

## Procuring advantage in a competitive landscape

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### **Abstract**

*This article discusses the findings of one aspect of a larger research project which asks “What motivates parents to engage with their children’s schooling?” The New Zealand education system already encompasses and supports private schools, state integrated schools, special character schools, charter schools and public partnership schools along with state schools. This gives parents a myriad of options, and adds to the nimbus of competition and choice within the New Zealand education system. Emerging themes in this section of the research are viewed theoretically through a social capital lens and indicate that middle class parents are active participants in their children’s education for many disparate reasons. This article does not consider the drivers for parents to participate in children’s education in other demographics of society, nor does it include the voices of teachers or children. Knowingly or unknowingly the parents in this research seem to have bought into market driven notions of transparency and data and are seeking advantage for their children to quell their own anxiety about their children’s future prospects in a competitive society. The research uses grounded theory methodology to distil emerging themes from within and around open ended focus group interviews with fourteen parents.*

**Keywords:** *Parent engagement; children; middle class; school; competition; advantage; education; neo-liberal*

### **Introduction**

In my role as a primary school principal I acknowledge that parents engage with their children’s schooling in a variety of different ways for a variety of different reasons. Henderson and Mapp (2002) found that students whose families were engaged with the school had better attendance in school, improved educational outcomes, and had greater enrolment in tertiary education. Although similar studies exemplify the benefits of parent engagement in their children’s learning there is little clear evidence to suggest why parents do or do not choose to engage with schools. There is an apparent lack of parent voice in the literature and as such this research will attempt to find out what motivates parents to become involved in their child’s education by allowing parents to voice their opinions and tell their stories.

### **Context**

The concept of parents seeking to procure advantage or privilege for their children in this research is situated within the domain of neo-liberalism (see Chubb & Moe, 1990; Hayek, 1986) where the state constructs systems and policies that encourage individuals to be competitive and enterprising (Olssen, 1996). Neo-liberal values have been entrenched as guiding principles in education i.e., choice, competition, innovation, user-pays principles, efficiency and outsourcing, since the uptake of the global move towards New Right policies of markets and standardisation occurred in New Zealand. The Labour Government of the 1980s actioned this move by undertaking economic structural reforms through which the education system was decentralised in line with neo-liberal notions of small government and localised autonomy (Osborne & Gaebler, 1992). These reforms were much more ‘radical’ than attempted initially elsewhere in the world, and parents in New Zealand became the new players in the market economy policy of choice and competition. The parents interviewed as part of this research have participated in the educational system of performance standards and achievement

targets both as students and as parents in schools during the 35 years that economic ideologies of free markets and concomitant standardisation have overlaid educational policy and practice. It is within this audit culture of compliance and accountability that the middle class parents whom I interviewed have the knowledge and skills to investigate the best possible outcomes for their children by utilising such market mechanisms to work the system to their children's advantage (Horvat, Weininger & Lareau, 2003).

*A comment to situate the perceived intent of interviewed parents*

The interviewed parents are active in their children's education and in the daily organisation of their children's school. All of these parents recognised how busy and challenging the role of the teacher is and felt that helping in the classroom would benefit the teacher, their own children and all children. These parents are representative of the nucleus of parents who help in schools. Interviewed parents mentioned their role in the parent teacher association (PTA), fundraising committees, leading and organising school fairs, maintaining and organising of teacher resources, organising and helping with sports practices, attending school camps as parent helpers, making up the required adult to child ratio when taking groups of children off the school site and working within classrooms to support teaching and learning programmes. As a school principal I know how much schools rely on this parent support in order to provide safety, breadth and choice in curricular activities as well as providing the school with much needed additional funding to purchase extra equipment for the playground or classrooms. Principals and teachers value the work of such parents and the findings in this research are not intended to demean or criticise the intent of parents who help in schools.

**Methodology**

It is important to differentiate between methods and methodology as the method tasks and techniques – in this case, interviews and transcribing as well as document analysis – align with the chosen methodology, but are insufficient and incomplete to provide evidence of the soundness of the research approach and activities (Crotty, 1998). The grounded theory methodology used in this research is informed by a design process intent on constructing a core category from the research that makes sense of the data (Corbin & Strauss, 2008; Charmaz, 2006).

Grounded theory building (Glaser & Strauss, 1967) supports the examination of individual standpoints within complex, interconnected contexts. Real life experience is taken as a starting point that connects individual agents physically and emotionally to the structural, the social and the historical (Starr, 1999). Social contexts and even the physical aspects of a social organisation like a school will affect people's past and present realities. These are all inseparable from contextualised practice or from the historicity of the period (Ball, 1993). A grounded theory approach considers the inextricability of the macro, meso and micro, (Bronfenbrenner, 1979) such as, student academic achievement, family socio economic status and community and political influences. Grounded theory is essentially a way of thinking about and conceptualising the data and allows the research to follow and adapt to the data as it is gathered. The inductive nature of grounded theory allowed me to collect rich data about parents' actions as well as their preconceptions and reflections about engaging with schools. I looked at their responses along with information they provided on their life situations and wider social contexts. This iterative process of developing claims and interpretations is responsive to research situations and the multiple layers of meaning produced by the people in them.

Grounded theory uncovers the hidden tensions, advantages, relationships, and hierarchies that exist within the school communities. This is especially pertinent as I seek to understand the types of connections parents make, under what conditions, and the circumstances that lead to increased parental efficacy and agency in the school community. The grounded theory approach enabled me to follow questions that I didn't

originally consider and to follow tangents and ideas presented in the interviews with parents. This adaptability 'grounds' resultant theories in parents' views and experiences.

### **Method**

I interviewed 14 parents from three different types of school in Christchurch, New Zealand. One is a full primary school in a high socioeconomic demographic. The second is a contributing school in a mixed demographic area and the third is a contributing school in a low socioeconomic area. Parent participants self-referred, choosing to be part of the research after I had placed an information sheet in the school newsletter.

All of the families in this research had at least one parent working full time. There were two families who had one parent in a professional vocation and one family who had a parent in a managerial role. Two of the mothers did not work in paid employment and three of the mothers worked part time. One of the fathers commented that he was able (financially) to work reduced hours. There was one single working parent amongst the interviewed parents. The interviewed parents were aware that their ability to engage with their child's schooling was in some ways related to the economic make up of their household, which enabled them to either work part time or not at all, as well as the support that they received from their employer which enabled them to take time to attend school activities.

Contextual information was collected through open-ended collaboratively constructed interviews between the researcher and the participants in a focus group context. The semi-structured, open-ended nature of the interviews privileged participants' conversations and meaning-making around what motivates parents to engage in their children's education. It is the detail within these conversations and subsequent transcripts that provided a thick description (Geertz, 1973) and uncovered the rich data that is needed in order to undertake a significant investigation. The framework of these interviews provided opportunity for discussion, reflection and social support amongst participants (Dockrell, Lewis & Lindsay, 2000; Mutch 2005; Vaughn, Schumm & Singagub, 1996). The interviews were recorded using 'photo booth' Apple software to ensure that the researcher transcribed the data accurately as this gives both visual and auditory clarification. The sessions ranged from 40 minutes to one hour. Being mindful of trustworthiness of my research, issues of reliability and validity are addressed using "multiple perceptions to clarify meaning, verifying the repeatability of an observation or interpretation" in the data. (Stake, 2000, p. 443). Issues of reliability and validity are addressed using Guba and Lincoln's (1989) set of standards for establishing the 'trustworthiness' of data in qualitative research and participants were invited to view their recorded responses to ascertain if the transcripts reflected intended meaning.

### **Data analysis and interpretation**

After the conversations had been transcribed I began the process of 'naming and categorising' (Strauss and Corbin, 1990, p. 62), by looking for broad themes in the data which I labelled under headings (eg: academic success, parent voice, school culture). In grounded theory this is termed 'open coding' and describes the first step in interpreting the data collected. The next step in the process is termed 'axial coding' which makes "connections between a category and its sub-categories" (Strauss & Corbin, 1990, p. 97). During axial coding further themes and patterns emerge, some of which are obvious e.g., parent anxiety and others which are less obvious e.g., individualism.

In grounded theory, it is the level of explanation of the data that distinguishes it from other qualitative methods. Coding is not simply part of data analysis; "it is what transports researchers and their data from transcript to theory" (Walker & Myrick, 2006, p. 549). I then looked for similarities in the dimensions of the major themes which enabled me to start to focus on the core category of the research. The theme of 'competition' which this article attempts to expound is interrelated with other subsidiary categories and will eventually tell the story of the emerging theory.

## Findings

### *Parents seeking information*

Parent participants in this research study viewed their child's primary or elementary schooling years as providing important opportunities for the development of academic abilities which in turn would give their children more options for academic and social success later in life. Parents wanted to ensure success for their children both academically and socially and they wanted assurance that the school is supporting their child now and in the future.

*You know school is so important ... they only get one shot.* (Mother)

*I am at every assembly, I'm at every prize giving, at every sports event. They do not get the chance to do it again and I don't want to miss a minute.* (Mother)

The comment "not wanting to miss a minute" epitomises middle-class parenting practices that demand a lot of both parents and children. Middle-class parents gain great satisfaction in raising their children and seeing their accomplishments at school (Nelson, 2010) and it is through this acceptable and even admirable attribute that the need for constant presence in the lives of their children is construed.

Some parents wanted more information about what their child is learning in class so that they could have relevant conversations about school learning and have more of a focus when helping with homework. Parents' knowledge around their child's progress often elicits increased engagement in helping with schoolwork, especially if parents perceive that the child is having difficulty (Cooper, Lindsay & Nye, 2000; Dauber & Epstein, 1993; Pomerantz & Eaton, 2001).

Representative parent comments were:

*I think even academically as well ... you can see what are they doing in the classroom. Then – what do they need to work on at home?* (Mother)

*I think that I know so much about what's going on and any problems they [children] have, and all the teachers know me and they know that ... I want to help them at home. If there are any areas that I need to help them with, they know that I will follow through.* (Mother)

Even though parents gain information through newsletters, classroom blogs and teacher emails, parents still felt it was important to be present in classrooms and some parents are willing to commit to helping in the classroom on a regular or daily basis. These parents have the privileged knowledge that is only available to the parents who are "willing to physically and mentally immerse themselves in the goings-on of the school ... for the entitled-minded parent, this is the definition of the good mother" (Landeros, 2011, p. 254).

Consequently parents in this research study wanted to feel welcome in classrooms and wanted the freedom to look at what their child was working on in class, as well as wanting to look in their child's books. Representative comments included:

*I don't like a school that doesn't like me to interact with my child ... it makes me feel like they're hiding something, so I don't like that approach at all.* (Mother)

*I wasn't actually allowed to go in there and see what my children were doing. And even going up and looking at their books was a big "no no".* (Mother)

Most schools in New Zealand have an open door policy but it would be an expectation that parents arrange visits with teachers prior to turning up in the classroom. In the above situations the visits were not pre-planned but availability to classrooms was an expectation of parents.

Being actively and regularly involved in children's education requires the family to have the financial resources to support a stay at home or part time employed parent, and the level of involvement parents (usually mothers) invest often depends on the extent to which the household earnings enable them to be available (Griffith and Smith, 2005). Interviewed parents prioritised the ability to spend time with their children in their formative years ahead of monetary gain. Two parents who chose not to work full time said:

*It's a sacrifice you make ... not working, and we went without for many years ... I'd think, "ok we'll go without that but we'll be around for our kids more ... at home and at school."* (Mother)

*I've got enough money to not have to work full-time so I only work part time and that gives me time to spend with my family. That's why I can help out at school in my daughter's class.* (Father)

These comments indicate that parents who choose to stay at home to be more available for their children view this as a worthwhile sacrifice and highlights the importance that middle-class parents place on being available for their children. These comments are indicative of the centrality that children play in the lives of these parents, as middle-class parents gain great satisfaction in raising their children and seeing their accomplishments at school (Nelson, 2010).

#### **Parents taking on responsibility for children's learning**

Interviewed parents took responsibility to help their children make progress. One mother talked about how she felt it was necessary to prepare her child for school before he started in order to give him a learning advantage when he started school.

*I guess I thought for my kids ... he's starting school, OK let's learn to write your name before you go, and let's go over the alphabet. I taught them their alphabet and their sounds, so they went off and had a good head start.* (Mother)

All of the interviewed parents in this research were interested in what their child was learning and how their progress compared to others. Representative comments were:

*We had reading recovery with [Reading Recovery teacher] who was amazing. We knew she required a lot of extra support in her learning and unfortunately she still sits below in most things. Reading wise she's now up at level [with other students of a similar age] but pretty much everything else that's not art or anything artistic she's sitting below what the national standard is.* (Mother)

*I think because you go in [to school] and help [in the classroom] you see what the standard of [other children's] work is, and I want to make sure my kids are up there [to the standards of the other children]. I make sure that my kids are well behaved and that they're going to complete all their work to the highest standard.* (Mother)

Interviewed parents are willing to invest extra time and resources to ensure that their children are making progress. This willingness to take on the responsibility for their children's progress by providing extra tuition and coaching is evident in the following parent comments:

*I was giving him his own homework just trying to extend him with his times tables ... things like that, just to try and bring him to where I think should be up to speed.* (Mother)

*His teacher knew how much that we wanted to do anything we could [to help him improve] so these holidays she gave us a huge amount of work and books and things to take home and he's just making such huge improvements and finally he's starting to catch up.* (Mother)

The phrases “up to speed” and “starting to catch up” in the above comments denote a common desire for their children to at least sit within the “average” field. Parents seem to value the notion of the theoretical average and as such want to ensure that their child is present in the mean of the “bell curve,” (the distribution of scores that resembles, when graphed, the outline of a bell – i.e., a small percentage of students performing well, most performing average, and a small percentage performing poorly). In New Zealand the ongoing use of norm-referenced tests like Progressive Achievement Tests (PAT) and Assessment Tools for Teaching and Learning (AsTTle), which are specifically designed to rank test takers on a “bell curve,” continues to heighten parental sensitivity about scores and rankings and whether their child is sitting within the average band of achievement or above or below.

### *Seeking advantage*

These parents (not all of them in high socioeconomic school communities) are willing to spend money to augment the work of schools and to give their child an advantage. After-school tuition, language lessons and music lessons were all mentioned within the parent conversations. Parents in this research alluded to the extra curricula activities that their children were involved in both in the school day and out of school hours. Representative comments were:

*The parents are busy too ... busy being busy. Our classic week is you know ... there's swimming, there's soccer, there's cricket, judo, cubs. Our kids are busy, but it's worth it. I want to do it [provide extra curricula learning] no matter how much, [it costs] you just expect to be busy.*  
(Father)

Even though schools have music lessons, sports practices, and a variety of cultural extra curricula activities as part of their day it seems that parents are willing to introduce more extra learning for their children and in doing so overfill any spare time the children may have. The comment below not only indicates how busy parents are but also how busy children are in extra afternoon and evening activities:

*We are out three nights a week [with extra curricula activities], like today I've got swimming at 3.30, basketball at 5pm and karate at 6.15 and so [child] won't be home until eight.* (Mother)

There is little evidence to suggest that participation in extra curricula activities affects student educational outcomes either positively or negatively (Shulruf & Wang, 2013), but this busy timetable of after school extra curricula events is common. Interviewed parents indicated that they regard these extra learning experiences as a valuable investment in their children's learning regardless of the cost and time incurred. One parent commented about the amount of homework work that his daughter was given after her language tuition in the weekend, he said:

*My daughter goes to (language) school in the weekend so she has like a lot of (language) school homework which is pretty full on.* (Father)

This child goes to school in the weekend and has a lot of homework associated with the weekend school. This research did not gather student voice but it would be worthwhile to gather the opinions of children in relation to this schedule of extra learning experiences.

### *Comparison and competition*

Parents (especially mothers) talked a lot about their children's cognitive skills in relation to the stages and levels in the curriculum. Furthermore, most interviewed parents were well informed about their children's maths levels, reading ages and writing stages. For example, parents said:

*My daughter is almost halfway through year six and she's ten and a half and she's reading at 13 and a half and she's got that comprehension and understanding of what she's reading.* (Mother)

*I know where she's at in reading and what level she's at. I know what maths level she's at because I've had so many children go through that I know what level she's at and what she's doing. There are certain things that don't worry me like ... writing, because I know the expectations are way too high. (Mother)*

The comment above implies that this parent knows a lot about the curriculum context and levels and she is making her own assessment about what is actually important and what is not. Having knowledge about the curriculum is one way that parents can deepen their understanding of assessments relating to learning contexts and this information may be used by the parents to advantage their child's progress. It also aligns with the notion of interventionism or smoothing the way forward by allowing her child not to have to work toward that particular writing standard thereby reducing stress for the child.

All parents were interested in the comparative information that applies to their child's achievement e.g., stage, grade or level. It seems that these parents have bought into the notion of 'standards' and 'rankings' and will put in efforts to get their child up to the age-based standard. Inferentially parents were proactive in asking about their child's progress and wanted to know if their children were not progressing cognitively as expected. One parent said:

*I can ask the teacher how she's doing without having to wait for those numbers and reports. I can actually ask the teacher and they can give me the informal answer [about daughter's progress] which often has a lot more insight than numbers. (Father)*

Parents are aware of the competitive nature of society and are willing to compete accordingly. One parent said:

*Well it's part of the irony is that there seems to be a lot of competition ... like making sure that your child is successful. You know, make sure you get this type of education or these types of toys. Whereas I want my child to have that edge over other children but I sort of work on that edge by spending time with the child as well as being concerned what happens for her at school. (Father)*

This parent has accepted that competition is a part of life, albeit middle-class life. His response is to increase advantages for his child by way of his input as a parent and furthermore his positional power as middle-class parent. Recognising what to do to secure an advantage for children in a competitive culture is part of the emotional and psychic response to class inequalities and awareness of social capital (Reay, 2005).

Comparing what different schools have to offer their child is another way that parents actively engage in the competitive nature of education. An example of this is the way parents visit schools before they enrol their child to "have a look around the school". Principals will often host these visits and have conversations with parents who ask what the school can offer them and their child. These may be parents who have a child just starting school and they will have looked at several schools within their community or it may be for a child who is already attending another school in the area and they are wanting change schools. Once they have the information they need, for example, any special programmes that the school offers, after school care facilities, homework policies or standardised school wide student achievement data to make any comparisons, they can then choose their preference. One of the parents in this research said:

*I went to [another school] just to have look around a while back, and there were some things I loved about their school but I wasn't convinced that it was right for my children so we are staying here [present school] for now. (Mother)*

The phrase "staying here for now" in the above quote implies that this parent will continue to look at other schools to see what suits her children in the future. It is this drive for the best school which will add the

most value for individual children that supports the market economy model of choice and competition within education

Parental choice and the idea that one school can meet the needs of a child better than another has led to over-subscribed schools and those with declining rolls. In this competitive environment schools are needing to promote and market themselves in order to catch parents' attention, for example glossy brochures and school websites which display electronic artefacts of student's work, student blogs and links to school policy. Many schools are now dependent on marketing themselves to maintain a market share (Edirisooriya, 2009).

### *Children's happiness at school*

Although the interviewed parents are generally interested in their children's academic progress there are also emotional motivations for parents to engage with schools. Parental concern about their child's emotional well-being at school is well recognised in literature, albeit intertwined with academic concerns and motivations to engage (see for example, Lareau, 2003; Lawrence-Lightfoot, 2003; McCarthy & Kirkpatrick, 2005; Stearns, 2003). Ensuring that their children are emotionally safe and happy at school is a common factor in parents' motivation to engage with their children's schooling. All parents want their children to be happy but in some cases this may be more about parental peace of mind than for the child to enjoy school in a happy state of mind. This parental mindset and practice of emotional safeguarding (Warner, 2010) can be indicative of the parents' own emotional state, which can provide justification and focus for middle and upper-class parents to engage in children's education (Reay, 2000; Gillies, 2006).

For some parents, the motivation to be at school, seeing their children are happy and enjoying that experience may in fact be the driver for the parental engagement. The importance of affectional bonds between children and a primary caregiver is situated in attachment theory (Bowlby, 1982) (see also Moss, Rousseau, Parent, St-Laurent & Saintonge, 1998; Moss, Cyr & Dubois-Comtois, 2004), which affects individuals across their life span and across generations. Attachment theory may have some bearing on the need that parents have to see their children at school and the obvious separation anxiety that is evident from among the parents of New Entrant students (first year at school in New Zealand) when they have to leave their children at school. To illustrate the difficulty that some parents have when leaving their children, the mother of a New Entrant school student said:

*As a Mum part of me wants to be there [at school] all the time. I've heard them [teachers] say "it's great if you can drop and run, and you want them to be independent" but it breaks my heart to think of just dropping him off. (Mother)*

The following comment illustrates the importance that this parent attached to her child feeling happy and confident at school:

*That's what I noticed when I first went to visit the school ... it does have a really good feel about it and it's a smaller school, about 250 [pupils], which I liked. I don't want my child to feel like he will get lost at school, it's important that he feels confident and happy going there. (Mother)*

Whilst parents want their child to be happy, sometimes this may be more about parental peace of mind than about the happiness of the child in enjoying school. The interviewed parents seemed to take on responsibility for ensuring that their child was happy by providing inferred needs (Noddings, 2003), which are imposed on children by adults, often to justify the adults' sense of need and conviction for example, parental presence in the classroom. It is important to consider that caring for children's needs always entails an element of distance, letting go and trust so that children can develop their own schema of self-management and problem solving and not become overly dependent on the care and interventions of parents in the school context (Hoagland, 1991).

## Discussion

### *Social capital*

Since the 19th century, school relationships have been based on the social control and surveillance of students (Foucault, 1977; Giddens, 1984). Twenty first century bureaucracy, markets and data driven escalating targets still demand and accept mutual surveillance through strong partnerships between teachers and parents: i.e., “Parents monitor teachers, and teachers monitor parents to monitor the pupils” (Crozier, 1998, p. 128). In this “New Public Management” (Hartley, 2007), parent engagement and partnership has become the lateral energy that sustains top down government demands and performance standards (Hargreaves & Shirley, 2009) and provides parents with a platform to advocate for their children. The parents in this research are engaging with their children’s schooling by overseeing, managing and intervening in their child’s experiences while co-constructing their identity as a “good parent” (Pillet-Shore, 2015).

The interviewed parents in this research study understood the benefits of their own social capital, (Bourdieu, 1986) and are using their social, economic and cultural capital to their advantage, especially within the educational system. Knowing how to access and connect with services and support, as well as having incomes within the middle class wage and salary brackets mean that these parents have perceived control over the resources (for example: transport, ability to take time off work, being a stay at home parent, support from a like-minded peer group, and confidence to approach teachers) that enable them to engage in their children’s education (Bracke & Corts, 2012; Hornby & Lafaele, 2011).

Although the reasons that parents engage with their children’s schooling appear to be driven by notions of partnership with the school and support for their children, these interactions were advantageous for parents in other discrete ways. For example, when parents engage with teachers about their child’s learning and promulgate their preference for extra and personalised work for their child, this makes them better equipped to assist their children in their school-related activities and as such builds their own social capital. It is this type of mutually advantageous social cooperation which is embedded within closely tied networks of individuals and organisations that the parents in this research regularly participate in (Sarason, 1995; Putnam, 2000).

### *Parents taking on responsibility for children’s learning*

Interviewed parents seem intent on taking on the responsibility for their child’s happiness, and success, and will act accordingly if they fear that their children are not successful and happy at school. Having parents intervene to smooth the way for children to decrease their anxiety in challenging situations will be detrimental to children’s development around resilience and the ability to problem solve and develop learning dispositions and competencies for life long learning. Critical thinking and problem solving, character education, creative thinking, citizenship, collaboration, and communication are important skills for learners in the 21st century (Fullan & Langworthy, 2013), and many western education systems have introduced similar competencies over the decades to define new learning goals (see for example, initiatives such as the EU Key Competency Framework; The International Society for Technology in Education’s NETS framework; and in New Zealand the 2009 curriculum focus on the “key competencies”). This highlights the importance of educating parents around the necessity for children to face challenges in order to enhance learning. When learning is a challenge, children may feel confused and frustrated, but it is in this place of discomfort and conflict that children can construct meaning and clarity out of basic understandings of a concept (Hattie, 2009; Nottingham, 2013). More importantly, children can learn to be risk takers, while developing resilience, persistence and self regulation as they learn from their mistakes. Consequently, when parents intervene to remove any discomfort or conflict that the child is experiencing as part of their learning process, they may be depriving their children of the opportunity to become independent self regulated learners.

***Parental anxiety***

Parental anxiety about their children's progress is part of the worryment of the "anxious rather than complacent and comfortable" middle class (Roberts, 2001, p. 162), and as such parents are seeking advantage for their children by attending to the quality of the education that schools are providing. The interviewed parents view education as an instrument to prepare their children for the job market (Wolf, 2002), and there is anxiety and uncertainty about how their children will measure up against others in the competitive and uncertain job market that will be their children's future. Increasing parental anxiety conjoined with an increasing global focus on standardised testing results and the publication of learning and achievement information e.g., National Standards in New Zealand, the Annual Yearly Progress reports (AYP) in the United States and the National Assessment Programme in Literacy and Numeracy (NAPLAN) in Australia, impel parents to focus on academic results and where their child will fit in educational rankings. Having access to their children's work in the classroom is one way that parents seek assurance that their children are making progress and that the teacher is providing a suitable learning programme to enable this. Research indicates that teachers rank the handling of parents as one of the most difficult aspects of their role (Gibbs, 2005; Keyes, 2002; Miretzky, 2004) and while parents wanting to see the work that their child is doing in their books at school may seem reasonable, this can be overwhelming for teachers when there are 10 to 15 parents in the classroom before school starts, looking in books and asking questions of the child and the teachers.

***School choice***

My overarching research question "What motivates parents to engage in their children's schooling?" uncovered a variety of themes including emotional safeguarding, individualism, parent voice, school culture and relationships with teachers. All of them contribute to this theme around competition and comparison. Parents are attempting to secure the best possible opportunities for their children to learn and this extends to wanting the right type of teacher to connect with their child's unique personality and the right type of school with a learning culture where they perceive their child will make progress.

The education landscape is competitive and some schools feel they have no alternative but to clarify and highlight their 'point of difference' through branding, which fuels competition between schools and gives parents more information on which to base their choices. It is this type of information along with school performance data that enables parents to make comparisons with other schools in line with the neo-liberal policy mantra of choice, competition, consumer power and sovereign individualism (Chubb & Moe, 1990; Hayek, 1979).

For some parents (especially mothers), seeking advantage for their children is a full-time endeavour that must show results and as such middle class parents are positioning themselves in the hierarchy of the school for the good of their child. Parents working to ensure success for their children enables schools to function at a competitive level, which in turn maintains the class structure of the community (Griffith & Smith 2005). Individual student achievement is of great interest to parents particularly mothers, and seems to be of value as a visible factor of good parenting, both in terms of school expectations as well as those of other mothers (Griffith & Smith 2005). The success of the child reflects the parents' own hard work investment, love and care beyond the realm of school (Smrekar & Cohen-Vogel 2001). In a competitive society, care is regarded as a private good and to care for one's child is to make sure they have a competitive edge against other children (Tronto, 2002).

**Conclusions and recommendations*****Lack of trust***

An economic approach to education which includes the dimensions of marketisation, privatisation and evaluative accountability for educational practice (Apple, 2001; Ranson, 2003) has instigated conflict between 'purchasers', 'funders' and 'providers' in the education landscape by encouraging competition and differentiation between

state schools (Starr, 1999). This approach has resulted in a culture of accountability and loss of collective responsibility, cooperation, social justice and trust (Codd, 2005). As educational leaders we need to look outside the process of economisation and reconfigure relationships between ‘purchasers’, ‘funders’ and ‘providers’ for public good and for the future of partnerships between home and school contexts.

### ***Parents exercising choice and control***

The premise that parents can choose schools and then attempt to configure the school context, through interventions based on emotional or academic concerns for their children, highlights the difficulties that schools have when trying to accommodate parents whilst balancing curriculum requirements (Lareau, 2003). Parents in this research expect to have free access to classrooms especially before school, but for many teachers especially young teachers or those new in their career this seems as if parents are checking up on the work of the teacher. This highlights a need in professional practice teacher programmes to help equip teachers with strategies to cope with parents’ need for evidence. Much like the lack of formal parent engagement policies in schools, teacher pre-service courses in New Zealand do not have specific modules or training blocks specifically designed to develop teachers’ strategies around engaging with the parent community and this only adds to the rhetoric of parental engagement (Hornby & Lafaele, 2011) in New Zealand schools.

### ***The complex role of leadership***

Principals’ daily management of school and leadership of teachers occurs on the finely balanced tightrope between anxious and entitled minded parents and supporting the professionalism and morale of their teachers. Over the 2015-16 year there has been an unprecedented number of primary school principals leaving their positions in my local area, either for early retirement or moving out of school leadership completely. This is predictable considering the ongoing pressures of individualism, competition and parental entitlement that principals are expected to respond to and resolve so that all parties are satisfied.

### ***Recommendations***

#### ***1. More opportunities to inform and educate parents***

Parents want more information to assure them that their child is progressing and the school is providing a suitable curriculum. It seems reasonable to provide parents with opportunities to understand the teaching and learning programmes and the overall strategic direction that the school is moving in. Schools in New Zealand have to make their charters a public document and their annual plans within these will outline aspects of teaching practices and programmes for learning. From my research it seems that parents need to engage with school leaders and teachers in more of a reciprocal forum in order to give opportunity for questions and feedback. These opportunities need to be more than the traditional “meet the teacher” at the beginning of the year and the learning conferences that teachers, children and parents attend once or twice a year. Opportunities to inform and educate parents about what is happening at school need to be ongoing throughout the year relating to new learning contexts and systems as they arise. When schools willingly and regularly share information that is tailored to meet parental interests then there will be more of an opportunity to develop trusting relationships between schools, teachers and the parent community. Therefore, purposefully planning to provide learning platforms that involve parents in the school, with an expectation that both parties engage to develop shared understandings between parents and schools, is one way to reconfigure relationships between ‘purchasers’ and ‘providers’ for the future.

#### ***2. Eliminating competition between schools***

In some ways school zones (in New Zealand these are agreed catchment areas for school populations) limit the school choices that parents have, although overlapping zones provide several school choices in some situations.

As a school principal I work with six other nearby principals in a cluster which defines a shared notion of good practice across all seven schools, and we provide opportunities for professional development contexts where all of our teachers work together. This ensures that the quality of education in our area of the city is consistent across schools, which goes in some way to stop parents “school hopping” within the local area and empowers principals to direct parents back to their school to work to solve any problems if they attempt to enrol in another school in the cluster. In this model all principals need to be totally committed to the good of the wider community and spend time in each other’s schools supporting and celebrating student success, ahead of solely focusing on the direction of their own schools. Finally, all principals in our cluster are equal, there is no hierarchy, no lead principal and as such we don’t fit into the current government model of a the Community of Learning (CoL) which financially rewards a lead principal to work across schools. Parents in our area know that all of the principals work together for the common good and they also know that the programmes available in any one of the seven schools are being run as programmes in all of the schools in the cluster. By collaborating to strengthen our cluster and align our schools, comparison (apart from surface features like environment) becomes less important when choosing a school.

### *3. Adequately resourcing all schools*

To encourage parents to go to their local school the government needs to focus on ensuring that all schools are well resourced, that incoming teachers have high standards to meet for acceptance into teacher training programmes, and that there is suitable remuneration in line with other professional vocations in order to retain quality teachers in schools. In this way principals and teachers will feel more secure in the direction that public education is heading and working together with other schools can be a powerful reality instead of having to create a point of difference to attract more students away from other schools in the local area.

### *4. Supporting principals to lead*

Supporting principals to cope with the pressures and worries of school management, resources and pressure from parents is essential if schools are to be led by skilled leaders who are not afraid to bring about change and address societal issues, such as equality and access to resources, marginalisation and poverty. Principals are in need of a supporting apolitical body enabling them to lead morally and ethically whilst they are charged with working within educational policies that hang on economic frameworks and foster individualism and entitlement within their school communities. Pressure from parents is constant but in some situations this can become highly emotive and move into a public arena and unfortunately when parents show dissatisfaction with a school it is typical for the media to highlight the plight of the parent and to further demean the reputation of the school and the principal. In these situations, principals need someone to protect them and support them as very few are able to weather the ongoing vitriol that often accompanies ongoing parental complaints, let alone trial by media. There is no one recommendation that will change the burden of school leadership, but working to educate parents and resourcing all schools to meet the actual needs of their students and communities will temper the need for constant comparison and competition between schools. These changes are systemic and as such need to start within the hearts and minds of all parties in the educational system – school leaders, teachers and parents as well as politicians.

### **Author’s final comment**

There has been no opportunity to gather student voice in this section of the research or in the wider study, and as student agency is an important feature of 21 century learning contexts, attempting to understand how students feel about their position in the current educational landscape would be an appropriate direction for further research.

This was a small study in predominately middle class contexts in Christchurch New Zealand. At this stage of my research, the emerging findings cannot be applied to all elementary school settings, even in New Zealand. This research may eventually have a place within the grand narrative of power and control within a gendered, homogenous capitalistic society.

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