority of students, however, students 'expressed a desire to have control over the amount and extent of their parent's involvement' (ibid, p.232).

While the logics of biopolitical governance seek the responsabilisation of students and parents, the results of this study suggest that school expectations tend to remain unarticulated. Schools take parent support for granted when they sign a contract pledging student supervision. Crozier's research also suggests the ways in which knowledge of school systems privileges some parents over others and in this way produces a misinformed account of parent engagement practices across the socio-economic spectrum. Students say that parent support in a general sense is helpful. Parental scrutiny to the extent that it encroaches into the students' personal learning space is not required. This feedback speaks to the quality of student self-responsibilisation that has taken place within the pedagogical space over time.

### **3.10 Parent-teacher conference**

In the acknowledgment that interactive practices are co-constructed, communication studies present another way to understand teacher/parent activities. The work of Pillet-Shore (2015) demonstrates, in this vein, the 'responsibilisation-ability' of parents. Pillet-Shore was involved in 'three years of fieldwork in four different public and private schools' from kindergarten to elementary school in the United States (ibid,

p.376). Participants came from different socio-economic backgrounds, family composition, and included students who achieved at different attainment levels.

Presented from the perspective of interaction in-situ, video recordings of 'naturally occurring' parent teacher conferences reveal that parents, by way of showing their acceptance of school expectations, often highlight discrepancies in student behaviour prior to the teacher doing so (Pillet-Shore 2015, p.373). Rejecting the notion that 'being a good parent' is 'an objective social fact', Pillet-Shore posits that parents will demonstrate and enact a construct of what they believe the school perceives to be a 'good parent' (ibid, p.373).

Moreover, teachers and parents co-construct sequences of speech that situate parents as 'credible perceivers' and 'fair appraiser of their own children' (Pillet-Shore 2015, p.375). By showing deference to the teacher, parents can legitimately be part of remedial action to correct any deficiency in the child that they highlight, and provide the optimum conditions for '*shared teacher-parent responsibility*' (ibid, p.391, emphasis in original). Conversely, a lack of deference may situate the parent as being wholly 'responsible for the trouble and its remedy' (ibid, p.392).

Pillet-Shore shows that parents learn to accommodate to school expectations. Parents who do not demonstrate such an insight might receive a less favourable response from the school. Those parents who anticipate teacher critique show a willingness to give an appearance of conformity. Formal meetings leave an impression, therefore interaction between parent and teacher work as an interface between home and school and unwittingly reveal the extent to which teachers are subsequently required to monitor home systems.

### **3.11 Social class as a determinant of school involvement**

Introducing complexity to the field of education, Lareau (1987) situates parent involvement with school as a class related issue. The views held on home-school interaction frequently fail to take account of factors such as parental educational

attainment or work commitments, as potential barriers to home/school engagement practices. Citing a study she carried out in North America, Lareau sought to compare school interaction practices with middle class parents and working class parents on two different school sites. Using a mixed methods research methodology, Lareau documents the response of parents to school requests for assistance with improving student achievement. With the intent that 'family life and school life are integrated', teachers at both sites communicated with home using textual material and by giving verbal reminders to children regarding parent involvement requirements (ibid, p.76). Parental involvement with children's reading became a focus for interaction. The expectation that parents would be involved with reading activities was reinforced with visual achievement displays in the classroom for each child to account for reading hours completed, and served as an ongoing reminder to parents when attending parent teacher meetings.

Lareau (1987) found that while both schools taking part in the study intimated that parental feedback was encouraged, such feedback when given, was not always appreciated. An interpretation of partnership by some parents, who thought that an equitable relationship might be possible, was perceived by the school to be outside the remit of parental expertise. Rather, teachers wanted parents to 'back them up', for example, by assisting with homework (ibid, p.76). Lareau found that children seemingly fared better in class when parents did not challenge teacher authority; conversely, lack of parental involvement could mean that children did not receive additional educational support when required. Consequently, Lareau concedes that parents were unable to find common ground because of teacher misperceptions of parent intent.

Lareau (1987) also noted a difference between schools with regard to the levels of comfort parents experienced when engaging with teachers, and the attendance rates at parent-teacher conferences. Parents of lower socio-economic status were inclined to show physical and emotional signs of discomfort when speaking to teachers in the school environment, and would address non-academic concerns on the infrequent occasions when they did contact school. Middle class parents by contrast, appeared to

be much more comfortable in the school environment; they had a relaxed demeanour when in conversation with teachers, and would happily discuss academic matters.

In explanation of the minimal contact with school by working class parents, the parents surveyed by Lareau reported a distinct division between home responsibilities and school responsibilities (Lareau 1987). In light of having a poorer educational experience themselves, parents were inclined to leave teaching to teachers. Free time out of school saw children from working class families engage in informal play or household duties. Middle class parents however took a greater interest in the child's education because they had the skills to do so, and were more inclined to see education as a 'shared responsibility' (ibid, p.80). After school hours, middle class children usually participated in structured leisure activities. Lareau found that this observable difference in parent engagement practices was interpreted by school as being representative of the class-related level of parental interest or valued placed on education. Lareau refutes this misinterpretation. Parents in both communities did value education; they differed only in their perception of who could best assist their child to achieve at school.

Lareau (1987) highlights the misunderstandings that can be revealed and the potential discontinuities across schools with regard to the home/school relationship. While bio-power has the effect of turning population into a measurable phenomenon, the effects of responsabilisation may work to reinforce negative normative assumptions about parental cohorts. Those parents who displayed a tendency toward limited involvement inadvertently signalled to staff that they did not want to be involved and in so doing, the school interpreted this as an inclination toward disinterest. Systems that enable the exercise of bio-power within the school obscure the effects of social inequality at a personal level. Therefore, in general, terms social inequality, concealed within data sets, becomes the catalyst to which teachers learn to respond as an effect of responsabilisation, and misunderstandings about parent participation become rearticulated within the school as parent disinterest. The sense that parents are reluctant to engage requires that the school, as a contributor to population



administration systems, deploy greater responsabilisation-techniques, which are consequently implemented to marginal effect if any.

### **3.12 Poverty and child development**

Shifting focus to the effect of social inequality at a personal level, and in response to punitive welfare reforms and associated policy changes in the United States in 1996, Duncan and Brooks-Gunn (2000) conducted a literature review to look at the link between poverty and child development and wellbeing. The catalyst for the research was the 'ending of six decades of guaranteed government aid for economically deprived children' put in place by the Clinton Government (ibid, p.188). Duncan and Brookes-Gunn anticipated that this wholesale restructuring of welfare provision would 'increase the depth of poverty' because of sanctions that were inbuilt to the changes (ibid, p.188). For example, single mothers would be penalised financially if they could not comply with 'welfare to work' programmes. Duncan and Brookes-Gunn show how bio-power, anticipating that the removal of citizen entitlements will work to change personal circumstances, actually works to the contrary.

Duncan and Brookes-Gunn found that the effects of poverty have been widely researched. However, the 'volatility' of household income, and the 'the effects of income poverty on child development' had not been recognised (Duncan 1988, in Duncan and Brookes-Gunn 2000, p.189). This distinction is necessary because many 'correlates of poverty' are static, such as 'low levels of schooling or lone-parent family structure' and using these descriptors alone can be misleading (Duncan and Brookes-Gunn 2000, p.189). The authors insist that insecure and fluctuating household income has more of an effect on child development than family background.

Looking for evidence to rebut policy change, Duncan and Brookes-Gunn, want to know 'how low income affects children' (ibid, p.190). Living in a household in which there is uncertainty about income sources affects the way people live. Duncan and Brookes-Gunn point to five areas in which children in economically challenged families might experience disadvantage. Firstly, there may be difficulty with forming close emotional

bonds with significant caregivers. Secondly, there is likely to be an increase in household stressors and an associated breakdown in adult and child physical and mental wellbeing is possible. Thirdly, communication is effected, with a greater negative impact on child 'verbal ability and achievement' (ibid, p.189). Fourthly, housing may be in less desirable areas where 'social disorganisation' is commonplace (ibid, p.190). Finally, the quality of childcare provision, if any is likely to be less developmentally robust.

For Duncan and Brookes-Gunn, the key to mitigating negative wellbeing and academic outcomes, and to ensure that children have equal opportunities for life chances, is to 'avoid the adverse consequences of deep or persistent poverty in early childhood' (ibid, p.191). Sweeping welfare reform changes in the United States make this aspiration unachievable. Supplementary welfare provision, which supported low waged as well as unemployed families, limits opportunities for autonomous decision-making. Women are particularly affected by some state prerogatives to limit their reproductive capacity, resulting in overall household income being reduced if 'family caps' are breached by having more children (ibid, p.192).

Making a comparison with France and Germany, where additional financial assistance is provided for mothers when children are young, Duncan and Brookes-Gunn (2000) advocate policy that will make the same provision in the United States for a minimum period of two years post-birth. The authors suggest that such a financial cushioning would allow for maternal bonding, and for a gradual reintroduction of women to the workplace. While maternal responsibility informs policy implementation, state assistance does indicate, the capacity for governance to acknowledge that during certain periods of life, additional support is required.

Wellbeing indicators offer an estimation of how well citizens have a sense of place and connectedness. Louise Humpage (2010) conducted a straw poll of 87 participants from different socio-economic demographics, ethnicity, age, and gender to consult on public opinion regarding matters of social citizenship in Aotearoa New Zealand. Humpage

wanted to find out about what constituted 'a basic level of social and economic security through rights to health, education, work, and welfare' (2010, p.5). The study comes in the wake of 'neoliberal policy reforms implemented since the 1980s', in which the lay public experienced a change to the ways in which citizen entitlements were articulated and presented (ibid, p.5). The study seeks to find out in what ways, if any, such changes have had on public perceptions of social connectedness, and to uncover what 'people *think* and but also how they *feel* about living in New Zealand' (ibid, p.5, emphasis in original).

Humpage contends that policies that promote individualism decrease social cohesion, and coincidentally, lessen the propensity of the lay public to see the need for universal entitlement provision. This is not the case however. 'International empirical research' concludes that citizens feel that private enterprise can be lacking, and the state still has a part to play in core service provision to some extent (ibid, p.5). Public opinion in Aotearoa New Zealand concurs. For Humpage this means that policy change that adversely effects access to 'health, education, or the 'welfare safety net'' would not be welcome (ibid, p.6).

To the question, 'do you feel first class?' Humpage found that there is a general sense of feeling undervalued in New Zealand society (2010, p.11). This is attributable to concerns about low wages, lack of financial backing by Government for key life stages, an increasing imperative to study and gain qualifications, and a propensity for a mono-cultural point of view to prevail. Humpage contends that neo-liberal policy implementation has had a negative impact on individual subjectivity; consequently, people are more inclined express 'frustration with such reforms' (ibid, p.20). A sense of 'citizenship and belonging...are heavily influenced by forms of inequality and disadvantage', therefore the implications of continuing with similar policy initiatives must be given serious consideration. For Humpage, a broad based review of such policies would go some way to 'recognising devalued groups *and* improving socio-economic conditions', and bolster full participation in social experiences (ibid, p.12, emphasis in original). Humpage shows that governance lacks consideration for the types of negative experiences people encounter: consequently lay citizens experience

a lack of personal fulfilment or have a sense of low self-esteem. It has been established that these factors impact negatively upon the ways in which people can participate in society in general.

The significance of these findings for this research is that the school, cannot, through the engagement of parents of 'at risk' children alone, have significant effects on life circumstances. Bio-power, despite rhetoric to the contrary, cannot provide the types of conditions conducive with an enablement of self-initiated alternative-making futures. This is because the effects of bio-power, particularly for disadvantaged groups, works to cultivate and project a sense of personal accountability for circumstances external to the remit of personal control, thereby diminishing the capacity of actors to have any sense of social security. It is this condition, in conjunction with the appropriation of emotional capacity of teachers that is most likely to prevent parent engagement with school.

### **3.13 Social exclusion**

Common to this literature is a finding that that existing inequalities in society come in to the school environment (Lareau 1987; Hamre and Pianta 2001). Class and social inequality bear little relevance for bio-power because governance discourse announces ways to change futures and this expectation comes to the fore through social policy implementation. Data gathered within the education sector signals to governance where improvements need to be made, for example in raising student achievement. Targeted initiatives seek to provide resolution. Significant for this project, one such policy change saw the introduction of National Standards testing. Focusing on activity within the school environment, therefore, it becomes possible for governance to discount social inequalities in this pursuit.

Alexiadou (2002) found that discourses of social exclusion can be animated by at least three alternative assumptions. The range of these assumptions has important implications for policy implementation across government departments, which carry responsibilities for the social reproduction of collective life. Firstly, social exclusion can

be seen to come from a lack of individual effort, for example where individuals do not take advantage of educational opportunities while at school, or further training after school. In this view, the link between social deprivation and educational outcomes is ignored and rests with the individual. Secondly, social exclusion can be because of inadequately communicated, if not fragile school expectations. Examples might include the absence of adequate standards of achievement that would prepare a young person for work. The third discourse, looks to issues of social citizenship, revealed by statistical data on 'real issues' (ibid, p.79). This discourse recognises that social exclusion is a problem of government in which 'conditions of poverty reinforce processes of social exclusion' (ibid p.80).

In the absence of any 'consensus on the definition of the problem', Alexiadou hints that policy implementation that 'draws from different political traditions' will continue to confuse the issue of social deprivation and what can be done about it (2002, p.83). Alexiadou says that this is because changes to education that privilege neo-liberal ideology and market forces, legitimate the operation of governance at a local level, and push aside local knowledge by which communities might resist changes which result in a demise of their political agency.

### **3.14 Conclusion**

This literature review suggests that the relationship between home, school, and society is complex, and has been the subject of scholarship from a diversity of academic specialities over time. Seeking to find the answer to differential educational outcomes, academics have posed a series of questions that attempt to understand the inequalities at work and what might be done by way of redress. The current discourse in education that supports a home/school relationship, as a means by which negative school outcomes might be mitigated, suggests that the solution lies in achieving 'educationally powerful connections with parents and whānau'. Within the literature reviewed here however, this aspiration appears insufficient and does not accept that the school, as a microcosm of the wider social environment, carries within itself the conditions that exist in the wider social environment. This archive of research suggests

it may be disingenuous to suggest that parents and teachers can somehow bridge learning gaps without taking account of this circumstance.

The following enquiry into home/school relationships asks teachers to describe the possibilities available to them for engagement with parents of children deemed to be 'at risk'. In keeping with the research reviewed here, the study suggests that teachers must continually meet performance markers. The requirement to respond to the effects of managerialism pushes teachers to find any way to bring parents into the pedagogical field.

Teachers have the unenviable position of being the front-line interface between governance and the populace. It is to the expectations of governance that teachers must turn in order to respond to managerial expectations. As teachers are called to use innovative ways to bring parents of educationally 'at risk' students into the pedagogical field, a situation arises whereby strategy implementation occupies an ever-increasing component of the work of the teacher. Responding to Nancy Frasers's concern regarding bio-power's simultaneous use and disavowal of 'affective and material labour' (2016, p. 99), exemplars of current teacher practice show the ways in which the current crisis of social reproduction is played out within the school at a local level. The following chapter outlines the methodology used to find out about the strategies that teachers develop to meet the institutional requirements that they bring parents of 'at risk' children into the pedagogical field.

## Chapter Four-Methodology

### 4.1 Introduction

Teacher engagement with parents has seemingly become a prerequisite of teacher practice in the societies of late modernity where administration processes within education assist with meeting bio-political governance outputs. Population administration only becomes possible through mechanisms of governance that seek to capitalise on conscious subjective connections, such as are enabled through the teacher-role. The emotional capability of teachers therefore serves as a resource to link home and school for educationally 'at risk' students. The ERO enables the work of such governance through the monitoring and assessment of school capabilities to facilitate this policy expectation.

The investment of emotional labour required by teachers as part of their role speaks of the inherent contradictions at work. Fraser locates such contradictions not only within the field of bio-political power, but more generally within capitalist society, in which an inclination to 'deep-seated social-reproductive "crisis-tendency"' plays out (2016, p.100). As capitalism seeks to build greater productive capacity across the population as a whole, the effects of such an endeavour inadvertently works to 'destabilise the very process of social reproduction upon which it relies' (ibid, p.100). Fraser points to the capacity-overload to which workers are bound within the practices of managerialism through which bio-power takes concrete form. Fraser says that considerable emotional effort is required to meet those ends, consequently workers, and for the purpose of this research, teachers, find themselves having to meet output-focused criteria to the detriment of their pedagogical role by spending more hours at work than should be necessary. However, it is not the exploitation of workers per se, that Fraser draws attention to in this crisis-tendency. It is instead, the pernicious overuse of emotional labour. The overuse of emotional labour undermines any workers' sense of self. The erosion of self-efficacy becomes detrimental to the usual performative qualities required of any population. It is to the intensification of

practice-implementation, in respect of the affective labour of teachers used to link home and school that this enquiry turns.

This thesis addresses the following sets of questions in order to generate understanding of this dynamic: firstly, in which terms do teachers identify students at risk of educational underachievement, and in what ways are students encouraged to become actively involved in their learning? By knowing the variables used to identify such students, and by knowing of the strategies used by teachers to meet student-learning outcomes, it becomes possible to identify the foundations of the home/school relationship. Secondly, how do teachers describe the process of family engagement and in what ways do structural expectations shape the ways in which they are inclined to progress? Similarly, if teacher judgement establishes the basis for parent engagement practice, it becomes possible to know the ways in which the teacher-role responds to institutional expectations and informs ongoing parent engagement strategies. Thirdly, how do teachers articulate those experiences with 'at risk' families and, in what ways, are those experiences likely to affect future interaction strategies with similar groups of parents? The last two questions seek to reveal the ways in which the institutional requirement to engage parents bears upon teacher subjectivity, such that those experiences have the potential to inform subsequent engagement practices.

The rationale for such an enquiry is that teachers are positioned as active agents of change, yet teachers find themselves working in an educational environment that puts performative administration practices to the fore, thereby thwarting possibilities to deny the presence of bio-power. Using the theoretical framework of Michel Foucault, the expectations experienced by teachers are examined in such a way as to situate the problematic as one which sits within a 'potential space' within the remit of teacher control. The concepts of governmentality, bio-political power, responsabilisation, and power-knowledge will be used to uncover the types of discourses, strategies, knowledge development, and subjectivity-effects that are associated with the development of relationships both with students and with parents of those students. In so doing, the activities that underpin the teacher-role can be opened up to reveal the ways in which institutional expectations of the parent-role become articulated



within the school. Correspondingly, the ways in which these forces work, brings forth the expert knowledge of the teacher, to meet institutional requirements and bring parents of 'at-risk' children into the pedagogical field.

The matter of subjectivity's constructed form directs not only the trajectory of the research, but also a reflection on the role of the researcher within the project. In so saying, research interests cannot be held to be objective: being cognisant of such matters allows the researcher say why research interests matter. Indeed this research is resonant with aspects of my own biography, in respect of having a main caregiver who was hesitant to engage with school, for similar reasons as outlined in this thesis, and my own experience of working in an overtly managed environment in the health sector. While I express these circumstances now as being representative of two discrete areas of my life, I understand that my subjectivity is influenced by the concept of 'othering', informed by material, economic, and social disparity in early life (Jensen 2011, p.63). I have simultaneously felt drawn to help people who experience disadvantage, yet been all too aware that such assistance does not address wider societal issues that occasion the persistence of unequal life chances. This thesis seeks to produce new understanding regarding the possibilities of future outcomes of teacher-subjectivities.

#### **4.2 Methodological considerations**

Researchers use interviews as a research method because they are 'interested in other peoples' stories' (Seidman 2006, p.6). Qualitative research requires that the interviewer take account of the lived experience of the participant (Davies and Bansel 2007). Asking teachers to talk about their experiences of parent engagement is consistent with not only the Foucaultian enquiry, but with inductive epistemology more generally. Both situate participant narratives as representations of social phenomena, not evidence of absolute truths (Abercrombie, Hill, and Turner 2006). As such, any account should be considered as a social construction (Berger and Luckmann 1991). By asking teachers to explain the ways in which they endeavour to engage with parents of children at risk of educational underachievement, as informed by the bio-

political educational environment, it is possible to gain a deep perception about the assessment and interaction practices in which teachers must participate, of the issues they are thereby given to negotiate, and for the prospects for resistance and change.

Interviewing relies on known aspects of interaction conventions, familiar to both interviewer and participant (Silverman 2006). While the interview was conducted in a conversational style, it was not a conversation. The interview sought to elicit context-specific knowledge and to obtain an insider perspective to teacher/parent interaction. Data generated from questioning, from participation in an exchange to clarify meaning, and from the seeking of further explanation when required, can reveal the affective possibilities of role-specific subjectivities (Davies and Bansel 2007). The significance for this study is that the emotional investment teachers make in their professional role-capacity is anticipated by the school, as the school works to meet the pre-requisites of bio-political governance. The outcome of such an expectation is that teacher-subjectivity effects become re-scripted as personal-subjectivity effects, which over time compromises teacher self-efficacy in the school. This is the contradiction to which Nancy Fraser alludes as being the 'crisis tendency' of late-capitalism (2016, p.100).

Insofar as teachers become caught up with trying to engage the families of 'at risk' students on behalf of the school, teacher agency proper might be misrepresented in the context of late modernity, as individual agency is somewhat mythologised, according to Davies and Bansel (2007). They describe the negotiation of onerous or difficult situations in terms of a generalised denial of 'neoliberalism's project of clearly defined and predictable outcomes', as being categorised as 'a failure of the self to adequately take up the burdens of being appropriate(d) subjects of individualism and responsabilisation' (ibid, p.256). An inquiry into teacher interaction practices benefits from asking about the types of accommodations teachers make, so that it becomes possible to understand occasions where 'failure of the self' might be expressed as a pragmatic solution making in response to the role-specific expectations of bio-political governance.

### **4.3 Ethical considerations**

As is consistent with all research undertaken under the supervisory capacity of Massey University, an ethics application was completed prior to the commencement of locating research participants for this study. This research application has been peer reviewed and assessed as a low risk project by Massey University Human Ethics Committee (MUHEC). Permission was granted for the project in May 2016.

### **4.4 Research parameters and data reliability**

This study is based on the contribution of six participants, which was considered to be adequate to meet the intended research objectives. The research aspires to enable an 'understanding (of) a situation that would otherwise be enigmatic or confusing' (Eisner 1991, p.58, in Golafshani 2003). Participants who express views consistent with observations and reflections from their own practice assist in this endeavour. Data from the interviews reveals that teachers may describe aspects of interaction in terms that are specific to their school environments but which speak to themes occurring more broadly across sites.

All participants were offered an opportunity to read and comment on the transcript of their interview. Two participants chose to make additional comments in the transcript to provide clarity. All participants agreed that the transcript was an accurate representation of our discussion and gave consent for the transcript to be used as a data source for this thesis. While this thesis is founded on the views of the participants, and intended to provide information to the local teaching community these views may indeed be resonant with the types of experiences that are familiar to teachers across the country.

### **4.5 Participant recruitment**

An email describing the project was sent to primary school Principals in the Marlborough region by a contact in the education sector who offered to provide an

initial introduction. Principals were invited to share the details of the project with their teaching staff. I followed up by making contact with Principals at eight schools one week after the initial email was sent, which resulted in three Principals offering time to speak to staff in person. Having a contact in the education sector allowed me to gain access to a cohort of professionals that I would not usually have contact with. Being introduced in this way, made it possible to access a relevant demographic of potential participants who have in depth knowledge of parent engagement practices. Purposive sampling allows the researcher to reach participants who 'are selected according to predetermined criteria relevant to a particular research objective' (Guest, Bunce, and Johnson 2006, p.61).

From those schools, three teachers made contact to express an interest in taking part. One of those participants enlisted a colleague from another school. One participant got in touch voluntarily after reading the initial email. The other participant had hoped to garner support from her own network but became sufficiently interested to participate in their stead. Demographic information was not sought as participants who took part come from the local teaching community and as such meet the registration requirements of the education Council for current practitioners (Education Council, n.d.).

Each participant received an email thanking them for taking part, and attachments detailing the context of the research and the topic for discussion. The location and the timing of the interviews was arranged to fit in with the teachers other commitments. It had become apparent in the initial stages of participant recruitment that while there was a desire to take part, those teachers who did participate would have to fit our meeting into an already busy schedule. Two interviews took place on a weekend, one interview occurred in the morning before school and three interviews were conducted after school. Interviews before or after school took on average forty minutes to complete; the interviews that took place on a weekend lasted for one hour.

#### 4.6 Data collection and transcription

The use of a semi-structured interview schedule enabled the aims and purposes of this research. The interview comprised of six open-ended questions asking the participants to explain their methods and rationale for student and parent engagement practices. Supplementary questions to those six main questions asked the participants to reflect on how ways of knowing are constructed in the moment and over time. In so doing, it becomes possible to appreciate the ways in which knowledge is expressed as claims of truth about professional and lay actors in the context of education (LeCompte and Schensul 1999).

Each interview was audio recorded. Lapadat (2000) suggests that each researcher will develop transcript conventions particular to their own situation, taking into account the 'work' the data must do. Therefore, before transcription several practical considerations were taken into account, namely my skill and experience in transcription, and the purpose of the research. The audio recording was transcribed leaving out gaps in conversation and excerpts that were difficult to decipher because interviewer and participant had inadvertently spoken over each other. The audio recording was then revisited whilst re-reading the transcript to check that the written words gave a substantive account of the dialogue.

Once transcription was completed a further analysis took place. Accepting that transcription moves active dialogue to being 'static, permanent and manipulable' (Lapadat 2000, p.204), excerpts from the transcription were coded and grouped according to the theoretical concepts of governmentality, bio-political power, responsibilisation, and power-knowledge. This is consistent with the suggestion that 'links between concepts and indicators are checked by recourse to other indicators' in the pursuit of generating research findings (Hammersley and Atkinson 1983, p.199, in Seale 1999). Transcription therefore provides a resource for sociological enquiry (Silverman 2006).

## 4.7 Conclusion

This chapter explains the rationale that underpins this research, and in so doing, locates the process of finding out about social phenomena within a wider sociological and philosophical tradition (Snape and Spencer 2003, in Ritchie and Lewis 2003, p.2). It describes the processes undertaken to understand 'the perspective of the people being studied by penetrating their frames of meaning' (ibid, p.4). The research questions have been informed by Foucault's analysis of governance, and of bio-power more particularly. Consequently, this enquiry analyses school practice to consider the ways in which the contemporary subject-position of 'teacher', as an effect of governance, becomes bound up with the current discourse informing home/school partnerships. The emotional investment teachers make to that subject-position becomes a valuable resource to bio-power, by way of bringing parents into the pedagogical field, and by way of closing the gap between home and school such that 'at risk' families are animated towards a state of productivity. However, by drawing attention to what Fraser (2016, p.99) calls the 'crisis of care' inherent in late-capitalism, the contradictory nature of work-intensification practices reveal unexpected outcomes within the school. Looking at teacher experience in this way moves away from the system of reasoning that currently informs school auditing practices. In so doing, new knowledge becomes available. The following chapter conveys the results of the research.

## Chapter Five-Data Analysis

### 5.1 Introduction

This enquiry creates new understandings about the ways in which an institutional requirement to engage parents in the education of children at risk of educational underachievement, manifests, becomes articulated, and enacted at a local level. Teacher practice is revealed as being contingent on the context of the interaction, and dependant on prior knowledge of student profile, and family circumstance. Teachers' accounts display the contradictions at play in institutional life. Teachers speak of working in ways to accommodate management expectations, that parents of educationally 'at-risk' students are brought into the pedagogical field, yet describe engagement practices inconsistent with, or counterproductive to fruitful parent engagement. Such contradictions are characteristic of the inclination of bio-political governance towards meeting administrative outcomes, and speak to what Nancy Fraser calls the tendency within late capitalism towards a crisis of social reproduction.

The bio-political intent to influence teacher-practice in this way means that teachers seeking to satisfy school requirements inadvertently become caught up with meeting outcomes, which render students and their parents amenable to administration. Teachers are all too aware that role-specific outcome expectations cause teachers to work between two conflicting ideals: those of governance and those of their own professional beliefs and values. It is through the negotiation of these incapable-of-being-reconciled contradictions, that teachers must produce results in any way they can.

### 5.2 'At risk' student profiles

Teachers describe students who are 'at risk' of educational underachievement, in respect of family background or in terms of how well the child has been prepared to transition to the school environment. This includes the ability to understand school rules and fit into school routine, and, the extent to which children come to school in a

condition that is perceived to be conducive with being ready to learn. Brenda describes the types of home conditions that typically effect student learning potential:

Children who have had a poor start in life in general and if they don't have support for their learning at home, or after school hours, or if their family life can involve a bit of poverty, or abuse, or neglect of course.

When asked to provide an example of the kind of student who is at risk of educational underachievement, there is a discernible difference between the descriptions offered by teachers in respect of age group taught. Early years teachers initially rely on observational information, as demonstrated by Susan, who responded by saying:

They're the children who come to school with no school knowledge, they don't know their colours, they don't know their numbers. They haven't been taught how to hold a pencil, or how to cut. They stand out quite a bit when they enter the classroom, and they don't understand how a classroom works.

The ideas being advanced by Susan is that being ready to begin school can be measured in some capacity. An initial visual assessment of the classroom will provide teachers with lots of information about their charges, and signals the types of activities that need to be employed to address the deficit in student capability. Teachers make it known that they have a six-month window to get the child used to school routine, after which there are clear expectations of meeting marked educational stages. Demonstrating how quickly children must adapt to their new school environment, Alice says:

In my class you see letter formation, how children hold pens, how they interact with books, all those sorts of things go to building a picture of where children are. That's referenced to National Standards, in respect of where the children need to be after one year. So therefore, if they're not hitting those milestones by six months, if they can't sit on the mat, if they're not able to hold a pen, that's



going to give us a pretty clear indication that they are going to struggle to meet that one year target.

Teachers show that they rely heavily on cognitive and motor developmental markers to inform their assessment of the child. Teachers therefore identify gaps in learning by the child's inability to meet normative expectations of learning progressions, and classroom activity when they begin school. In so doing, teachers show how assessment techniques are embedded into everyday practice, and fundamental to making a sound initial judgement on child learning potential. By implication, Alice is saying that unless the learning gap is addressed within that first year, the child may find it difficult to meet subsequent achievement standards. Susan is more direct:

And then in those six months, that gap between those that come to school ready to learn and those who don't just gets bigger, because those kids who are school ready have jumped ahead.

As students progress through the school, teacher insight returns to aspects of family life that hinder academic progress. Students are thought to be disadvantaged by lack of parent interest. Emotional insecurity also makes it difficult for children to settle at school and make friendships. Julie contends:

I would say students whose parents themselves just don't have a high opinion of school, who didn't enjoy school, and they don't see the value of school. But I would say that a huge proportion of the kids that don't achieve are socially, they don't fit with their peers and they have trouble making friends. So their first and foremost, you know in their mind, when they come to school it's about friendships, it's not about learning.

Providing further evidence of the effects of unequal life circumstances as this plays out in the school environment, Laura shares the types of situations that she has encountered:

So, children that change schools, children who are not sure, are not confident about what's gonna happen when they get home at night. Like whose house are they staying at, who's picking them up, because they tend to lose a lot of gear. Children who have maybe had traumatic or emotional incidences, and that gets in the way of their learning, because they're too busy scanning the classroom or being hypervigilant. And children who come to school hungry or distressed. I suppose those are the ones I get worried about, learning wise.

These teachers seemingly rely on a deep assumption that parents as guardians should provide physical and emotional security for their child, and in the absence of such support, there is a negative effect on child wellbeing. Difficulties in student learning become attributable to deficits in parental capacity and parent background, and foster an understanding that some parents do not have sufficient capacity to equip the child with the requisite skills and attributes for social interaction within the school environment. Reinforcing the assertion made by Hamre and Pianta (2001) regarding positive child/parent attachment behaviours, Julie and Laura confirm that, unless a child is emotionally secure, the potential for learning will be compromised.

Systems within the school are designed to get to know the child in a specific way, and that knowledge is used to project how well a child is likely to progress through school. Providing insight into how biopower functions within the classroom setting, through which the productive capacity of the population becomes a calculable entity in respect of meeting the aims of governance, documentary and observational evidence is gathered so as to track those students who need extra support. Teachers learn about their students through formal channels such as in-school tracking or assessment systems, or by informal means, such as teacher experience with the student in a previous year group. Fiona confirms that personal and familial information is shared freely in the school:

Well, when I first come into a new class you talk to last year's teacher, or you talk to the principal or your colleagues about the children. Then you get your raw

data. Quite often you'll get a note next to someone saying, I don't know, maybe not a good relationship with home, or behaviour problems, or something like that. There's a lot of information that gets passed down through the school.

While it is not presented as being problematic, taking information as read in in-school information systems may have the potential to misinform teachers because of variations in how messages are interpreted (Vanderstraeten and Biesta 2006). Nevertheless, teachers value the support of their colleagues. In this quote, Julie reinforces the importance of school knowledge in respect of child welfare:

I might notice that a child is looking a bit different to everyone else, to what they were looking before, and you know, you can ask their previous teacher if there's been any issue before, about their background.

These excerpts suggest that these teachers concede that children who experience the effects of social disparity are the most likely to underachieve at school. Teachers are confident however, that pedagogical insights have developed which allows teachers to accommodate for individual learning requirements. An increase in support services has helped but teachers are aware that modifications to teaching practice, should not position teachers as the panacea for addressing societal ills. As Laura says:

I used to think that if you have an amazing enough programme it would make up for the home stuff. I literally did think that my room was the universe and if you came in here, and you were happy I could keep you safe from the world. And if your life was rubbish, I could in five and a half hours make your life great. But I think now you have to accept that the stuff you come in with, you can't leave at the door, the emotional and social stuff you come in with, you can't leave at the door.

The work of the teacher constitutes an established praxis in which the work of governance can be exercised at a local level. It is through the collection and collation of

data that it becomes possible to know the student and by association, the parent population within the school. Teachers' accounts show that there is a finite amount of time available to them to get children settled into the school routine before testing proper begins. Those children who lack familiarity with school processes are immediately disadvantaged and may, according to the teachers interviewed here, see underachievement persist throughout their school career because of that initial deficit identified by school testing.

### **5.3 Student engagement strategies**

Having identified gaps in student achievement, teachers are inclined to use all available resources to encourage the child to take an active part in their learning. Since the child's preparation for starting school is perceived to be incomplete, this also has implications for teacher workload. Strategies are used in such a way as to reduce any possible negative impact on the child, by minimising individual pressure and avoiding any sense of failure. Being aware of their own limitations, teachers also co-opt classmates into learning activities. For younger students, teachers incorporate play activities into learning. For example, Susan says:

I tend to buddy them up with somebody who's really capable, because I just can't stretch myself that far, so I get a child that's really able, and they become the teacher. It's usually very basic hands on activities to practice basis skills, like playdough, painting, cutting, playing with Lego or Mobilo and other fine motor activities. I also tend to do lots of whole class stuff. So if I notice that a child can't skip, I will get the class to skip from the classroom to the hall, and do it incidentally throughout the day, the week, the months until they are showing some sort of progress.

As children settle into school routine, teachers try to make learning enjoyable by initiating social activities such as shared learning experiences and peer collaboration. Alice emphasises the importance of discussion:

We focus a lot on talking, and questioning and social skills. I also put in a lot of discovery type learning to give children some experiences, because often children who haven't had experiences have nothing to draw upon, in terms of maybe their writing or their oral language. So if we have a shared experience then those children can have exactly the same, they've had that experience so they can join in the learning. I also do flexible grouping, so children may be together for some things, then that could be changed up the next day because we are focusing on something else.

A range of learning materials serves to protect children from being overwhelmed.

Laura says:

Basically you provide a differentiated learning programme that might not rely on doing homework, because then they feel bad because they haven't done it. Just being really careful about these things; not pushing them into a hole.

Julie again points to the importance of student wellbeing as being a factor in taking active measures to minimise classroom stressors. Acknowledging that systems within the school may disadvantage students, Julie is prepared to work around the requirement to test every student by revealing:

So one kid just packs a strop any time there's a test. The reason he packs a big strop is that he knows that he's well below, like he knows he finds learning hard. And every time he has to do a test it's reinforced for him that he's gonna come out feeling crappy. So rather than doing the proper, like it was a spelling test he packed a wobbly at the other day, so rather than giving him the spelling test, it was just, here take the words and highlight the ones that you don't know so that he's not in that test situation. It kind of skews the results, but he was honest, he highlighted the words that he didn't know.

For Laura, having a personal connection with her students, and being available before school is vital for the school day to run smoothly. She explains:

So before school between eight and nine you can't be in the photocopier room. You've gotta be there when they turn up. You've got to be literally physically there so when they walk into the room you say hello. You can see, have they got their lunch box, have they got their shoes on, are they looking really tidy. Because that's when you get them, at the beginning of the day, because if you find out at the end of lunch time, that they haven't had any lunch, or they haven't had any sleep, it's too late by then and the wheels have usually fallen off.

Professional development and research is accepted as a resource for pedagogical insight. Nevertheless, teacher strategies are largely informed by the requirement to find something that works, so trial and error, and on the job learning expressed as experience, are commonly cited in response to questioning about how teacher insight is gained. Again, teachers focus on wellbeing. The sense of relying on colleagues comes up again when Brenda says:

Well it depends. It's a lot of different ones. Sometimes it's going to courses. Generally just by looking at, by just doing it myself, thinking what does that child need differently and having to do that myself. You know, I don't think there's any other way. We also have our syndicate team meetings. Every time we have one of those, once a fortnight, at least, we look at different children and [explore] strategies for improving their learning as well. We have talked about different children and their welfare and how we could improve their learning. So we look at things collaboratively as a team.

Minimising conflict, involving the child in decision-making and gradually enabling student independence, establishes a sound foundation for creating trust between student and teacher, it also however, equips student with a solid baseline of

transferrable skills. Speaking of students who change schools frequently, Laura confirms that she promotes student independence by conveying to students:

Now that you've got your reading underway, and you're doing your practice and you've got your homework book organised that shows that you're a really self-managing learner. So you need to teach them to be independent about that and give them the power, because if they zip off somewhere else and you provide them with all this scaffolding, it might not be there in the next school or the next class.

Teachers show that they put in considerable effort to build capacity in the child. They use prior knowledge of adverse family circumstances to reduce the potential for additional stressors in school. Teachers encourage classmates to help with learning, and through discussion with colleagues, teachers try to find ways to make a connection, and promote learning opportunities. Teachers make learning a social activity. However, their comments also reveal that time and resources may be limited, and there may be a palpable volatility in the classroom that teachers must actively work to mitigate. In addition, teachers' accounts expose how it becomes possible for knowledge to be developed of students in respect of their family background. This information mediates the interaction possibilities with home.

#### **5.4 Home/school partnerships**

Respondents acknowledge that a positive home/school relationship should keep the child as the focus for communication, and perceive that fostering a pleasant atmosphere in school will encourage parents to be more willing to help their child. Teachers speak of the need to build trust with home and being consistent with the support they provide to support student learning outcomes. While an intention to make school accessible is expressed, a potential exists that teachers may be inclined to temper their engagement practices according to the extent to which they feel valued or respected as an educator. Making school less frightening for parents, also means

letting go of their professional demeanour, to some extent. Fiona says it is important to:

Make school a less scary place, because if the parents have had a bad experience at school, they don't want to come and see us. So if we try and be as human as we possibly can. And sometimes the change in language, like if I talk to someone in a not so professional way, then it's more relating for them on their level, than me talking in my teacher speak to them, and they are like, what's she talking about?

However, for Julie, lack of communication from home signals a possibility that parents are transferring parental responsibilities to the school, and teachers become de facto parents. In Julie's experience, there is a difference between the 'imagined' meaning and the 'real' meaning of home/school partnerships:

So it's the child knowing that the teacher and the family are on the same page. Knowing that the kid knows that all three of them have got equal stakes in making sure that the child succeeds. And also, it's the kid knowing that they can't play one off against the other. In reality, I feel like it's the school giving hard out trying to involve parents, and the parents, the majority of parents just being like, it's babysitting. Right, here you go, take the child. I feel like that's a lot of parents.

While professional insight in the classroom environment works to accommodate student needs, teachers may be inclined to reinstate professional boundaries in pursuit of making explicit their expectations of parent engagement practices. An apparent withdrawal of parental support changes dynamics in the relationship, where a perceived lack of accepted social conventions may occasion the teacher to view the home school partnership as one of convenience to meet the student's learning outcomes. For example, Susan says:



Parents say that they'd like to help at home and so you get things ready for them, they take it home and it doesn't often get done at home. As I am getting older, I am getting a little bit more blunt. I have said, this needs to be done, so we do it at school. I make sure it's done in the morning, we make sure it's done in the afternoon, and it would be great if you could do it in the evening, and this is how you do it.

It is perceived that the home/school partnership is fundamental to student achievement. Teachers say they cannot accommodate all of the student learning requirements in school hours yet teachers time and again find themselves making concessions in educational expectations by setting optional homework, and making space for families to have time out at home by way of minimising additional stressors. Susan continues:

I make it really, really, easy for parents, because they're people that are struggling with this child anyway, so I don't want the struggle to carry on at home. So I've said, if it's going to be a struggle, stop and try it again the next day. As soon as it's a struggle don't do it.

Brenda has had a similar experience:

The way they learn at home is, you know the kids might read something else, or they just don't do the homework that's set by the school at all. And I don't make a big issue out of it because I know it's hard for some families. They do get learning at home but it's only a really, really, small part.

While it is anticipated that teachers can rely on parental support to advance student academic achievement, home circumstances may not make that possible. Both Susan and Brenda convey an insight that there may be latent tensions within the home, making it difficult for families to have, the right frame of mind to assist their child with home learning. That inside knowledge tempers any overt insistence that homework

must be completed. Cognisant that learning across home and school will be of benefit, however, teachers talk about the ways in which they try to bring parents into the pedagogical field.

### **5.5 Strategies to engage parents**

All participants say that their schools have an open door policy. Teachers make themselves available to parents before and after school, as often as their schedule allows. Positive aspects of student achievement are emphasised, teachers strive to maintain a cheerful demeanour and to ensure that students are happy in class in order to head off negative feedback from parents. Face-to-face engagement is preferred but school newsletters, electronic communications and telecommunications, are all used to make and maintain contact with home.

Teachers speak of trying to create a cooperative relationship between home and school on the understanding that both parties share responsibility for achieving a specific goal. However, informal engagement might focus on the social aspect of interaction. In Brenda's experience:

The main thing is that when you physically see a parent you have a chance to go and chat. And sometimes that's really hard to do, and a lot of our parents will, well not hang back, but wait in different parts of the playground, so I just go and say Hi. In regard to learning, I think I don't always hit them with the learning stuff. It's more about how things are going, and behaviour, catching up with what's working really well at home, if things are settled or not.

Teachers learn these strategies through trial and error. Colleagues provide assistance, by sharing accumulated wisdom the types of interventions that might work. Evidencing the effect of increased managerialism in education, the push to engage on any terms is evident as teachers are inclined to use any strategy that might work. Alice explains:

I think you are always changing things, you're just looking to have lots of different ideas for the same goal, so I think we always try lots and lots of different strategies. What may have worked with this child last year, or this group of parents last year may not work this year. So you've got to think this is not really working, and then reflect and think, yeah, okay, what else could I try.

Principals also make it clear that parent engagement is a priority. As the leader of the school, the principal sets the standard for engagement and encourages a flexible attitude towards that engagement. In a similar way to that identified by Saltmarsh and Barr (2014) this group of teachers find that school leadership is fundamental to instilling a positive attitude in staff. Moreover, they suggest that teachers who feel supported and valued are inclined to be pro-active in their interaction practices with the parents of students. To minimise negative feedback from parents and prevent the need for principals to intervene, Fiona talks about the principal at her school:

The principal makes you feel secure in your job, makes you feel appreciated, which I can tell you I've not had in other jobs. And I would say that because the principal does so much for us, we in turn want to do a good job, which of course is doing the best for the children. We don't want the Principal to have to deal with parents who are cross at us about things, you know.

In contrast, for Julie a decision by the principal to waive school donations has not helped to encourage parents into school:

So we don't ask, we don't push for, we don't send out bills, we don't even make reference to fees or school donations. I know for a fact that a huge number of kids in my class have parents who don't work. I don't know what they do but they're not coming on trips. They're not coming in to help with reading. They're not helping us.

Julie finds it difficult to understand why, in the absence of any requirement to make a financial contribution, parents are seemingly still reluctant to come into school. Making a connection to the unemployment status of families, Julie assumes that parents should have time available to help the school in some way. However, the avoidance of school by parents can be attributable to wider socio-economic and environmental factors that affect family circumstances and sense of parental efficacy. In their American study, Waanders, Mendez, and Downer (2009) found that parents tend to stay away from school if they feel they do not have anything to contribute to their child's learning. Parents also withdraw if financial security is compromised, living conditions are precarious, or if they have limited social networks. Abolishing school fees therefore, as Julie has said, may have little potential to encourage parents to come into school.

Brenda talks about the ways in which meeting MoE expectations can assist in parent engagement, but also how Ministry directives may obscure teacher's significance in the development of school practice:

I have had concerns that we weren't engaging parents enough a few years ago. I felt that I was listened to, and things changed and I had a voice. But the Principal could also at the time been getting information from the Ministry about improving it, I don't know.

Schools try a variety of strategies to engage parents. It is perceived that teachers being friendly and approachable assist with initial contact. Nevertheless, parent participation can be inconsistent. Parent engagement may, however, be only marginally related to what teachers do. Wider societal factors may have a greater effect on parent self-efficacy and contribute to the reasons for apparent parental disengagement. Institutional practices may also contribute to the complex problem of apparent parental school avoidance.

## 5.6 The effect of school structure

Teachers say that their professional experience is informed by the expectations and management style of the principal, and by the extent to which MoE requirements are conveyed through the principal as expectations of teacher practice. National Standards testing requires that parents must be kept informed of student progress in respect of meeting expected learning outcomes. Therefore, this official requirement most commonly instigates teacher/parent communication. Dialogue begins as soon as test results indicate that supportive measures are needed. Fiona describes the need to make contact with home as soon as possible after testing results have been confirmed:

Front foot communication means to me that when I have done my assessment and I see that a child is likely not to meet the National Standard at the end of the year, then I am in term one talking to mum, saying, mum this is what's gonna happen. So if I say to mum, right I will do this, this is what I am going to do, this is what I need you to do. Here's a list of stuff, you can do it.

There is a general sense however, that the requirement to report on student National Standards attainment may be detrimental to parent engagement and somewhat irrelevant for students with diagnosed learning difficulties. While there is a clear directive to report twice a year, contact with home so early in the school calendar, combined with ongoing reporting of underachievement should it persist, can create feelings of unease for both parties. Alice says:

I've got an ORS child in my class, and I still have to report to the parents and say this child's well below. So that's a frustration because those parents don't need to know, you know, in their face every year, that their child is well below. It doesn't help anybody, I don't think.

Again, Laura referring to a child with an unsettled home situation confirms that:

I think that sometimes that National Standards get in the way, to be honest, because it all becomes about academia and not about sharing progress and positivity. Obviously, by definition children who are failing to engage are often underachieving. It's a vicious cycle you know if every time you talk to these people and you have to tell them that their child is failing basically, you know, they haven't hit the bar, they haven't hit the bar, they too by year five are a bit over it. They don't really enjoy coming to those meetings. I don't try and gloss because you are required to report, but I do try and emphasise things like progress. So that type of thing I think gets in the way.

The push to engage also manifests in unsolicited pro-active behaviours, to take advantage of serendipitous meetings outside the school environment, as Laura reveals when discussing parent/teacher interviews:

You know who they are because everybody fills in their forms to have their parent/teacher interviews, and there's four or five that don't. I have to phone them. You know what I mean, it's another, please come in. So some of my meetings wouldn't be at school. Some of them I say, oh, I met them in the street, and that was our meeting. You know some people don't like coming to school.

School systems may also inadvertently become a barrier to parent/teacher relationships. For example, differentiated management responsibilities may see staff members other than classroom teachers contacting parents about attendance or behaviour management concerns. Teachers say that the use of incidental communication of this kind to meet reporting expectations of the MoE can have a negative impact on parent/teacher communications. The sense remains that teachers should be the main point of contact for all educational and pastoral matters, in order that a full picture of home life can be ascertained. Julie asserts that:

So if I've got a relationship with a parent but then someone else goes in and makes contact with that parent, it can absolutely ruin the relationship that I had

with that parent because someone else has gone in from a different angle. But that happens quite a bit sometimes because the 'at risk' kids for learning normally, are quite often, the 'at risk' children for behaviour as well. So there are times when another teacher kind of gets involved. Or a principal gets involved and it's not the best.

Principals, who appear to put greater emphasis on the views of students and their parents, may inadvertently deter teachers from making contact with home because of a perceived diminution of teacher importance. In such circumstances the teacher may withdraw from overt parent engagement practices, and adopt a pragmatic stance to engage minimally and only when necessary. In regard to this, Susan says:

I feel like in the big pecking order, teachers are right down. You know, it sort of goes parents, the teacher aides, the office staff, and then the teachers. We just have to pick up the pieces for everything and we are right down the bottom. We're just told what to do, and even if you have an opinion about different things, you're not really listened to because of that hierarchy. Peoples' needs are put before the teachers, the teacher needs are flat last. I feel less confident contacting parents nowadays because of this.

The imperative to engage pushes teachers to participate in interaction practices to meet management expectations. Those expectations must also satisfy MoE requirements. However, it appears that it is not the quality of the interaction that is important. Rather, findings point to matters of compliance, which is both measurable and comparable within bio-political reporting standards. Teachers are more or less inclined to participate depending on the relationship they have with the principal. As a consequence, the potential for parent engagement practices relies on the principal fostering the right type of mentality in the staff to achieve the aims of governance. The result of covert managerialism is that teachers work to please the manager to achieve positive engagement practices. The effect of overt managerialism either pushes

teachers to engage with parents to meet performance indicators irrespective of the place or the time, or fosters a disinclination to engage at all.

### **5.7 Barriers to parent engagement**

Participants agree that the ability to make contact and stay in touch with parents can often be difficult. Barriers to communication are revealed as coming from three sources: school process; the extent to which communication can be maintained, and; wider societal issues that bear influence at a family level, particularly for parents in a lower socio-economic demographic.

It has been established that schools work towards building capacity in students to be independent learners. As children become increasingly independent, it is thought that parents gradually disengage from being an overly involved in educational matters. Participants say that it is easier to have contact with parents in years one and two; parental interest usually tapers off thereafter.

Schools tend to engage in one-way communication by means of traditional and electronic communication systems. Parents may or may not respond to communications. Personal circumstances can mean that parents will get information and at times they cannot respond. As a consequence, the expectation that teachers reduce barriers to engagement means that they must be available well after school closes. Brenda says that:

Over half the families in my class don't use email at all. They might go on Facebook or something, it might even be more than half that don't use email, but texting is definitely the way to go. With a text, even if they can't reply because they haven't got credit they will say the next time they see you. Like, they might not be ready to receive a call. They might be at work, or they might be busy with pre-schoolers up until eight at night, and then you can just send a text or give them a quick call.



Fiona likes aspects of this flexible interaction:

I do like the fact that, I mean parents have got my cell phone number. They can text me because it's easy to text back. It might be annoying at times, like in the evening, when you sit down to dinner and you get a text from someone. I mean I've got my email going all the time. So I don't mind that modern stuff, but there's gotta be a point where you say I've done enough now.

It has been established that families from low socio-economic demographics are more likely to experience social marginalisation, which can be exacerbated by participation in low waged work, or non-standard kinds of work. The effects of poverty are apparent in school, as Fiona attests:

You know if they work hours that don't coincide with school, it's really hard. Like if you've got dad doing a night shift, and mum doing work in the day, you know you might never see dad because he's asleep in the day. Or vice versa. You know lack of money is another big thing, and that's the nutrition. You know we had a couple of kids who had their power cut off last year, and they've got no power at home, so when they come to school, you know, these kids are kids we feed already.

Formal meetings do not always go as expected. Parents share concerns about parenting or financial issues, and teachers may be inclined to view this as a barrier to communication. However, the research of Pillet-Shore (2015) suggests that this type of interaction from parents is more likely to be demonstrating an attitude of deference to teachers' positions, knowledge, and expertise. This can be seen by the way in which parents might initiate conversation with teachers' about their children's problems, prior to the teacher needing to do so. Teachers, however, may be reluctant to engage in such conversations. Julie says:

There are parents who are constantly going, what can I do, what can I do? He's not going to bed on time. He won't do his homework, and what can I do? I've just got bitter. I've changed. I'm just gonna be like, well, you can be a parent, figure it out.

In contrast to this, Brenda suggests that concerns of these general kinds need to be openly addressed in order for them as teachers to speak with the parents about more specific educational matters relating to the child's progress:

I think that maybe they think or see formal parent conferences as a time to have a good chat about that stuff, yeah. I don't mind. But then as a professional if you can't sort that stuff, the parents won't be taking in anything about what the child is learning, and writing and reading. They're worried about how they are going to afford a school polar fleece. And you know if they can't get past that, they're not going to be worried about what the child is reading at home either.

Teachers also show that another barrier to engagement comes from where they are unable to make a positive, unmediated connection with parents, or where they feel unappreciated by parents for the effort they put into their job. The emotional component of teaching therefore affects the ways in which it becomes possible to engage. In an exploration of this issue, Hargreaves (2001) carried out a study in Canada in which she looked how changes in educational policy affected the emotional efficacy of teachers. She found that a teacher's self-efficacy increased with positive feedback. While teachers invest heavily in the emotional wellbeing of their students, it appears that teacher wellbeing is less frequently addressed. Susan shows the ways in which overt managerialism affects her sense of professionalism:

I think I'm a lot more aware of what I say to children, there's so many hoops you have to, there's so many people looking at you now. I feel like that everyone is watching my every move at the moment. Now I think that everyone has got an opinion, and they put their opinion across and will tell the principal, and then the

principal comes and questions you, all the time. It's happening a lot. You need to justify your actions for things the children take home and tell mum.

Julie talks about the lack of significance given to what teachers say:

To me, a lot of leaders say it's the child first. It always comes back to the child, and what's best for them. I say no, it's actually the teacher. If the teacher is not happy, supported, heard, then good luck trying to get those kids learning. So I suppose it's an equal kind of balance. But don't say that the kid comes first because if you actually do want the kid to actually make any progress then the teacher needs to be heard.

The final barrier to engagement is time. As has been shown throughout this analysis, teachers' work starts before school begins and carries on well after school has closed. Asked to quantify the amount of time spent doing their jobs, respondents replied as follows:

It's huge! I work twelve hour days a lot, and then I'll come in at the weekend. Some of that I feel is because we've got ERO coming and it's expected to get my game up a bit. I do cope with it but I see a lot of people who don't have family commitments who are making the decisions on what needs to be done. I don't want to sound hard, but they are the ones who will email me at nine at night wanting a response the next day. I think there's a huge lack of an awareness. You can be working twenty-four hours a day. I think that the culture of teaching seems to be if you're not doing that sort of thing, then you're not a good teacher (Brenda).

I mean last year it was horrific. Last year I worked all weekend, every weekend because I was, I started teaching [at this school] and six weeks later ERO turned up, you know, the paperwork. Some nights I'd be working till ten and I'd get up at four. I'd get six hours sleep and just keep working. But I knew it was going to

be like that because you don't want to let ERO down. And they did, they came and went through all my stuff, and it was all there, but it was crazy (Laura).

There's the time you are in the classroom, nine till three, but there are many, many, other meetings. You know I have meetings before school. At the moment, I have meetings every day after school, every week. Meetings in terms because I'm management. I've got management meetings, I've got team things, I've got professional learning meetings. We've now joined the COL, Community of Learning, so COL meetings. I mean there's no choice about it, so it's really hard to keep a balance. So people say, teachers holidays, aren't they fantastic. I mean you know, you are working all holidays quite honestly. I'm still on my emails all the time. At night when my children are in bed I am working because that's when I can, because you go to all those meetings and you need to do stuff to follow up, but there's no time because you're at the meetings (Alice).

The barriers to engagement cover a wide range of institutional, situational, personal, and societal situations. Teachers speak in school specific terms, but nevertheless share an insight that speaks of the effects of social inequality in some way impacting upon the learning potential of students. Teachers show great insight for the needs of their students. However, it would appear that teacher wellbeing does not receive similar attention.

## **5.8 Conclusion**

This project recounts the measures teachers say they use to engage both student and their parents in the activity of raising student achievement out of the 'at risk' category. In the course of using those measures, teachers seemingly become involved in practices that seek to address matters of administration and compliance. This analysis has positioned teachers as the conduit through which engagement expectations become actualised, yet simultaneously reveals the frailties in such practices for all involved. Even though teachers speak of making empathetic connections with students, the rhetoric of home/school partnership remains that of constructing a

functional relationship to meet specific educational outcomes. The broad scope of what teachers say they do signifies the contradictory and complex scope of circumstances being discussed.

In so doing, teachers offer a working example of what Nancy Fraser refers to as 'capitalism's social contradiction' (2016, p.101). In the course of meeting management expectations, teachers will try any action that increases the prospect of parent engagement. In so doing, and in the apparent absence of management support, teachers cannot determine a point beyond which they will cease to be persuaded that such practices will work. Stated another way, teachers know that their effort may only have limited effect on parent engagement practices yet they remain compelled to try, despite considerable knowledge to the contrary.

Data analysis reveals the classroom environment to be one in which the teacher is continually shifting to maintain an equilibrium that is consistent with favourable student outcomes and experiences. Teachers, aware of the types of general circumstances that are likely to prevent parent engagement with school, are inclined to make concessions. It is in this circumstance that power/knowledge of a resistive kind works in the moment to mediate institutional interaction expectations.

If engagement practices have been unsuccessful, or if the teacher detects a perceived resistance to their efforts, parents are likely to receive a less favourable response. Such measures are largely precipitated by parents failing to meet the normative expectations held within the institution about such interaction. For teachers, the avoidance of school by parents can be interpreted as disinterest on the part of those parents in their children's academic outcomes and can in addition suggest an apparent disrespect on the part of those same parents of the teacher's abilities.

Yet a seemingly contradictory situation within institutional settings may further complicate matters. Processes in the school require children to be independent learners. Any expectation that students' capacities will develop as those children

progress through school, may in fact work against parent involvement. In addition, participants cite National Standards as one of the two main structural elements that compel teachers to engage with home, with an unanticipated effect that parents may become reluctant to engage with school if their children's underachievement persists. Parents do not want to come to school to be told that their child is failing.

Adding another layer of complexity to the situation is parent demographic, as described by Lareau (1987). Parent subjectivity, informed by their own negative school experience and an understanding that home and school are two different spheres of social activity, may render teacher engagement practices incapable of producing the intended outcome initially sought. Teachers show great insight about the systems within which they are required to work, and which inform current teaching practice. Teachers are aware that they are part of a highly managed profession, and teacher subjectivity forms in relation to these practices. Specifically, participant responses tell of teachers being enabled or constrained to the extent that their sense of professional subjectivity becomes rearticulated as a sense of personal subjectivity. To put the point bluntly, the teachers' sense of self-efficacy becomes defined by the extent to which they can meet management expectations (Denscombe 1980).

As is consistent with new managerialism, the skill of the principal to instil such a requirement and ensure those demands are being met, demonstrates the ways in which the requirements of governance are being actioned at a local level. Parent engagement practices initiated by the teacher, as a means by which parents are brought into the pedagogical field, reflects the types of activities upon which governance depends: governance values people who do the right thing. Greater managerial scrutiny only comes when those normative role expectations have not been achieved.

The following chapter identifies a series of contradictions and discontinuities in the education system as they reveal themselves in the participants' discourses. That set

puts at risk the ability of current education policy to make any meaningful or lasting effect on achievement outcomes for 'at risk' students.

## Chapter Six-Discussion

### 6.1 Introduction

This research was prompted by the ERO (2015) report *Educationally Powerful Connections with Parents and Whānau* in which narrative accounts of school practice serve as exemplars to persuade the reader that educational underachievement can be addressed with effective home/school relationships. The overarching purpose of this thesis is to enquire into the contradictions that teachers encounter, in the pursuit of drawing parents of students 'at risk' of educational underachievement into the pedagogical space, as education now works in ways associated with bio-political governance. The findings reveal that the managerialist organisation of education, instead of countering the socio-economic marginalisation that characterises the families of 'at risk' children, supports a form of social reproduction that normalises disadvantage while being unsupportive of another that is more fundamental in kind to the development of young people.

The form of social reproduction given support is the continuance of unequal life chances within family systems (Lareau 1987). In this respect social policy that was put in place to draw attention to educational underachievement, for example through the introduction of National Standards, cannot change the effects of social disparity and children pass through the education system likely experiencing the same types of conditions as did their parents. They will likely lead similar types of lives as well. The second form of social reproduction refers to the concerns raised by Nancy Fraser regarding the intensification of workplace demands within capitalism which leave insufficient time for making and embedding social connections, because 'capitalism is systematically expropriating the capacities available for sustaining social networks' (2016, p.116). Strategic decision-making by teachers, which is currently of value in education, cannot support conditions suitable for making long-term relationships with marginalised families; neither can this circumstance provide the teacher with enough time to do it, should it be possible. In keeping with Fraser's attention to the 'contradictions of capital and care' (ibid, p.99), this thesis identifies an associated set



of anomalies that arise for these respondents, as an effect of their attempts to meet the impossible requirements placed upon them to intervene in the family systems of their 'at risk' wards. These anomalies within the educational field provide grounded examples of that tendency toward the crisis of care in social reproduction more generally.

## **6.2 A series of anomalies**

It transpires that teachers engage in a tentative negotiation with parents of students at risk of educational underachievement. The act of carrying responsibility for the initiation and sustaining of meaningful connections, coupled with that obligation being reinforced by management expectations, can have negative outcomes. While teachers at times withdraw from the expectations placed upon them, they are also 'pushed' into making pragmatic responses when the opportunity arises. The effects upon teachers of the intensification of expectations for meaningful interaction with parents, is both time consuming and seemingly unproductive. That said, it nevertheless seemingly continues with little critical reflection. Reflective of the types of activities in which workers in general must engage, such circumstances exemplify the managerialist conditions within late modernity. Nancy Fraser warns of the 'crisis of social reproduction' at work in capitalist society (2016, p.100). Suggestive of the types of contradictions in capitalist society that undermine the human capacity for social reproduction, the following 'anomalies' have been identified at a local level within the field of education.

First anomaly: Teachers are inclined to compensate for a perceived lack of parental involvement in preparing the child for school. Within the classroom setting, activities for children new to the environment tend to focus on skills related to socialisation, communication, and physical activity. Opportunities for building language and composition skills are provided by shared learning experiences. Teachers' accounts suggest that the education system has already anticipated children might show differences in preparedness for beginning school. Teachers know of a range of corrective measures that may be put to use to assist the child to 'fit in' to the school

environment. Children's learning progressions may then be benchmarked against normative assessment standards.

However, by sharing in-school experiences, and through the provisioning of common language by which children might learn to describe such experiences, the transmission of the dominant cultural paradigm may inadvertently signal to parents that any contribution to learning they may wish to make may in some way be insufficient, as compared with the provisions made at school. Alice says that to help children 'join in the learning' she provides shared learning experiences because 'often children who haven't had experiences have nothing to draw upon, in terms of their writing or their oral language'. Alice's comments convey an intent to help the child with written composition and articulation, albeit from an institutional perspective.

Furthermore, any relationship with home may be thwarted by the bio-political nature of the education system itself. The need to know the population in particular ways, in this case, through the evaluation of children against pre-established assessment criteria and, ipso facto, the families of those children, may actually work against any possibility that a relationship may be established at all. Laura says 'it's a vicious cycle you know, if every time you speak to these people and you have to tell them that their child is failing, they too by year five are bit over it'. Laura understands that the achievement of normative milestones must be addressed, but recognises that communicating student underachievement may undermine tentative relationships. The current administration of education requires that teachers meet performance outcomes. Despite the considerable effort of the teachers to build relationships with home, the qualitative character of education as it currently presents, values the meeting of performance outcomes. Engagement practices are recognised within administrative systems in the school.

Second anomaly: Teachers may inadvertently convey mixed messages to home by the way they accommodate the effect of adverse home conditions. Showing familiarity with the home circumstances of their wards as they progress through school, teachers

may conflate knowledge of these circumstances with possibilities for learning within the home environment. Brenda does not anticipate that the children in her class will complete homework when it is given. She says 'I don't make a big issue out of it because I know it's hard for some families. They do get homework, but it's only a really, really small part'. Brenda, taking account of the difficulties some families experience, minimises the need for in-home learning.

Accommodation also occurs through the teachers' attempts to build capacity in the child such that it appears that the child does not require parent involvement in their learning. Despite the ERO's intention that learning takes place across home and school, school processes in this circumstance work to reinforce the separation of home and school as different social spheres, thereby inadvertently conveying to parents that the school will deal with all learning matters. Taking account of adverse home conditions, Laura says she conveys to students 'now that you've got your reading underway, and you're doing your practice and you've got your homework book organised that shows you are a really self-managing learner'. With a focus on children's learning in school, teachers work to meet the performance standards whether or not they have parent involvement. This is because it is against the learning outcomes of the child that managers will assess teacher performance.

Consequently, teachers equip the child with the tools that are required to meet learning expectations and academic skills commensurate with their school year. Teachers scaffold learning progressions, by preparing children for their next learning stage and by involving children in decision making in class. With an emphasis on the identification of learning strategies that succeed with engaging at-risk students, teachers seemingly become quite pragmatic in their pedagogical orientation. Alice explains 'I think you are always changing things, you're just looking to have lots of ideas for the same goal ... so I think we always try lots and lots of different strategies'. This may inadvertently have the effect of conveying to parents that teachers have control of the situation, and have the requisite expertise to deal with all academic learning. Brenda relies on her teaching experience when she talks about engaging the child. She says 'Well it depends. It's a lot of different ones. Generally just by looking at,

just by doing it myself. Thinking what does that child need differently and having to do that myself'. The reach of teacher expertise works to inculcate independence in the student, with the consequence that student independence may inadvertently work against parental participation. For Laura, in-school learning protects the child from experiencing guilt. Laura says 'basically you provide a differentiated programme that might not rely on doing homework, because then they feel bad because they haven't done it'. The direction of in-school learning speaks to what Nancy Fraser calls the crisis of care: teacher energies are invested in the child in the classroom and the family unit remains on the periphery.

Third anomaly: Knowing that home life can at times be stressful, teachers do not always provide homework for 'at-risk' students. Teachers are inclined to focus on learning activities in school as the primary means by which to progress student achievement. While teachers are willing to assist home in any way they can, taking learning back inside the school again can work to reinforce to parents that the school is best placed to teach their child. Finding ways to build capacity in a child beginning school, Alice valuing the concept of shared learning says, 'I do flexible grouping, so children may be together for some things, then that could be changed up the next day because we are focusing on something else'.

Conversely, if homework is provided and not completed, this may signal to teachers that their expertise is not valued, or that parents are not interested in their child's education. In Susan's experience, 'parents say they'd like to help at home and so you get things ready for them, they take it home, and it doesn't often get done at home'. This kind of situation has the potential to overshadow the fact that parents from a low socio-economic background might place value on their child's education. These parents may be more likely to think of school and home as different social fields and accept that schools have the requisite expertise to educate their child (Lareau 1987). Insofar as parents rely on school to educate their children, teachers do try to connect with home. However, teachers' efforts to reach out to parents cannot by themselves, counter the administrative meaning which the task comes to take on as it gets recoded by the logic of managerial accounting. If parents' input is really of value to the

educational outcomes of their children, a requirement that formal reporting on student achievement to home should happen twice a year, does not convey that sentiment.

While it may be expected that the maintenance of high pedagogic standards will make a difference to student outcomes, teachers say that their knowledge of family systems informs the ways in which they are inclined to work with children 'at risk'. Accordingly, teachers say they are inclined to lower expectations in order to accommodate unequal home circumstances, or learning challenges that children from such situations might experience, for the benefit of student or family wellbeing. Teachers, caught up within the contradictions of their role appear inclined to accept that any learning is better than no learning. Again, albeit in the pursuit of maintaining family wellbeing, this circumstance may work against parental involvement.

Fourth anomaly: To make school welcoming to parents, teachers try to be approachable. This may mean, however, that they have to manage their presentation of self, if not underplay aspects of their professional practice. For Fiona it important to be 'as human as we possibly can, and sometimes the change in language, like if I talk to someone in a not so professional way, then it's more relating for them on their level, than me talking in my teacher speak to them'. Teachers say they must first establish a friendly rapport with parents that should not focus on the learning requirements of their children. This may, at times, involve listening to financial or parenting concerns. While listening to parents' concerns may speak to the pastoral component of the work of the teacher, such concerns detract from an ability to address directly any learning matters. For Brenda, being approachable means that 'I think I don't always hit them (the parents) with the learning stuff. It's more about how things are going, and behaviour, catching up with what's working really well at home, if things are settled or not'. Asking about behaviour management issues, Brenda demonstrates the reach of the school to access home systems in this respect.

Successful long-term engagement of parents may be ultimately unproductive if that engagement does not translate into sustained home learning. More particularly the requirement to report on National Standards testing may in fact work to demotivate parents from school interaction, if underachievement persists. Laura takes advantage of serendipitous meetings when parents are reluctant to come to school for parent/teacher meetings. She says 'so some of my meetings wouldn't be at school. Some of them I say, oh, I met them in the street, and that was our meeting. You know some people don't like coming to school'. The anomaly reflects the contradiction in social reproduction highlighted by Fraser: while aware that an intensified approach may have limited effect to student learning, teachers are compelled to try to engage parents.

Teachers try to communicate to parents an expectation that they are required to support the learning of their children. The reach of teacher expertise in this way is anticipated to bring parents into the pedagogical field. That said, in the pursuit of favourable outcomes for the students, teachers say they are willing to try any pedagogic technique that works. A required activity of bio-power is that of getting results in a form which can be measured. This tendency may be overwhelming for parents who are reluctant to engage with school. Susan, notes a change in her approach to parents by saying, 'as I am getting older, I am getting a little bit more blunt. I have said, this needs to be done, so we do it at school. I make sure it's done in the morning, we make sure it's done in the afternoon, and it would be great if you could do it in the evening, and this is how you do it'. These factors may again work against parent engagement.

Fifth anomaly: School management systems may inadvertently cause tensions between teacher and parents. While teachers may express desires to be involved in all academic and pastoral matters relating to their charges, specific managerial duties are commonly distributed to other members of the school personnel. For example, different members of staff will have responsibility for dealing with attendance or behaviour management concerns. Discontinuity in communication can lead to frustrations for the teacher, as other school staff seeking to meet their own

performance indicators may compromise tentative parent/teacher relationships. For Julie, school systems at times get in the way. She says, 'so if I've got a relationship with a parent but then someone else goes in and makes contact with that parent, it can absolutely ruin the relationship that I had. But that happens quite a bit sometimes because the 'at risk' kids for learning normally, are quite often the 'at risk' children for behaviour as well'. The education system again shows the inherent contradictions that teachers must negotiate, as administrative systems intervene upon the sociality of teacher/parent relationships. By conforming to the requirements of governance, school personnel may inadvertently become caught up with a contradiction within communication systems that apparently does not consider the effect of such communications on teachers or on parents, yet satisfies matters of compliance.

Information systems in schools may work against the encouragement of productive parent involvement. School records not only take account of demographic information, they contain personalised notes from teachers in respect of family background, and current interaction practices with home. Such records may have the effect of building impressions of parents within teachers before they have had any contact with parents themselves. Fiona describes the sources of information about student demographic in her school. She says 'you talk to last year's teacher, or you talk to the principal or your colleagues about the children. Quite often, you'll get a note next to someone saying, maybe not a good relationship with home, or behaviour problems, or something like that. There's a lot of information that gets passed down through the school'. Such information may be of marginal significance and compromise any ability of parents to themselves talk about the ways they might prefer to interact with school. Such records are seemingly valued by teachers, however. That is apparently because teachers rely on collegial support and insight in order to counter the negative effects of increased managerialism. Susan is concerned about an apparent lack of concern for teacher welfare: she says 'I feel like in the big pecking order, teachers are right down. We're just told what to do, and even if you have an opinion about different things, you're not really listened to. People's needs are put before the teachers; the teachers' needs are flat last.' Susan demonstrates that

teacher opinion is not required as it holds no value in administrative systems within the school.

Sixth anomaly: It seems to be accepted that parental involvement with the school will reduce over time. Teachers who teach children in years one and two may have a greater opportunity to see parents in the classroom, and to thereby experience the benefits of parent involvement. As children progress through school, teachers indicate there is a gradual withdrawal of parent involvement. Teachers suggest there tends to come a point when patterns of sporadic interaction have been so established that teachers in the senior years have limited opportunity to change those patterns.

Diminished involvement means that parents fall out of the purview of bio-political governance. This circumstance seemingly increases demands on the teacher anew, in order to reintegrate those parents back into the educational domain. Brenda talks about contacting parents in the evening. She says 'over half the parents in my class don't use email at all, but texting is definitely the way to go. They might be at work, or they might be busy with pre-schoolers up until eight at night, and then you can just send a text or give them a quick call'. Teachers are compelled to try to engage parents in any circumstance, despite knowing that their efforts may have limited results. However, decreased parental involvement could also be an indicator of financial insecurity or diminished emotional wellbeing or of a marginalised status within the local community in general.

Communications from school are underpinned by an undeclared imperative for the reduction of risk at the level of society in general. While purportedly initiated to address student underachievement and thereby addressing that risk, school communication systems that seek to draw parents into the pedagogical field may inadvertently reveal the vulnerabilities within that same community. Such vulnerabilities are unable to be appropriately addressed because the reach of education does not extend into the material conditions of community-life, despite possible claims to the contrary. While the school may be aware of adverse family



circumstances, data-sets developed within the school in association with its reporting functions do not require that such circumstances be recorded. Unacknowledged in formal systems of reporting, educational underachievement rests with the child, and not the societal issues that may have brought about any disposition for underachievement in the first place.

Across this set of anomalies, the school environment emerges as complex and contradictory. The school works as a system that purports to value parent involvement yet the system itself obscures that requirement. This is because teacher engagement strategies are not valued for the act of engagement itself, rather the 'worth' of the engagement is measured by within administrative logics as the perceived reduction of risk of underachievement for society-at-large. While ERO anticipates that teachers will engage parents of 'at risk' children, the anomalies highlighted here show that the work of the teacher in this pursuit meets many institutional obstacles. These obstacles, in concrete terms work to redirect the energies of teachers to meet administrative outputs and to reduce the risk of underachievement in society more generally. Teachers ultimately return their attention to the child because it is through the raising of student achievement that teacher effort is acknowledged in school administrative systems.

Consequently, teachers use a range of pedagogic techniques and practices to engage students in their learning. Using knowledge of the home systems of their wards, teachers temper the requirement to do homework to reduce the potential for additional family stressors, seemingly anticipating that this might make these home systems amenable to ongoing teacher contact. Teachers try to be welcoming to parents, yet, apparently despite this friendly approach, parent involvement gradually reduces as the child progresses through school. Teachers are seemingly thwarted in their efforts to engage parents by the very system in which they work. Teacher effort cannot attend to these institutional contradictions that simultaneous call for parent involvement, yet seemingly work against any possibility of that same involvement being actualised.

### **6.3 Declare the contradictions**

Nancy Fraser, while highlighting the contradictions in capital and care, says she cannot propose any resolution to those same contradictions. Indeed ‘tinkering with social policy’ cannot address the need for ‘deep structural transformation’ (Fraser 2016, p.117). To that end, perhaps declaring the contradictions that play out at a local level within education might provoke further discussion to evaluate the system as it currently stands. A series of observations can be seen to emerge from the anomalies identified by this research. It is to these observations that attention must be drawn in order to remind lay publics of the ways in which our lives are shaped by governance in the field of education. It may be that through the critique of such circumstances that the purposes of governance may be challenged if not changed.

It is necessary to declare the contradictions at work within the education system because it is the system itself that works against parent involvement. It is not the perceived deficiencies in parent capability, or any apparent lack of effort on the part of teachers that fails to bring parents into the pedagogical field. It is instead, the settings by which the system itself is put to work. Teacher/parent relationships have emerged as being fundamental to student achievement as a way of countering any perceived threat of ‘at risk’ groups to the population as a whole. The teacher-role within capitalism has been repurposed to attend to these apparent emergent difficulties. In the act of undertaking pedagogical practices that reflect the logic of bio-political governance, teachers must work towards bringing parents into the education field so that parents are within the realm of state observation. In the absence of any such correlative declaration being made by governance however, teachers seemingly become caught up within the role-capacity by which their purview now operates. Teachers seemingly work to engage parents under those same undeclared terms, albeit in the pursuit of raising student achievement.

Drawing attention to the ‘crisis of care’ within capitalist society, Fraser (2016, p.100) suggests that governance overuses the emotional capacities of workers. In the context of education, the overuse of the emotional capacities of teachers happens because of

a preference within capitalism for administrative and regulatory administration practices. Systems within education that purport to seek the contribution of parents in raising student achievement actually do not need that same assistance. Teachers are put to work to observe the families of their 'at-risk' wards. Teacher/parent relationships are a means by which governance can reach the private domain of the home environment. The emotional capacities of teachers serve to maintain the connection between home and school. However, if the home/school relationship is ultimately unsuccessful, institutional systems can continue in the absence of any such relationship. A series of observations can be made in that regard:

First observation: the system takes over. Anticipating that not all children will come to school 'ready to learn', teachers have at their disposal an array of remedial instruction initiatives that will assist the child and the parents to address any perceived deficit. Despite considerable effort to know their student as individuals, teachers must assess each child against performance markers. The education system unwittingly participates in a diminishing of student individuality as it seeks to measure that student against pre-set learning standards. Therefore, within school administrative systems students become known in relation to those same standards of comparison and are categorised accordingly. Again, despite teachers referring to the individual qualities that children have, these same qualities, while acknowledged at a local level within the school, are not recognised in official reporting systems. Bypassing those human capacities, the system perpetuates a disavowal of those same qualities that are required to sustain human relationships. This constitutes, in the terms used by Fraser a 'crisis tendency' within capitalism (2016, p.100). Governance, placing greater value on administration, yet unable to achieve those administrative outputs in the absence of teacher effort, allows the system to take over such that the internal contradictions fall from view.

Second observation: the school as an adjunct to governance must retain authority as a separate social field. Only by maintaining autonomy can the field of education be of use to the administrative requirements of governance. Any implication by the education sector to the contrary, is disingenuous. Drawing parents into the

educational space to bridge the gap between home and school works to keep parents in sight of administrative systems. Parents are not being invited into school to make a difference to the learning environment despite indications to the contrary. Rather parents are being invited into school because the school represents a social field in which the population-at-large may be observed. It is through these engagement practices as practices at the level of the school that populations can be monitored. The emotional capacities of teachers are put to work to build relationships with parents and to quietly appraise the home environment of the students. Teacher efforts in this pursuit provide an insight into those home environments, and do not necessarily result in the sharing of learning experience across home and school, despite a purported desire to the contrary.

Third observation: it does not matter if reluctant parents remain on the periphery. The school must work towards building capacity in the child by way of reducing the risk-to-society of the current generation. It is through the expertise of the teacher role that this generation will learn to integrate their desires with given sets of social expectations. Implied within the prevailing logics of governance, it may be to this output that the emotional capacities of teachers are best advanced. Teachers show an enormous capacity for empathy with parents of 'at risk' students, yet teachers know that their efforts to bring these parents into the educational space may not be achieved. The education system insists, however, that teachers must continue trying. The resultant effect for teachers is that a continual effort to engage parents may diminish the teachers' senses of self, as their efforts seemingly do not achieve the outcomes specified in the normative standards by which their student's achievements are measured. Seemingly having a marginal impact on parent engagement practices, teachers remain committed to their charges in the classroom environment.

Fourth observation: the teacher-role still cannot find a definitive purpose. This circumstance is consistent with all workers who participate in knowledge work. The teacher-role currently fulfils a myriad of duties commensurate with childcare, pastoral care, and instruction, as well as being an adjunct to bio-political governance. It should be unsurprising then that the teacher-role is characterised by contradictions when it

must find some form of middle ground between looking after the welfare of the child and looking after the welfare of the nation. Ultimately, however, it is to the learning achievements of the child that the teacher must focus attention, as it is to these results that governance looks to appraise school and teacher performance. By necessity, knowledge of home systems becomes dulled as teachers work to meet the requirements of school auditing practices. Knowledge of those same home systems, so encouraged by governance as a way to mitigate risk in populations in general, is ultimately of little significance within the reporting mechanisms on student achievement. 'At risk' groups, rather, are vulnerable groups. The emotional capacities of teachers become denied in this circumstance, as opportunities available to the teacher to build relationships, are undermined by a logic that encourages those same relationships in the first place.

Fifth observation: schools value data because governance functions through empirical data. Information systems at work in the school require that performance criteria be met. Addressing attendance and behaviour management issues speaks to the required-by-governance identification and reduction of risk at the level of society. A well-behaved child, who attends school regularly, is perceived to be less 'risky'. Taken as read in this way, data has the ability to conceal adverse home conditions because of those normative assumptions. While school systems gather the kind of data through which administrative systems function, data may be appraised differently to reveal many vulnerabilities at large within the community. However, it is apparent that governance is only concerned with groups, which appear to pose a threat to social stability. Governance shows little concern with matters outside of this remit. Capitalism works to make populations responsible for their own situations, therefore reducing possibilities for governance to intervene in the private lives of lay publics in general. Within the school, the emotional capacities of teachers put to work to identify 'at risk' families may in the end have had little consequence other than that initial identification. In this circumstance, how do teachers make sense of what they do?

Sixth observation: parents eventually stop coming to school. Teachers wonder why parent involvement with school gradually peters out. In the absence of empirical

evidence, it may be surmised that parents may be perceptive to the ways in which schools work to meet those same outputs of governance. Staying away may signal a disinclination to be measured and assessed by the system. Teachers, investing time and emotion in the pursuit of bringing parents into the pedagogical field, may at best make just a little difference anyway. Parents were once students, and as such know the types of socialisation and administrative processes at work within the school. Children must go to school. Parents know the types of experiences their children are likely to have. Despite the best effort of teachers to make school welcoming to parents, to acknowledge and minimise the adverse effects of schooling that parents may have experienced themselves, school avoidance may be the only recourse left to parents. Increased teacher effort, encouraged by governance in this pursuit, may in fact compound any tendency by parents to stay away. Consequently, the subtext, as yet undeclared in the logics of governance may already be known. The identification and minimisation of risk at the level of society, advanced as an adjunct to practices of teacher engagement are therefore ultimately incapable of reaching the home systems of vulnerable families.

These observations serve as a stark reminder that education requires a degree of social engineering to make an amenable and productive populace. Those involved within the field of education, faced with the impossibility of their work, know the contradictions to which Nancy Fraser refers. Teachers work to meet the demands of the job. This circumstance, at times means that teachers must direct their energies to meeting child-centred outcomes, rather than to the requirement that parents be brought into the pedagogical field. Despite any sympathies that teachers may have for family circumstances, teachers know that raising student achievement will be of greatest benefit to the system. Ultimately, teachers learn to play the game and meet the needs of the system in which they are now working.

#### **6.4 Implications for further research**

Relationships within the education system as it currently stands are conditional upon the parents of 'at risk' students doing 'the right thing'. While a tendency towards

productive home/school relationships is advanced as being beneficial to both child and family, the focus of governance primarily becomes only those 'at risk' families that are perceived to pose a threat to society-at-large. Teachers unwittingly become involved in matters of population observation. However, in the absence of parent involvement, the school works towards building student capacity as an independent learner. An investment of teacher effort in this pursuit is anticipated to prepare the child to be a responsible member of society. Governance cannot wait for parents to be involved; therefore, the system carries on in the absence of parent support. It seems that it does not matter whether parents are involved at all.

Nancy Fraser shows foresight in her revelations of the contradictions inherent within capitalist society. The systems currently embedded within governance require that workers invest of themselves in order that governance outputs are met. Fraser says that this requirement has the effect of eroding both the time and the self-worth of those workers who perform their roles in this manner. This research has shown that teachers, as an example of such workers experience similar conditions. Fraser warns that a propensity to value data instead of human relationships is damaging to social relationships. Indeed, the possibilities available for knowing people through the finely-meshed measurement of administrative systems undermine the very qualities necessary for understanding people within those same systems.

Fraser has revealed the contradictions within capitalist society, and a further set of apparent anomalies have been uncovered at the level of the school. It is appropriate to ask what is to be done with this information.

These findings cannot result in the presentation of recommendations for school practice or further research because the apparent anomalies revealed herein cannot be resolved by local solution making. Rather it should be stated that the systems put in place by the educational restructuring of the 1980s make it possible for schools to refute the existence of any such anomalies. Schools work to satisfy the requirements of governance. It has been established that each school, while expected to meet those

expectations, can be informed by different logics of local operation. The relationship any school has with its community rests upon those local logics. School success can be attributable to any number of variables. It becomes possible therefore to deny these anomalies if schools draw their populations from communities that are amenable-to-governance, and in which the home systems of families do not require the overt administrative oversight of the teacher.

Rather these findings suggest of the need, identified by Nancy Fraser to effect 'deep structural transformation' (2016, p.117). The implications of this research therefore should address a series of questions that point to a more fundamental set of concerns about the purpose and goals of education in a broader sense. An appropriate appraisal of these concerns must include the experience of teachers to that effect, as they now work to respond to the mechanisms of governance.

To whom these concerns may be raised is another matter. It may be assumed that matters effecting governance should be addressed to those with responsibilities for enacting logics of governance, however, these concerns may do well to be addressed to the population-at-large. Structural transformation may indeed come from grass roots activity. Nevertheless, any imperative to change the systems, which currently inform education, must involve professional and lay publics, as 'wholesale change' cannot be achieved from the contribution of one group alone. It may be the case that parents who experienced the effects of governance-heavy school practice might provide valuable insights to the long-term effects of such policies, and provoke valuable discussion about mechanisms of change.

To that end, this thesis concludes with a set of questions rather than answers. Firstly, how might education be organised differently to accommodate the unique qualities of each person? Secondly, in what ways can the persistence of class be mitigated in society? Finally, as educators, what role can teachers play in the restructuring of education? Should these questions be given thoughtful consideration, it may be possible to make changes to the ways in which education shapes our lives. Changes to



the organisation of education have the potential to affect alternative futures for all citizens of Aotearoa New Zealand.

## Chapter Seven-Conclusion

This enquiry responds to the ERO report *Educationally Powerful Connections with Parents and Whānau*. The report proposes that educational underachievement can be addressed by bringing parents of 'at risk' children into the pedagogical field thereby establishing remedial learning across home and school. While the report contains exemplars of forward-looking practice, and is informed by a narrative that advises on ways to improve school practice in this respect, the report fails to take account of the working lives of teachers or the lived experiences of parents. The purpose of this research therefore is to analyse the attempts by teachers to meet the requirements of governance with regard to the development of home/school relationships.

Theoretical concepts from the work of Michel Foucault have been used to inform the line of questioning put to the teachers. Specifically, the concepts of governmentality, bio-power, responsabilisation, and power/knowledge were used to interpret the data. Asking teachers to describe the types of student likely to be 'at risk' of educational underachievement reveals that children are identified by family background, and preparedness for starting school. Such knowledge informs the ways in which teachers are likely to approach and progress the home/school relationship.

Of significance for this work is the 'crisis of social reproduction' as discussed by Nancy Fraser (2016). Fraser says that workers within late capitalism experience an expropriation of their emotional capacities because their emotional energy is invested in meeting the demands of the job. This tendency, for Fraser, signals a circumstance in which workers cannot easily 'sustain social networks' (2016, p.116). It transpires that teachers as managed workers within late capitalism, and representative of such workers to which Fraser alludes, experience similar workplace conditions. Reflective of the output demands of bio-political governance, ERO wants teachers to establish 'successful working relationships' with the parents of educationally 'at risk' parents (Education Review Office 2015, p.5). However, teachers reveal that such parents can be difficult to reach. It seems that 'at-risk' parents respond to a friendly approach. Consequently, teachers 'pushed' by the demands of their job to meet institutional

expectations and performance indicators, unwittingly invest their emotional capacities in the student. Whilst teachers have empathy for adverse home circumstances they tend to have insufficient emotional reserves left to invest in reluctant parents.

Consequently, this thesis uncovered a range of subjectivity-effects for teachers. This thesis draws on literature that indicates that parents of children assessed as being 'at risk' of educational underachievement experience particular challenges that work to mediate interaction possibilities with the school. The emotional labour work of the teacher is put to work in addressing the risk seemingly posed to society and/or the economy by students who are at-risk of failing to achieve set educational norms. It also becomes apparent that the teacher-role is subject to increasing managerialist-effects at a local level within the school. Contingency management practices, so favoured by governance in late-modernity, work to destabilise the oft-times tentative relationships which teachers are required to develop with students' home-life. This is because teachers are obliged to engage with the home systems of their wards in any circumstance available to them. Managerialism therefore works against the realisation of successful parent engagement because managerialism undermines the potential relationship-making resources of managed workers. Managerialism recodes the emotional capacities of teachers into forms that can be easily accounted for in school administrative systems.

This thesis, through an exploration of teacher practice with parents of students 'at risk' of educational underachievement, suggests that institutional practices work against bringing parents into the pedagogical field. The theoretical framework of Michel Foucault used to interpret the data makes it possible to see the effects to governance as it plays out at a local level, specifically the effects of bio-political administration in respect of increasing managerialism within the school. In the sharing of their experiences, teachers allow others a glimpse of their working reality, and by association, the possibilities available to them for home/school interaction practices.

The research findings suggest that children 'at risk' of educational underachievement are likely to come from a poor and/or socially disadvantaged family environment in some respect, or be ill prepared to start school. Parents of children 'at risk' of educational underachievement may themselves have had a poor experience of school. Teachers find that this has implications for home/school interaction possibilities. While teachers are careful to shield their charges from adverse classroom situations, and focus on practices when a child first comes to school, which will enhance socialisation, cognitive, and motor skills, limited time is available to teachers for embedding such practices before formal processes of assessment begin.

Family background comes to the fore as children progress through the school. Cognisant of the oftentimes very difficult home situations that families can experience, teachers are inclined to provide limited homework if any, and focus on building social relationships with parents. In class, teachers work to build capacity in the student such that they become an independent learner. Again, teachers try to protect their charges from emotional distress that might arise where those children are aware that they are not achieving as per the norms against which they are being measured. It is within this climate and through the prevention of emerging situations in school that teachers become caught up in the contradictions of their professional-role.

National Standards were introduced in 2010 as a way of making clear to parents the educational achievement level of primary-aged children. What the policy did, however, was to introduce new terminology that signalled that the school, and, more particularly, the teacher should be responsible for addressing risk at the level of society. While the child would bear the marks of educational underachievement, the teacher would now contribute to the administration of the family unit, through bringing its adult members into the pedagogical field in order to raise student achievement. Children assessed as being 'at risk' would require remedial instruction that bridges the home and school environment.

National Standards as part of a wider set of population management and administrative practices, may in fact work against parent engagement. Indeed a set of anomalies identified by this research that relate to the crisis of care identified by Fraser, and that are embedded within the practices of school life, present a series of mixed messages to parents. Teachers work to promote independence in their student cohort. They tend to focus on in-school learning with students at-risk of underachievement in order to mitigate adverse home conditions. Teachers are sensitive to the needs of their students and show great empathy in the classroom environment in response to those same adverse home conditions. Likewise, teachers moderate interaction practices with parents of at-risk students for that same reason. However, it transpires that teachers, knowing that they must account for their actions find that meeting management outcome expectations becomes the focus for interaction. Strategic planning to meet those expectations may also work to compromise the home/school relationship by pushing parents away.

The school is a complex environment. The problems that exist in society come into school. This research shows that the school cannot address the effects of social disparity as they play out in the school at an individual level with at-risk students. Social policy that purports to raise student achievement has been ill considered in this respect. The introduction of National Standards, despite rhetoric to the contrary, cannot assist in the raising of student achievement for at-risk students. National Standards is a method of population management more than a mechanism by which advanced educational attainment may be achieved. National Standards instead works to make teachers, through the processes of governance, and through managerial observation, responsible for reducing risk at the level of society. It is through the induction of parents into the pedagogical field that the reduction of this risk might be anticipated. Responsible parents want their children to succeed. Reinforced by this thinking, educational underachievement unfortunately remains a private affair.

Of concern throughout this thesis has been the overuse of the emotional capacity of teachers as it becomes appropriated by capitalism as an adjunct to mechanisms of population management. Consistent with this model of educational administration,

such capacities of teachers are diminished within and through the audit culture now embedded within that same model. Teachers work in an increasingly intensified environment and are involved in work-related activities before school starts and after school closes. Teachers say that they cannot comment on such circumstances; it is expected that they do their job. Work practices such as the ones detailed in this thesis appear from the teachers' accounts to be unsustainable. It should be unacceptable that teachers, entrusted with the education of our children, should experience the futility of such contradictions.

This thesis located a series of contradictions that play out in the school. From those contradictions, a series of observations can be made. Firstly, the education system does not require parent support because teachers have access to an array of remedial instruction initiatives with which to address any perceived deficit in student capability. Secondly, the school must remain a separate social field if it is to respond in a manner conducive to the administrative requirements of governance, despite rhetoric to the contrary. Thirdly, the school works towards building capacity in the child to reduce the risk-to-society of educational underachievement. Fourthly, the role of the teacher lies in an ambiguous space and cannot be clearly defined, yet the role comprises the important capacities of attending to the needs of the next generation and the needs of the country. Fifthly, data systems are of the greatest value within the school as the school works to meet the administrative outputs of governance. Finally, parents, over time stop coming to school. In the absence of empirical evidence to the contrary it may be surmised that parents choose to stay away because they are familiar with the types of administrative processes at work in the school.

To that end, this thesis cannot make recommendations for school practice, or suggest areas that may benefit from further study. In light of these findings, the role of the state in the shaping of the futures of our young people has been firmly established. It must be to the social organisation of education that attention must be drawn. If, as Nancy Fraser (2016, p.117) contends, the only way to address the crisis tendency of capitalism is with 'deep structural transformation', then this endeavour requires the

contribution of all members of society, in which the purpose and goals of education in general must be addressed.

This project has demonstrated the contradictions inherent within a learning environment, whose internal administration responds to the broader logics of bio-political governance, namely the primary school. Those logics set in train a further set of contradictions at the level of grounded educational practice. Teachers must operate within a highly regulated school environment. Increased managerialism works to diminish self-efficacy for some teachers, whilst for others increased managerialism works to 'push' teachers into practices incompatible with initiating sustainable parent interaction over time. Whilst National Standards purports to alter educational outcomes with the early identification of educational underachievement, it transpires that 'at risk' children carry the effects of economic, material and social disadvantage. These characteristics cannot be reasonably addressed through educational policy that places extra pressures on family systems. While teachers show considerable empathy to 'at risk' children, and are pro-active with remedial education provision in class, parents of such students may fall out of view. Institutionalised practices are at risk therefore of becoming resigned to the existence of adverse family conditions.

Suggestions have been made here for further debate to enquire into these circumstances in greater depth. Indeed, it has been suggested, upon review of those further local contradictions identified in this research that the education system 'takes over' by way of addressing risk at the level of society. In such circumstances, it may not be of any great significance that reluctant-to-engage parents are brought into the pedagogical field. It has been shown that the system works independently of parent involvement to inculcate the desired behaviours and attributes within the child, such that future risk to society may be minimised. Teaching, as an adjunct to bio-political governance, is at risk of losing the human connection upon which it depends, but the system continues irrespective of this. Managerialism, rather than inviting parents to school may in fact work to push parents away, as teachers learn to play the game of meeting performance criteria at any cost. Finally, a call for societal change offers a promise of alternative futures in which education becomes a resource for community

empowerment. It is to this outcome that resources should be directed in order to benefit all citizens of Aotearoa New Zealand.



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## Appendix 1 – Information Sheet



**MASSEY UNIVERSITY**  
COLLEGE OF HUMANITIES  
AND SOCIAL SCIENCES  
TE KURA PŪKENGĀ TANGATA

Researcher: Christine McNeil

[christinemcneil@xtra.co.nz](mailto:christinemcneil@xtra.co.nz)

Tel 03 570 2055 or 021 107 3314

### ***Teacher Engagement Practices with Families of Primary Aged Students Categorised as At Risk of Educational Underachievement***

#### **Information Sheet**

My name is Christine McNeil. I am undertaking a research project on the interaction practices of teachers in respects of students who have been assessed as 'at risk' of educational underachievement. This research forms the basis of my Master's thesis in Sociology at Massey University.

The project involves talking with teachers about how interaction occurs between themselves and their parent cohort. I am particularly interested in the ways in which teachers engage with the families of students who have been assessed as well below, or below National Standard criteria, any challenges they encounter, and the ways in which future interaction strategies are informed by those experiences. If you would like to share the ways in which communication and interaction occurs between yourself and your parent cohort, I would be interested in talking to you about your experiences.

If you live in Marlborough, I can travel to speak to you in person. To enhance your feeling of comfort, the interview can take place at a time and place of your choosing. The interview should take no more than one hour of your time. The interview will be audio taped.

You will be able to view and comment on the transcript of your interview. You can make changes to the content of the transcript if you wish. On completion my thesis will be submitted to Massey University for marking. A copy of the thesis will be kept in the Massey University Library. At the end of the project, I will send you a copy of the research findings.

**Your rights as a participant:**

- If you decide to take part in my research your participation will remain anonymous
- During the interview you may decline to answer any question asked of you
- You may ask to have the tape recorder turned off at any stage during the interview
- When your interview is transcribed, all personal information will be removed in order that your identity cannot be ascertained
- Your transcription will be stored securely, and viewed only by myself, and my supervisors, Dr. Warwick Tie and Dr. Mary Murray
- You may withdraw yourself and any information you have provided from the study within three weeks of receiving and reviewing the transcribed interview
- The interview recording will be destroyed at the end of the project

If you have any questions at all about this research project please do not hesitate to contact myself, or my research supervisor Dr. Warwick Tie: School of People, Environment and Planning, Massey University, Albany Campus. [w.j.tie@massey.ac.nz](mailto:w.j.tie@massey.ac.nz)  
Tel: 0800 MASSEY ext: 43477

**Massey University Human Ethics Committee Approval Statement**

"This project has been evaluated by peer review and judged to be low risk. Consequently it has not been reviewed by one of the University's Human Ethics Committees. The researcher(s) named in this document are responsible for the ethical conduct of this research.

If you have any concerns about the conduct of this research that you want to raise with someone other than the researcher(s), please contact Dr Brian Finch, Director (Research Ethics), email [humanethics@massey.ac.nz](mailto:humanethics@massey.ac.nz). "

## Appendix 2 – Consent Form



**MASSEY UNIVERSITY**  
COLLEGE OF HUMANITIES  
AND SOCIAL SCIENCES  
TE KURA PŪKENGA TANGATA

### *Teacher Engagement Practices with Families of Primary Aged Students Categorised as At Risk of Educational Underachievement*

#### Participant Consent Form

Please consider the points below, then sign and date this consent form if you agree to the terms of reference.

I have read and understood the information sheet, and have had the details of the study explained to me. Any questions have been answered to my satisfaction, and I understand that I may ask further questions at any time before, during, or after the interview.

I agree to the interview being audio recorded.

I understand that this research has been authorised by Massey University.

I am aware that I can contact Dr. Warwick Tie or Massey University Human Ethics Department if I have any concerns that the researcher cannot address.

I am aware that I will receive a copy of the research findings at the end of the project.

I agree to participate in this study under the conditions outlined in the Information Sheet.

Signature \_\_\_\_\_ Date \_\_\_\_\_

Full Name- Printed \_\_\_\_\_

## Appendix 3 – Authority for the Release of Transcripts



**MASSEY UNIVERSITY**  
COLLEGE OF HUMANITIES  
AND SOCIAL SCIENCES  
TE KURA PŪKENGĀ TANGATA

### *Teacher Engagement Practices with Families of Primary Aged Students Categorised as At Risk of Educational Underachievement*

#### Authority for the release of Transcripts

I confirm that I have had the opportunity to read and amend the transcript of the interview conducted with me.

I agree that the edited transcript and extracts from this may be used in Christine McNeil's Master's Thesis.

Signature \_\_\_\_\_ Date \_\_\_\_\_

Full Name- Printed \_\_\_\_\_

## Appendix 4 – Interview Questions

1. What kinds of students are at risk of educational underachievement?
  - a. How did you learn to identify such students?
  - b. How are your insights into this group changing?
2. What kinds of strategies do you use to engage them in their learning?
  - a. How did you learn these strategies?
  - b. Are those strategies changing?
3. What does the term home/school partnership mean to you?
  - a. How did you learn to think about 'partnership' in that way?
  - b. How is your understanding changing?
4. What kinds of strategies do you use to engage parents whose children are 'at risk' of educational underachievement?
  - a. How did you learn those strategies?
  - b. How are those strategies changing?
5. What elements of school structure most affect your engagement with families of students 'at risk' of educational underachievement? (BoT, ERO, N. Standards, etc.)
  - a. How did you come to learn this?
  - b. How is your understanding changing?
6. What aspects of those families' lives most affect your ability to engage with them?
  - a. How did you come to learn this?
  - b. How is your understanding changing?