

**“SHE DOESN’T CHOOSE TO DO WELL”: AN EXAMINATION OF
THE DISCURSIVE CONSTITUTION OF ACADEMIC
UNDERACHIEVEMENT.**

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ABSTRACT

This thesis troubles current taken-for-granted hegemonic understandings of academic ‘underachievement’ by considering the complex processes that constitute primary school students’ academic subjectivities. It employs post-structuralist concepts of discourse, subjectivity, agency and positioning theory to examine the conditions under which discursive power acts to make the ‘underachieving’ student possible. In addition, this thesis examines how the research participants account for and negotiate their positioning as underachieving students. The concept of intersectionality is deployed to examine the complex ways in which the categories gender, ethnicity and social class play out in the discursive constitution of the underachieving student within the New Zealand context.

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with six students, aged 11 to 12 years, their parents/caregivers and their classroom teacher. Discourse analysis of the interview data examined students’ experiences of academic underachievement and the ways in which these are shaped by various social forces. The analysis was aimed at troubling current conceptualisations of academic underachievement as the ‘way things are’.

This thesis presents three data chapters. Each of the data chapters examines a different aspect of how students become discursively constituted as underachieving and its effects. Three themes emerged from the analysis. The first theme is that the normalising gaze of institutional discursive practices are implicated in the disciplinary techniques of testing, ranking, and streaming. The effects of these practices manifested in the students’ narratives. The second theme to emerge from the analysis is the complex and situational ways in which social categories play out in the discursive constitution of the underachieving student.

Neoliberal discourses of ‘responsibilisation’ and ‘choice’ are mobilised by the adults in positions of power (i.e., classroom teacher and parents) in relation to the social categories of ethnicity, gender and social class, to position underachieving students outside of

hegemonic discourses of what it means to be a ‘good’ student. The third theme relates to the complex and contradictory ways in which power relations work in relation to social categories and the discursively constituted subject. The power relations between middle class parents and the schooling system works to ensure that their children experience academic success goes unrecognised as well as the ‘emotional work’ undertaken by the families of students who have been discursively constituted as underachieving.

This thesis therefore destabilises the taken-for-grantedness of hegemonic explanations for underachievement by asking students to account for their experience of being positioned as underachieving. Moreover, it troubles the taken-for-grantedness of the normalising gaze and its effects as well as the contradictory ways in which power relations work in relation to social categories and the discursively constituted subject. The study offers scope for policy makers and practitioners within the New Zealand context to consider the effects on students and their families who have been discursively constituted as underachieving.

PUBLICATION AND PRESENTATION

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STATEMENT OF ORIGINALITY

The thesis contains no material which has been accepted for the award of any other degree or diploma in any university or other tertiary institution and, to the best of my knowledge and belief, contains no material previously published or written by another person, except where due reference has been made in the text. I give consent to the final version of my thesis being made available worldwide when deposited in the University's Digital Repository, subject to the provisions of the Copyright Act 1968.

Signed: _____

(Matthew Wilson-Wheeler)

Date: _____

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CHAPTER ONE

HOW IS THE UNDERACHIEVING STUDENT SPOKEN INTO EXISTENCE?

Introduction

The term ‘underachievement’¹ is ubiquitous in modern educational discourse and is a source of professional, government and public concern throughout the West, including New Zealand. Concern about academic underachievement and its long term impact upon the economy and employment has promulgated a ‘crisis narrative’ of underachievement which has inflected educational policy in Western governments. For example, in the United States, policies such as *A Nation at Risk* in the early 1980s set the stage for reforms for the more ‘cost-effective’ delivery of educational services within the public schooling sector and increased ‘accountability’ for educators charged with its delivery (Carlson, 2007). Variations of the same theme have informed subsequent policies such as *Years of Promise* in the mid-1990s and *No Child Left Behind* in the early twenty first century (Negru, 2013). The neoliberal themes of accountability and responsibility which have informed these policies have migrated and informed the educational policies of other Western countries including the United Kingdom, Australia and New Zealand.

Despite the significant body of literature that the issue of academic underachievement has generated since early in the twentieth century, there remains no consensus on how to conceptualise, define, identify or address student underachievement, thereby adding to its complexity. For example, psychological constructs of underachievement invoke low IQ, low motivation, low effort and low aspirations as explanations for students who fail to achieve their ‘potential’ (Wrigley, 2014) while sociological explanations on the other hand direct

¹ I have scored the term ‘underachievement’ to denote the problematic and contested nature of its conceptualisation.

their focus to cultural, socio-economic and gender differences in educational attainment. According to Wrigley (2014) while psychological explanations pathologise the underachieving student for her or his supposed deficits, sociological explanations homogenise underachievement to particular groups of students based upon cultural, socio-economic or gender differences. What these explanations share in common, however, is a tendency to ‘blame the victim’ (and/or their families) for their underachievement. Moreover, according to these normative discourses of underachievement, students who do not do well academically are only offered one way to exist, that is, as an underachiever. As Wrigley (2014) notes, ‘students become simply bundles of pathologies expressed through categorical labels’ (p.198).

This thesis aims to destabilise the taken-for-granted assumptions underpinning normative psychological and sociological explanations discourses and practices relating to academic underachievement (for example, simply as a ‘lack of effort’ problem, a ‘family’ problem or a ‘gender’ issue) by illuminating how students’ subjectivities are explicitly and implicitly constituted outside of normative educational discourses. In other words, rather than aiming to reconceptualise the term ‘underachievement’, this thesis aims to make visible the discursive processes at play that make the underachieving achieving student possible.

The Study and Research Questions

As noted above, governments throughout the Western World have mobilised neoliberal policies of accountability in order to close the so-called ‘achievement gap’. A key feature of these policies has been the implementation of high stakes testing initiatives where the measurement of academic achievement is currently more intense than ever. According to the neoliberal logic which informs these policies, by making school principals and teachers more accountable, teachers will work harder resulting in improved student achievement.

However, while educational reforms and initiatives have ostensibly been designed to address the inequities in student achievement, the standardization of curriculum and high stakes assessment practices have been found to exacerbate these inequities (Caraballo, 2011).

Within the New Zealand context, the relatively recent introduction of National Standards in New Zealand where differences in student achievement are measured by standardised test scores, has raised questions of why students in similar educational contexts perform better than others and whose interests are being served by standardised testing (Thrupp, 2013).

A great deal of the existing literature regarding the effects of such measurement relates to the underachievement of particular groups of students, namely students from particular social classes, or from particular ethnic groups or from groups of boys. For example, reporting on some achievement indicators continues to point to differential academic outcomes for girls and boys particularly in literacy, prompting a great deal of debate (much of which has been media initiated) regarding the causes of boys' underachievement and ways in which it might be addressed (Lahelma, 2014). As a result, the discourse of 'failing boys' as a gender issue has set boys against girls as if education is an academic wrestling match. However, the 'media-initiated discourse' on boys' underachievement has resulted in ineffective and at best unsustainable changes in educational policy and practice (Lahelma, 2014). Moreover, there is growing recognition that the focus on 'minor' differences in achievement between girls and boys has obfuscated more important differences such as those based upon ethnicity and social background (e.g., Driessen & van Langen, 2013; Gilborn & Mirza, 2000; Skelton, Francis, & Valkanova, 2007). For example, there is a tendency for research to frame the underachievement of boys from working class and/or ethnic minority backgrounds as an issue of gender only (Lahelma, 2014). There has been recognition in both the local and international literature therefore that asking 'Which boys?' and 'Which girls?' are experiencing difficulty at school, offers more promise by

taking into account how ethnicity, social class and gender intersect in relation to underachievement. (e.g., Delamont, 1999; Gilbert & Gilbert, 1998; Teese, Davies, Charlton & Polesel, 1995; Martino & Pallotta-Chiarolli, 2003; Caraballo, 2011). Within the context of this thesis therefore I propose to develop a better understanding of the complex issues underpinning underachievement as a lived discursive construction by asking: *“How do the social categories ethnicity, social class and gender intersect in the lived experience of students positioned as underachieving, and how does this occur in relation to the operation of power?”*

With the notable exception of Jones (1993), research that draws on students’ voices in relation to underachievement is limited within the New Zealand context. As such the production and experience of students’ educational subjectivities vis-à-vis academic underachievement has been rendered largely invisible. In terms of this research project therefore, I will foreground the gendered, cultural and classed practices that attend current discourses of academic underachievement. In particular I aim to destabilise the hegemonic discourses of academic underachievement that reproduce and normalise hegemonic neoliberal practices. I will examine in detail the complexity of subjectivities of students from diverse backgrounds with particular attention to disrupting the often simplistic (and deficit) explanations and solutions for underachievement currently preferred by policy makers and practitioners.

The overarching questions for this project are:

1. How do students who indicate that they are ‘not doing well’ academically account for and negotiate their positioning and what are the discursive practices that make the underachieving student possible?
2. How are students’ underachieving subjectivities produced and sustained in relation to the operation of power and what are its effects?

3. How do operations of power intersect with ethnicity, social class and gender to produce the achieving/underachieving binary?
4. How do parents and the classroom teacher position themselves and students in relation to normative discourses of underachievement?

This research project engages a post-structural theorisation of discourse, subjectivity, agency and positioning theory in addition to Foucault's theorisation of power/knowledge to explore the complexity of students' academic identities and in particular, to examine the discursive practices that make particular subject positions available. Central to post-structuralist thought is a rejection of the notion of a universal and absolute truth to explain complex social phenomena as well as the notion of a 'universal human subject' (Parkes, Gore & Amosa, 2010). Thus, in its rejection of the notion of the static and unchanging 'universal human subject', post-structuralist analysis is concerned with how the subject is discursively constituted and reconstituted in a 'web of social practices, discourses and subjectivity' (Henriques, 1984, p.117) within a specific social and temporal context. That is, discourses are not simply a coherent set of statements that are waiting to be 'taken up' by the subject or imposed on individuals, as discourse "can be both an instrument and an effect of power" where power operates to make some discourses inclusive while others may exclude (Foucault, 1977, p.100). This is significant in Foucault's conceptualisation of 'power-knowledge' relations'. Rather than viewing knowledge as necessarily making people more powerful, Foucault argued that knowledge produces particular kinds of people, that 'power produces knowledge' by constituting subjectivities (Foucault, 1977, p.27). For Foucault therefore, it is through the operation of competing discourses within these power relations that the subject is constructed. This thesis will therefore trouble the current normalised, decontextualised and ahistorical discourses on academic underachievement by mobilising

Foucault's theorisation of power/knowledge to make visible the institutional structures and discursive practices that make the underachieving student possible.

A particularly important aspect of post-structuralist thinking is that discourses operate beyond the linguistic, that is, discourses also operate at a physical, visceral and emotional level (Paechter, 2001). For example, the discourse of the 'good quiet girl' implies what is 'normal' or 'natural' behaviour for girls and controls the way in which girls use their bodies. Thus, in order to be seen as 'normal', a girl has to conform to the discourse's assumptions. Any deviation from these assumptions, for example being boisterous and active, may result in such girls being positioned as 'abnormal' (Paechter, 2001). According to Paechter (2001) post-structuralist thought has 'made a space for the discussion of the physical, visceral and emotional as important factors both in power/knowledge relations and in our thinking about the world more generally' (Paechter, 2001, p.45). In this thesis, I will therefore make a space for the inclusion of the role of emotional and behavioural factors and their relation to the operation of power in the discursive construction of the underachieving student.

The aforementioned theory will therefore be used to examine how discursive practices (both implicit and explicit) in an education setting (an intermediate school)² may act to provide or limit educational opportunities to particular groups of students by constituting student subjectivities in particular ways. Specifically, the research aims to make the constitutive force of the discourse of academic underachievement visible by interrogating the positionalities among students from diverse backgrounds in relation to the operation of power. This necessitates a methodological tool that addresses the question of how student diversity intersects within the educational context in relation to the operation of power. The concept of intersectionality will be deployed in this thesis to address this question. According to Anthias (2012) 'intersectionality posits that different social divisions interrelate in terms of

² In New Zealand, intermediate school is attended by students in Years 7 and 8.

the production of social relations and in terms of people's lives and they are seen as 'mutually constitutive' in terms of experience and practice' (p.126). Given intersectionality's attention to the interplay of social categories and social positioning as well as the partiality of knowledge formation, it aligns well with the post-structuralist project of troubling the post-structural theorising of unitary social categories and the analysis of difference and its attention to the deconstruction of homogenising and normalising categories (Brah & Phoenix, 2004). Furthermore, an intersectional approach to examining difference coincides with the Foucauldian theorisation of power and in particular its attention to the exploration of the contradictory workings of power (Staunæs, 2003) that emphasises the deconstruction of 'homogenising categories' whereby social categories such as gender, ethnicity and social class are not addressed as 'minority issues' but 'rather as categories that are produced, sustained and subverted in relation to one another' (p.105) in relation to the operation of power.

A post-structuralist lens will be used to interpret the data (using discourse analysis) and to identify the process/es by which students are discursively constituted as underachieving through mainstream academic discourses and to identify possibilities of intervention through which social transformation can be effected. Specifically, the research aims to identify possibilities for opening up spaces for resistance/rejection of deficit discourses attending underachievement. It should be noted that I do not wish to interrogate whether or not the arguments and debates regarding underachievement outlined below are 'true'. Rather, drawing upon the methodology mobilised by Foucault I wish to ask 'How is the 'truth' regarding underachievement constituted?', 'How is it possible to be discursively constituted as underachieving?', 'What effects does it have?' and 'How do social categories intersect in relation to the discursively constituted student?' An understanding of how students who are discursively constituted as underachieving negotiate their own discursive

experience may offer a line of inquiry into possibilities of agency for those students deemed to be achieving at lower than expected levels. Furthermore, these understandings will be used to interrogate the constitutive power of discursive practices employed by teachers and schools and used as a platform for informing sustainable practice and policy development.

The participants in the study include the teacher, 25 students aged 11-12 years from an intermediate school in the South Island of New Zealand, and their parents/caregivers. The data for the study were collected in two phases. In the first phase of the study interviews were conducted with 25 students who agreed to take part. The students were asked about how they experienced school generally and in particular how they understood their academic performance. In the second phase of data collection, six students (including three girls and three boys) were identified according to a range of self-identified academic abilities. Information regarding the students' ethnicity and socio-economic status was identified by records uplifted from school administration. The students were invited to participate in in-depth interviews and the parents/caregivers of these students and the classroom teacher were also interviewed.

Thesis Outline

In an age of high stakes testing, this chapter flags my concern that despite the attention of practitioners, policy makers and the wider community about academic underachievement, explanations for underachievement tend to focus on either particular groups of students or on the deficits of individual students. Current social, gendered and cultural constructions of underachievement may be viewed as a form of Othering practice which fails to recognise the complex ways in which hegemonic discursive practices work to constitute students' academic subjectivities or take into account the complex ways in which social categories may intersect with these practices to discursively constitute some students as

underachieving. This study will therefore address the research questions identified in this chapter.

In Chapter Two, I foreground the problem of the discursive constitution of academic underachievement. I discuss normative conceptions of underachievement including historical, psychological and sociological explanations as well as the ‘solutions’ for underachievement. I also discuss the notion that academic ‘achievement’ is now measured more intensely than ever both nationally (e.g., National Standards) and globally (e.g., PISA) and yet the effects of such forms of assessment on students who are deemed to be underachieving are not well understood. There have been numerous studies/reports regarding explanations for the differential levels of achievement between girls and boys for example as well as a number of debates/arguments explaining such differences, however there is now recognition that: 1) underachievement as a lived discursive construction and experience is poorly understood, and 2) that a more complex understanding of gender in the intersection with other social categories such as class and ethnicity is required.

Chapter Three outlines the epistemological considerations for this project. In particular it makes a case for a theoretical approach that allows a more carefully nuanced/complex understanding of how particular discursive practices constitute and reconstitute students’ academic subjectivities. The chapter discusses the post-structuralist theorisation of discourse, subjectivity, agency, positioning theory and how these concepts might be used to explore the complexity of students’ academic identities. Specifically, the research aims to make the constitutive force of the discourse of academic underachievement visible by interrogating the positionalities among students from diverse backgrounds. The concept of intersectionality is engaged as an analytical tool to examine how the intersecting categories of ethnicity, social class and gender constitute students’ academic subjectivities as well as how students position themselves and how they are positioned by others.

In Chapter Four, I outline the methodology and address the project's epistemological and ontological considerations. The project's analytical strategy is discussed where interview is employed to foreground the constituting process with the aim of making these processes explicit and hence to trouble what might be otherwise taken for granted. With an understanding of the relational constructedness of experience, the analysis utilises positionality to address the complexity of the lived experience of the research participants and how this constitutes students' academic subjectivities. The chapter also troubles the interview as a means of data collection (including ethical considerations) and addresses the issues attending representation and the question of validity.

It was apparent from the initial draft of an analysis chapter of an interview with one of my research participants, 'Maria', that despite my articulation of the post-structuralist underpinnings of the thesis that I defaulted to psychologising in my analysis. This included engaging in the production of Maria's biography as a singularly situated *real* story about her, through 'triangulating' her own, her teacher's and her mother's stories about her. Moreover, my own positionality in terms of how I engaged with Maria, the power relations between myself and her and my motivation for conducting the interview remained invisible and unchallenged. In Chapter Four therefore I also wrestle with the question of how we can 'know' our research participants, and I map the journey of representing Maria and the pitfalls that were encountered along the way with particular consideration of my own implicatedness in what is produced.

In Chapter Five I move beyond the powerful influence of psychologising discourses discussed in the previous chapter by revisiting the analysis with a different understanding of the implications that my positionalities have for the power relations between myself and the research participants. I foreground not only how students become un/marked as underachieving but illuminate the processes by which students' academic subjectivities are

produced, sustained and subverted in relation to power. Specifically, the analysis addresses the role that discourses and discursive practices play in the constitution of the underachieving student. The analysis examines the effects of the ‘normalising gaze’ of the teacher and the institution’s discursive practices in the disciplinary techniques of testing, ranking and description. The effects of such normalisation manifest in the narratives of the students. For example, the discourse of not being ‘smart’ or ‘brainy’ is mobilised by students who recognise themselves as underachieving. Notwithstanding such positioning these students negotiate their discursive constraints by deploying strategies such as ‘catching up’ and sporting success to enable recognition as legitimate students.

Chapter Six addresses the question of *who has the power to determine the discursive norm of the achieving/underachieving binary and how is it possible to uphold the positioning of students marked as underachieving?* The concept of intersectionality is used as an analytic tool to examine how the students interviewed for the project have become discursively positioned as underachieving through consideration of how the social categories of class, gender and ethnicity intersect in the lived experience of the participants. The analysis reveals the complex and situational ways in which social categories play out in the constitution of the underachieving student. For example, Maria (positioned by herself and others as an underachieving student) is positioned outside of hegemonic discourses of what it means to be a ‘good’ student and her gender places her ‘at risk’ of limited employment options and early pregnancy.

Chapter Seven examines how the teacher and parents/caregivers position themselves in relation to students constituted as underachieving. In particular it explores the dynamics and contradictory workings of power in relation to social categories. Furthermore, the chapter considers how social categories work together in particular ways in this particular context and how it invites us to consider the effects of the discursively constituted subject in a different

way. For example, it allows us to trouble the ‘blaming families’ discourse which informs normative hegemonic explanations for underachievement.

The final chapter, Chapter Eight, outlines the key findings of the analysis: destabilising the taken-for-granted assumptions that inform hegemonic explanations and solutions for academic underachievement. The study illustrates that hegemonic discursive practices exclude and marginalise students who have been discursively constituted as underachieving. It also illustrates the complexity and multiplicity of the power relations at work in the discursively produced subject and ruptures the taken-for-grantedness of the neoliberal assumption that the subject ‘chooses’ to underachieve. Moreover, the analysis illuminates the invisibility of the emotional effects upon the parents and caregivers of those who have been discursively constituted as underachieving.

Chapter Summary

Despite the ubiquitous use of the term underachievement in professional, scholarly and media discourse, the term appears to lack consensus regarding normative sociological and psychological definitions. Of equal concern are the differing hegemonic explanations and solutions for underachievement. Over the last thirty years scholarly, professional and media discourses regarding academic underachievement have variously invoked ethnicity, social class and gender as discrete categories to explain academic underachievement. These taken-for-granted hegemonic explanations for underachievement have failed to take into account how it is possible for the underachieving student to be spoken into existence and moreover what are its effects. That is, what does it mean to be discursively constituted as underachieving? Moreover, to date such explanations have not addressed how the social categories, ethnicity, social class and gender intersect in relation to the discursively constituted subject. The research presented here therefore examines the experiences of a

group of students in relation to these hegemonic discourses and power relations and provides a theoretical consideration of the complex and situational ways in which the underachieving student is produced.

CHAPTER TWO

LITERATURE REVIEW

Introduction

As was noted in the introduction to this thesis, the issue of academic underachievement has received widespread attention in public discourse, both locally and internationally, for a long period of time. In recent years this attention has received added impetus as a result of differential outcomes in high stakes assessment practices which have become a global phenomenon (Eggen & Stobart, 2014; Hursh, 2008; Myers, 2015). According to Myers (2015) assessment is high stakes when testing is used to make schools accountable for meeting externally imposed targets and to provide information to parents and school administrators about student achievement. In addition to localised testing, has been the emergence of international comparative testing whereby the performance of the education systems of different countries is compared and more particularly the performance of governments to be compared (Eggen & Stobart, 2014). Such testing includes the Programme for International Student Achievement (PISA), Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study (TIMSS) and Progress in International Reading Literacy Survey (PIRLS). As Kell (2010) has noted, such testing has been employed as ‘proxy indicators’ of the quality of the teaching of literacy and numeracy of the participating countries which have been ranked, resulting in the production of ‘league tables’. These league tables have then been utilised to inform educational policy, resulting in the promotion of further testing, centralised curriculums and ‘back to basics’ pedagogies. Within the New Zealand context, National Standards have been developed ostensibly to establish benchmarks in literacy and numeracy and are based upon the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development rationale underpinning PISA and PIRLS testing. A variety of explanations have been provided over

time to explain differential levels of achievement. In this chapter I contextualize current thinking about underachievement with consideration of the historical, cultural deficit, social class and gender based explanations and the ‘solutions’ for underachievement. Moreover, I consider the impact that neoliberal policy reform (such as NAPLAN in Australia and National Standards in New Zealand) has had on educational policy and the strategies that have been implemented to ‘solve’ the issue of underachievement. I argue for the need to reframe underachievement as not simply an issue relating to specific groups based upon ethnicity, social class or gender but to consider how students are discursively constituted as underachieving through the *intersection* of ethnicity, social class and gender in relation to the operation of power.

Historical Conceptualisations of Underachievement

Although the issue of educational underachievement has been a recurring theme in political, public and scholarly discourse in recent years it is instructive to consider the historical constructions of children who do not do well academically at school. For example, within the North American context, in the first half of the nineteenth century such students were variously categorised as ‘dunce, shirker, loafer, idle, vicious, reprobate, depraved, wayward, wrong-doer, sluggish, scapegrace, stupid and incorrigible’ (Deschenes, Cuban & Tyack, 2001, p.529). Underlying such categorisation was the belief that students who did not perform well academically were ‘deficient in character’ that is, the responsibility for academic achievement (and behaviour) was seen to reside in the ‘sovereign individual’ (it is noteworthy that individual responsibility continues to be a key feature of neoliberal discursive practices regarding underachievement discourses which I address below). Moreover, it was believed by the educational authorities of the period that exposure to a curriculum based in ‘morality, citizenship, and the basic skills represented by the three Rs’

would 'mitigate the advantages enjoyed by the more fortunate' (Deschenes et al., 2001, p.529). It was thought that through exposure to the provision of 'equality of educational opportunity' that it would therefore be 'primarily the fault of individual pupils if they did not succeed academically'. As such, educational success or failure was viewed as an individual problem and inequality in educational outcomes was legitimised on the grounds that if students failed they had no one to blame but themselves (Katz, 1993).

In the early twentieth century with the emergence of compulsory age-graded schools, the poor performing student began to become distinguished from the 'normal student' (the student who was deemed to be progressing academically at a similar pace to her/his same age peers). As Deschenes et al., (2001) note however:

As a way of moving large numbers of "normal" students through a standardised curriculum in a fairly efficient manner, the age-graded school had been a stunning success, and few educators have wanted then or since to change its basic structure. It worked better, however, during an era when academic misfits could and did simply quit school and go to work than during the twentieth century, when compulsory schooling and child labour laws compelled hundreds of thousands of students to continue in schools that were mismatched to their class and ethnic cultures and often scornful about their abilities and aspirations (p.533).

The emergence of the 'normal student' and the advent of the 'technology of testing' not only enabled educators to 'track' students according to academic 'ability' but also enabled programs to be established that were 'adapted' to students 'abilities' such as vocational education. However, a majority of these programs 'soon became educational channels for students who were failing or who were thought to be at risk of failing' (Deschenes et al., 2001, p.532). By the 1950s, underachievement was seen by some as a 'major educational disease' (Degan, 1959, p.35) and political discourse began to connect the risks associated with underachievement with the economy and social cohesion. For example, low achievement was linked to the failure to stay at school, delinquency, crime, teenage parenthood, low wages and unemployment. This discourse came to dominate public and political discourse throughout the Western World, including Australia and New Zealand. In

New Zealand, this was evident in the neoliberal educational reforms introduced in 1989 by the then Labour government. I discuss the influence of these reforms below.

The technology of testing also ushered in the notion that ‘intelligence’ was the main factor underlying educational underachievement which was viewed by psychologists as the discrepancy between a student’s IQ (Intelligence Quotient) and the student’s performance on an educational test (Plewis, 1991). It is interesting to note however that much of the early thinking about the relationship between IQ and academic underachievement was focused on the notion of the so-called ‘gifted underachiever’ (e.g., Durr, 1964; Shaw & McCuen, 1960) in which underachievement was understood to be a discrepancy between a high level of giftedness and relatively low levels of educational achievement (Zeigler, Zeigler & Stoeger, 2012). Although, the notion of the gifted underachiever remains a contested topic within educational discourse (for example, Negru, 2013, notes the ‘inadequacy’ of IQ models for making claims about underachievement given their decontextual, experiential and performative nature), the emerging ‘science of education’ and the ‘technology of testing’ in the twentieth century increasingly relied upon psychological explanations, such as ‘low IQ’ and ‘low motivation’ to explain poor academic performance (Negru, 2013). Indeed, the so-called ‘psy-disciplines’ including developmental and educational psychology have reinforced the notion that individuals are born with a predetermined intellectual capacity that is largely independent of context (Gale & Densmore, 2000). The use of IQ testing provided educators with a ‘scientific rationale’ to segregate and group students accordingly.

While psychological conceptions of underachievement tend to view underachievement primarily as an individual issue of the difference between a student’s performance on an IQ test and their performance on an educational test (which continues to be a very influential discourse), there was a gradual shift to framing and understanding underachievement in terms of student grades and standardised test performance (Smith,

2003). However, according to this understanding there remained a lack of clarity and inconsistency as to what characterised an underachieving student (Smith, 2003). For example, how much of a difference between a child's performance on a standardised test and the graded 'norm' represented a 'substantial' difference? In addition was the conflation of underachievement with low achievement. While low and high achieving students were those deemed to be performing to their 'ability', underachievers were considered to be those students whose performance was deemed to be below their ability (Jones & Myhill, 2004).

Although discourses of 'individual deficit' have historically been invoked to explain underachievement, the frequency with which such discourses have been invoked to explain poor academic performance has resulted in the persistence of individual deficit as an explanation for underachievement and as such has achieved a 'common-sense' status and consequently their 'hegemonic functions and effects' have remained hidden (Gale & Densmore, 2000). This is despite research that has repeatedly challenged the assumption that academic performance is dependent upon individual ability and effort (Negru, 2013). It is noteworthy that in 1963 Thorndike recognised the need to develop a more complex understanding of what characterises underachievement by taking into consideration the individual's gender, socio-economic status and parental education (Smith, 2003). As Comber and Kamler (2004) note: 'study after study has documented the comparatively low performance of low-socio-economic and marginal groups of children on standardised measures of literacy' (p.294). Sociological approaches therefore tend to focus on group underachievement. For example, students from working class backgrounds are seen to underachieve relative to middle class students and students from ethnic minority backgrounds are seen to underachieve relative to the majority. In the context of the underachievement of ethnic minority students in the United Kingdom, Gillborn and Mirza (2000) noted however that:

Unfortunately, there has been confusion about the meaning of the term. It is often assumed, for example, that the reason for 'underachievement' must lie with the pupils and/or their families rather than the education system itself. It has been argued that the notion of 'underachievement' undermines ethnic minority efforts to succeed and the desire to do well ... What began life as a useful concept, meant to identify an inequality of opportunity, has sometimes slipped into a pervasive 'discourse of despair' among and about ethnic minorities (p.7).

Such confusion about the meaning of underachievement has resulted in the term being used to describe the 'relative academic achievement' of individuals or as a 'catch-all' phrase to describe the relative academic achievement of students according to their gender, ethnicity or socio-economic status (Smith, 2003; Gorard & Smith, 2004). For example, within the context of gender discourses and underachievement, Skelton et al. (2007) noted that the so-called 'gender achievement gap' has resulted in an almost exclusive focus on 'boys' underachievement' (Carnoy & Lavin, 1985; Francis, 1999; Kimmell, 2010; Martino, Kehler & Weaver-Hightower, 2009; Sadker, Sadker & Zittleman, 2009; Sewell, 1998; Younger & Warrington, 1996). According to Jones and Myhill (2004), teachers are more apt to construct underachievement as a gender issue and to identify boys as more likely to underachieve than girls. That is, boys are considered to be more likely than girls to achieve below their 'potential'. As discussed below, however, this preoccupation with the underachievement of boys as a homogenous group focuses on a statistical gap between boys and girls and as such fails to address who these underachieving boys may be. Moreover, there is an implicit assumption that *all* girls are academically successful. As I note below however research has revealed that there are greater differences within groups than between groups (for example, Salisbury, Rees & Gorard, 1999).

Given the apparent lack of consensus about what characterises and explains underachievement both conceptually and operationally, in recent years there has been a call for a more complex understanding of why some students do less well at schools (Knowles & Lander, 2011). For example, Negru (2013) questioned the current Angolophone conceptualisation of underachievement as a 'failure to achieve potential' and suggests that the

notion of 'potential' is conceptually problematic because of the contested nature of identifying criteria for the term (for example, "What does achieving ones 'full potential' involve"?: having a high-paying job; having a high level of educational success; being happy; having a rich personal and social life?). As Negru (2013) indicates the list of criteria are potentially endless and socially constructed. Negru (2013) notes that the social construction of underachievement and potential reflect the dominant individualistic Anglophone discourse which may create tensions for cultural groups who do not share the same dominant cultural perspective (for examples, those groups that might adhere to more collectivist cultural views) and hence the requirement to attend to cultural practices in terms of the mobilisation of the terms. In critiquing the dominant discourse of underachievement within the Anglophone context, Negru (2013) therefore proposed a Foucauldian discourse analysis approach to problematise the inherent assumptions and contradictions within the discourse as well as probing the discourse in terms of its relation to power. For example, she suggested that one of the issues with underachievement is its conflation with low attainment. She cited the examples of the discourses of boys' underachievement and 'working class underachievement' which are both evidenced by attainment in national examinations. She questioned therefore the use of underachievement to describe student performance in examinations which are quantifiable whereas 'achievement' is a subjective value-laden term which is redolent of assumptions regarding 'values, culture, and lifestyle choices' (p.80) and argued therefore, that the notion of achievement and underachievement are social constructs that 'will vary internationally, nationally, regionally, from cultural group to cultural group, from ethnic group to ethnic group, from religion to religion, from community to community, from family to family, from person to person, and even intrapersonal over time' (Negru, 2013, p.82). However, in Foucauldian terms, the prevailing episteme in educational discourse continues to privilege underachievement as the dominant and normalising ideology which is

reflected in public and official discourse (including educational policy which I discuss below). The individualising and totalising effects of the existing paradigm results in the formation of un/educated subjects where those who do not demonstrate evidence of academic achievement is 'no longer able to be defined except in the negative' (Negru, 2013, p. 85).

For Foucault (1972), the education system is a form of disciplinary and discursive power in which the practices of surveillance including school record keeping, assessment and evaluation provide 'common sense' norms by which schools are enabled to monitor individual behavior and the means with which to address students who deviate from the norm. A number of studies (e.g., Graham, 2007; Saltmarsh & Youdell, 2004; and Youdell, 2003) have utilised a Foucauldian understanding of institutional and discursive power to examine the construction of student's subjectivities in the classroom. For example, Saltmarsh & Youdell (2004) examined the processes through which a group of high school students from a 'Special Sport' class become discursively constituted as 'impossible students'. The subjectivities of the students in this class were explicitly and implicitly constituted outside what is regarded to be acceptable sporting masculinities. All of this occurred against a backdrop of neoliberal policy reform whereby market driven competitive practices were being enacted within the organisational practices of schools. Effectively, schools respond to demands on their limited resources by 'rationing education' through what Gillborn and Youdell (2000) have referred to as 'educational triage' (p.133). Within, the educational context, only those students who are deemed to be 'treatable' benefit from the rationing of scarce resources while those deemed as 'untreatable' are denied access to educational resources. As a consequence, Saltmarsh and Youdell (2004) have suggested that 'the effect of rationing educational resources in this way serves to reproduce hierarchical divisions within the social framework of the school' (p.355).

Similarly, Graham (2007) has interrogated discursive practices that objectify and classify student's 'disorderly behaviour' in school. Specifically, Graham (2007) examined how the discursive practices of Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD) 'not only produce meaning but also particular kinds of objects and subjects upon whom and through which particular relations of power are realised' (p.4). Graham (2007) argued that the behavioural descriptors of ADHD namely, 'poor regulation, impulse or attentional control' (p.5) enables the 'behaviourally disordered' child to be 'spoken into existence' as a recognisable 'object of discourse' (Foucault, 1972, p.50). In addition to being 'spoken into existence', these discursive practices not only have the concomitant effect of distinguishing the behaviourally 'disordered' child from the behaviourally 'ordered' child but also 'prepares the ground for the exclusionary practices that derive from them' (Graham, 2007, p.15).

Consequently, the emergence of pedagogy as a scientific discipline and its normative practices became common sense and enabled schools to distinguish the 'bad' student from the 'good' student (Foucault, 1977). For example, Laws and Davies' (2000) examined how educational and psychological discursive practices constituted the identities of students in a school for behaviourally disturbed children. Laws and Davies (2000) analysis suggested that because the students' actions were so consistently read as being behaviourally challenging that it becomes extremely difficult for these students to see themselves as capable of being anything other than 'bad' students.

Laws (2004) has reflexively problematised the theory/practice, thought/word and public/private binaries within the context of her own work as a teacher and principal at a school for students categorised as 'emotionally/behaviourally disordered'. Laws (2004) described post-structuralist research as a means of 'disrupting certainties and seeing possibilities other than 'business as usual' in the cracks/silences opened by such disruption' (p.119). She acknowledged however that there were 'risks' associated with her engagement

in the disruption of discursive practices. In particular, she admitted to fearing being ‘read’ in the same ways that her students were, namely, as ‘disruptive, inappropriate and needing control’ and stated that ‘The dominant discourses remind us all the time of the importance of knowing how to get it right’ (p.119) and that it is only ‘through making the constitutive force of discourse visible, is it possible to work with students in ways that make them recognisable as legitimate students’ (Laws, 2004, p.116). I would argue that within the context of this thesis that for the student who has been discursively constituted as underachieving it is difficult for them to see themselves as anything else.

An Alternative Construction of Underachievement

Within the context of hegemonic constructions of academic underachievement, Stojnov, Dzinovic and Pavlovic (2008) have proposed an alternative construction in which underachievement might be viewed as an effect of normalisation practices based upon the operation of dominant forms of discursive power within schooling, scholarship and the media. Specifically, they draw upon Michel Foucault’s (1977) theorisation of disciplinary power and George Kelly’s (1955) ‘principle of elaborative choice’. While I elaborate more on Foucault’s theorising of power in Chapter Three and normalisation in Chapter Four, Stojnov et al., (2008) have argued that school underachievement might be better understood as a form of ‘resistance to dominant discourses’ rather than as a deviation from normal hegemonic discourses.

In accordance with a Foucauldian perspective, Stojnov et al., (2008) suggested that deviation from the expected norms of achievement results in ‘the development of a penal system to discipline, correct, and adapt behavior to the norms, in accordance with the criteria of success and usefulness’ (p.47). The type of punishment is contingent upon the degree of infringement and may include increased surveillance and ‘special assessment’ practices.

Within the New Zealand context I would include in the special assessment category, the requirement for students who are reading below the level of their same aged peers to attend Reading Recovery.

Reading Recovery is an intervention strategy developed by Marie Clay (1985) to assist the development of reading skills of children who are identified as having limited reading ability compared to their peers. The intervention involves the withdrawal of students from their classrooms for one-to-one reading instruction for 30-40 minutes per day for 12-20 week period by a specialist Reading Recovery teacher (Clay, 2005). Tunmer, Chapman, Greaney, Prochnow and Arrow (2013) have indicated however that a reason for the relatively large achievement gap in literacy in New Zealand is related to the ineffectiveness of Reading Recovery. In particular, they noted that Māori and Pasifika students and students from low decile schools were less likely than Pākehā and students from high decile schools to be successfully discontinued from Reading Recovery after 20 weeks. In New Zealand, schools are ranked according to the socio-economic status of the community in which the school is located from decile 1 (low) to decile 10 (high).

Tunmer et al., (2013) attributed the failure of the literacy strategy to three interrelated factors including a flawed theoretical approach to literacy education, a failure to address differences in 'literate cultural capital' when children begin school and 'restrictive policies regarding the first year of literacy teaching' (p.173). Consequently, Tunmer et al., (2013) argued therefore that the Reading Recovery program should be reconsidered and replaced with an intervention program based upon contemporary research which targets beginning readers who are most in need. Arguably, however, the implementation of an individually targeted reading program by an expert reading teacher will not necessarily address the underlying conditions from which reading difficulties arise. I would also argue that the

process of identifying and treating students in Reading Recovery as a special assessment category results in the constitution of the ‘psychological individual’.

According to Burman (1994) the notion of the psychological individual emerged in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century Western Europe out of the need to control and regulate the growing concern regarding the ‘feeble-minded’ and concomitant ‘delinquency’ amongst the population. An ‘individual psychology’ provided the means with which to classify and monitor these potentially ‘unstable and unruly’ social elements and hence to address the social ‘anxieties’ created by these elements in the middle classes (Burman, 1994). The emergence of the ‘psychological individual’ enabled individual ‘mental qualities and development’ to be compared with those of the general population, providing the means with which to divide ‘the mad from the sane, the criminal from the unlawful and the educable from the ineducable’ (p.14). Consequently, the psychological individual became the focus of the prison, the psychiatric hospital and the school and became the forerunner of a developmental psychology which has become the chief means for the standardisation and normalisation of child development. According to Rose (1989) developmental psychology:

...was made possible by the clinic and the nursery school. Such institutions had a vital role, for they enabled the observation of numbers of children of the same age, and of children of different ages, by skilled psychological experts under controlled, experimental, almost laboratory conditions. They thus simultaneously allowed for standardization and normalisation – the collection of comparable information on a large number of subjects and its analysis in such a way as to construct norms. A developmental norm was a standard based upon the average abilities or performances of children of a certain age on a particular task or a specified activity. It thus not only presented a picture of what was *normal* for children of such an age, but also enabled the normality of any child to be assessed by comparison with this norm) (Rose, 1989, p.142).

Burman (1994) critically examined how the normative discourses associated with modern developmental psychology not only detaches ‘the child’ from her/his socio-political and historical context but also how homogenised descriptions of child development pathologise children (both individually and collectively) who do not ‘fit’ with normative accounts of ‘the child’. The normalisation of child development was enabled by the concept of ‘mental age’ which underpinned the notion of IQ testing and the scrutiny of children’s

psychological development within the medical gaze (Burman, 1994). Burman (1994) noted that the comparison, regulation and control of children are closely associated with modernity and subscribes to a particular ‘gendered model of scientific practice’. Such practice, psychology as science, has contributed ‘to the conditions which produce taken-for-granted practices which in turn produce taken-for-granted facts’ (Laws & Davies, 2000, p.207). For example, Burman (2011) noted in respect to notions of child development the ‘naturalised, psychological ‘truths’ such as the understanding that ‘adolescence’ as a distinct life stage is associated with various challenges which take on a ‘general, universal applicability, of timeless truth’ (p.648) such as the claim that ‘teenagers are troubled’. The taken-for-grantedness of such claims is illustrated by the occlusion of questions of causality (‘why are they troubled’) and context (‘where and how they are troubled?’) (Burman, 2011, p.648). Walkerdine (1990) noted that the development of modern psychology and the study of child development in particular are also ‘central to the modern “truth” about pedagogy. It seems central to modern regulation practices. The ‘facts of child development’ form the bedrock of modern pedagogy, and the teacher must know them’ (p.68).

Stojnov et al. (2008) also have noted the influence of the ‘psy’ science discourses of psychology and psychiatry in school underachievement which invoke medical diagnoses. Students who are deemed to deviate from expected achievement norms (derived from their performance in standardised intelligence tests) become ‘diagnosed’ as underachieving. As such, underachievement becomes a ‘potential disorder’ because:

Rationalism and pragmatism in modern “psy” sciences do not account for the individual interests of school underachievers, their behavior is not conceived as a conscious, rational and preferred choice, but as a product of irrational, instinctive, and emotional aspects of their personalities (Stojnov et al., 2008, p.47).

In keeping with the pathologisation of school underachievement as a psychological problem, it must therefore be ‘treated’. In this context it is therefore interesting to consider Stojnov et al.’s, (2008) conceptualisation of underachievement as a form of resistance.

Specifically, they proposed that ‘School underachievement may be conceived as a field of resistance to the physical, epistemological, psychological, and ethical shaping performed in an educational setting’ (p.50). Drawing upon Foucault’s notion that the subject is constructed through the operation of competing discourses within the operation of power relations, resistance becomes possible at the nexus of conflicting power relations. However, rather than resistance being a case of subject versus repressive power, power may be mobilised by the subject *against* other powers. Resistance therefore offers the possibility for the operation of power relations to be brought into relief and examined (Stojnov et al., 2008).

Within the context of school underachievement, students who do not do well academically are positioned as unsuccessful and as such are only offered one way to exist in school, that is, as an ‘underachiever’ or as a ‘bad pupil’. Effectively, this positioning restricts the ‘semantic space’ available to students who have been positioned as underachieving.

Consequently:

School underachievers may be thought of as being forced into a restrictive and inevitable state of affairs determined by adults. The knowledge and values offered by schools, as well as defined goals and expectations with respect to educational productivity, erect a semantic structure that is not negotiable, one in which pupils are not expected to judge its legitimacy and viability (Stojnov et al., 2008, p.50).

As Stojnov et al., (2008) noted, resisting the dominant discourse provides the student who has been constructed as an underachieving student ‘with a particular position of power in relation to the educational system’ (p.51). That is, while the ‘successful’ student implicitly accepts the normative expectations of the dominant discourse thereby perpetuating existing power relations, the underachieving student, on the other hand, who by failing to adopt these norms is viewed as disobeying these expectations and becomes subject to the schools disciplinary strategies of ‘self-correction and self-surveillance’. When these strategies fail to have the desired effect, the underachieving student cements her/his positioning by the school as being ‘irrational’ from a psy-discipline perspective (Stojnov et al., 2008).

Rather than viewing behaviour as ‘irrational’ however, Stojnov et.al., (2008) noted George Kelly’s proposal that ‘irrational’ is the term applied to behaviour that is not understood and that within the educational context is often used by school authorities to describe the ‘potential negative consequences’ for the underachieving student. That is:

When behaviour is qualified as “irrational” by school authorities, it is dismissed on the basis of representing an illegitimate desire – a wish not catalogued in the authorities’ list of “normal” social needs, such as being well educated (p. 53).

However, rather than accepting the taken-for-granted values and meaning that underpin normalised hegemonic discourses regarding educational achievement, Stojnov et al., (2008) proposed that student underachievement may be conceptualised as resistance to these normalised educational expectations and as a means of reflecting the students’ *own* ‘values and life priorities’. Therefore, if we are to move beyond normative conceptions of underachievement, Stojnov et al., (2008) argued that it is necessary both to deconstruct the assumptions that underpin hegemonic educational discourses and to include the perspectives of students themselves who have been discursively constructed as underachieving. Within the context of this thesis I would argue however, that it is also necessary to understand how students become discursively constituted as underachieving in the first place, that is, what are the processes that constitute students’ academic subjectivities as underachieving? Moreover, I would argue that it is also necessary to make the constitutive force of underachievement visible by examining the positionalities of students from diverse backgrounds, that is, how do the categories ethnicity, social class and gender intersect in relation to the constitution of students’ academic subjectivities.

Stojnov et al., (2008) also argued that ‘decentering’ power relations between school authorities and students who are positioned as underachieving provides the opportunity for dialogue which makes the operation of power visible. In particular, they suggested that ‘dialogue and negotiation’ can illuminate the school authorities’ disciplinary practices of surveillance and tacit expectations and take into account the perspectives of the students.

Stojnov et al., (2008) noted however, that making power relations visible doesn't mean a 'total renunciation' of surveillance and normalisation as:

...an alternative to a disciplining school of power is not necessarily a school in which all are powerless, trying to position themselves as powerful through resistance. [Rather] Negotiating implies an active collaborative effort between the education authorities and students in creating mutual meanings, tolerance regarding different values, consensus of rules and procedures, and socially constituted criteria for shared activities such as education itself (p.56).

Hence, by engaging in a 'discourse of mutuality', where meaning and understanding are negotiated rather than imposed by school disciplinary power, students who don't experience academic success may be able to participate in the process of education that is acceptable to themselves. By doing so, rather than understanding school underachievement as a matter of 'free will and choice', this perspective takes into account that student subjectivity is not fixed and inevitable but rather is a function of the multiplicity of understandings that attend social practice. As such, these social practices shouldn't be analysed in relation to their 'truthfulness' but rather in terms of the role that they play in the discursive constitution of subjects. Again, within the context of this thesis, I would add that power relations operate beyond that of school disciplinary power. It is also necessary therefore, to illuminate the processes by which students' academic subjectivities are produced, sustained and subverted in relation to the discourses and discursive practices of students' parents/caregivers and classroom teacher.

In view of the above and in accordance with the theoretical framework of this thesis, I take up Stojnov et al.'s, (2008) conceptualisation of underachievement which views school achievement as an effect of the normalisation of hegemonic discourses in relation to the operation of power. As I outline in the following sections however, although discourses of cultural, social class and gender deficit and disadvantage have been extant in the literature as explanations for school underachievement, it is readily apparent that the mobilisation of these homogenous categories to explain underachievement has done little to illuminate the complexity of the issue. In the following sections I therefore elaborate on how the categories

of culture, socio-economic status (including the influence of neo-liberal policy reform) and gender have been mobilised and then outline how an intersectional approach may offer a more complex theoretical basis for empirically examining how power operates in discursively producing the underachieving student within the New Zealand context.

Deficit Theorising of Underachievement

While noting above that discourses of individual deficit have been (and continue to be) used to explain underachievement, discourses of family and cultural deficit have also been used extensively as explanations for poor academic performance (e.g., Brown & Brown, 2012; Ladson-Billings, 2006; Valencia, 1997; Shields, Bishop & Mazawi, 2005). For example, within the American context, parents of students who were underperforming in the nineteenth century were considered to be ‘intemperate, ignorant, undisciplined and unfamiliar with American customs and values’ (Deschenes et al., 2001, p.536). While in the twentieth century, such criticism was less moralistic, familial cultural and economic deficits were implicated in their children’s poor performance. By default, families were seen as complicit in their children’s education and ‘solutions’ therefore were aimed at redressing the ‘defective socialization children received at home’ (Deschenes et al., 2001, p.536) by ‘Americanising’ the children of immigrants for example.

Within the North American context discourses of deficiency have also characterised explanations for differential educational outcomes of African-American students in schools which have continued throughout the twentieth century where African-American students and their families are positioned as ‘lacking the skills, experiences, beliefs and values needed to succeed in schools and in society’ (Brown & Brown, 2012, p.12). According to Bondy and Ross (1998) the ‘myth’ that African-American students and their families do not care about education and the presumption that these students lack motivation and are not provided with

‘appropriate intellectual experiences’ by their families has also informed the discourses of deficiency held by teachers. As such, family background remains ‘the primary point of interest for many school and social policies’ (Ladson-Billings, 2006, p.4) and moreover has reinforced the deficit explanations for the educational experiences of African-American students which, as discussed below, parallels the experience of Māori students within the New Zealand context. Counter-discourses located in oppositional cultural theory which is based upon John Ogbus’ critique of the education system as an extension of the dominant groups reproduction of social inequities, have aimed to challenge these deficit discourses by illuminating the structural factors that impact upon the agency and educational experiences of African-American students. Although, as Brown and Brown (2012) noted these counter-discourses ‘can unintentionally open the possibility to homogenize African Americans in a social discourse of specialized need and intervention’ (p.13) and create a situation in which African-American students become deviant from the normal.

In an examination of research studies and reviews of the underachievement of Black pupils in England, Troyna (1984) argued that such literature has tended to ‘pathologise’ the causes of black students’ underachievement by focusing on the child’s cultural and home backgrounds: inadequate child-rearing practices, single parent families, family structure and organisation, and lack of parental interest (Troyna, 1984). According to Troyna (1984) the ‘cultural deprivation’ thesis results in the pathologisation of underachievement whereby the ‘victim’ is ‘assailed for his/her supposed deficiencies’ and places the onus on the child him/herself to change (Troyna, 1984, p.157). The cultural deprivation thesis is invoked for example when comparisons are made between Black ‘underachievement’ and Asian ‘overachievement’ (Troyna, 1984). According to Troyna (1984) ‘the former are generally seen [by their teachers] as boisterous, aggressive, unable to concentrate for long periods and more interested in non-academic pursuits; the latter, as diligent, intelligent, well-behaved and

totally committed to the school ethic' (Troyna, 1984, p.157). Consequently, these stereotyped images of black pupils are 'translated into practice via the differential day-to-day interaction between teacher and pupils' (Troyna, 1984, p.157). Such stereotypes, including the notion of the 'overachievement' of students of Asian descent have been challenged however. For example, the 'Model Minority Myth' of Asian overachievement posits that the notion that all immigrant Asian students are high academic achievers who serve as a model for other ethnic minorities to emulate is simply that, a myth (Wing, 2007). As Wing (2007) noted 'the myth has served as a tool to castigate other people of color and to discredit their struggles for equality and social justice' (p.460).

In response, some writers have argued that the issue can be explained by cultural dissonance whereby white teachers do not understand the cultural backgrounds of their black students and misinterpret the behaviour of black students which subsequently impacts upon the educational experiences of these students (e.g., Fordham, 1996). Others, such as Foster (1989, cited in Gillborn, 1990) have even argued that the streaming of black students into lower streams was justified on the grounds of their disruptive behaviour, notwithstanding that students' of different ethnicities engage in similar levels of disruptive behaviour. Such explanations have led to the proposition that the negative schooling experiences of black students (both in the United Kingdom and the United States) are the result of systemic and individual racism (Blair, 2001). As Blair (2001) indicated however, 'despite the research, the community campaigns, the efforts of multiculturalists and antiracists, little seems to have changed over the decades and black and other minority children continue on aggregate to underperform in standardised tests compared to their white peers' (p.28). More recently, some writers (such as Brown & Brown, 2012) have argued therefore that a more complex and sophisticated understanding of the underachievement of black and other minority students is required.

Deficit Theorising of Māori Underachievement

According to Valencia (1997), deficit theorising of difference in academic achievement has been informed by discourses of ‘at-riskness’ and ‘blaming the victim’ as well as practices such as intelligence testing. Valencia (1997) argued that the psychologising of underachievement enables poor school performance to be attributed to the characteristics of individual students as a consequence of their membership to a particular cultural group.

Within the New Zealand context, Russell Bishop and his colleagues have argued that:

Deficit theories blame the victims and collectively see the locus of the problem as either lack of inherent ability, lack of cultural appropriateness or limited resources; in short, some deficiency at best, a “pathology” at worst. The general pattern of the solutions they propose suggests that the “victims” need to change, usually to become more like the proponents of the theories. Further, these are cul-de-sac theories, in that they do not offer any way out that is acceptable to Māori people. (Bishop, Berryman, Tiakiwai & Richardson, 2003, p.6).

Shields, Bishop & Mazawi (2005) have proposed that deficit theorising and the pathologisation of the lived experience of some students and their families is deeply rooted in colonialism in which the perceived cultural, ethnic, social and intellectual differences between the European colonizers and indigenous people were explained in terms of geographical or genetic factors. In New Zealand, despite what was guaranteed by the Treaty of Waitangi (1840) in terms of a cultural, economic, political and social partnership with Pākehā³, the Māori people were pathologised socially, politically and educationally. In the educational context, Māori were pathologised through the establishment of a separate Native School system by the Native Schools Act in 1867. The Act was established in response to the petitioning by Māori communities for secular primary schools. Until the mid 1860’s Maori students attended government funded church schools (Özerk & Whitehead, 2012). The Native Schools were predicated on the basis that Māori were incapable of abstract thought and would not benefit from a more extensive curriculum. Although the Native Schools Act

³ Pākehā is a Māori term for non- Māori New-Zealanders.

permitted aspects of Māori tikanga (Māori customs and traditions) to be included in the Native Schools curriculum, the schools 'operated a limited public school curriculum, emphasising health, hygiene, and manual dexterity; all of which were taught through the medium of the English language' (Bishop, 2005, p.63).

The subsequent inclusion of Māori into mainstream schools on non-Māori terms following the demise of the Native School system in 1969 continued to perpetuate the pathologisation of Māori in an education system which privileged the mastery of abstract concepts, individual achievement and competition which was in contrast to the social experiences of many Māori children in which interdependence, group co-operation and group achievement were emphasised. According to Bishop (2005) the lives, history and culture of Māori people were also pathologised in school textbooks in which a particularly Eurocentric perspective of history was promoted. Textbooks represented Māori people 'as happy-go-lucky, frivolous, and primitive' and 'as desperately in need of civilization' (p.67). Such representations illustrate the continuation of the colonialist discourses of cultural inferiority. Furthermore, these discourses can serve to reinscribe Pākehā teachers' cultural assumptions. As Bishop (2005) has noted however unless students are encouraged by their teachers to critically evaluate the colonialist discourses inherent in such representations of Māori that their pathologisation will continue to be perpetuated.

As a consequence of the pathological representation of Māori, cultural deprivation theories which focus on 'cultural deficiencies' have been invoked by researchers to explain the underachievement of Māori students within the mainstream education system. For example, Lovegrove (1966) identified the Māori home environment as not being as visually and verbally sophisticated as their European counterparts resulting in the academic difficulties experienced by Māori students. This theorising has subsequently been echoed in more recent research in which the educational disadvantage experienced by Māori students is

attributed to limited ‘family resources’ in Māori homes. As a consequence of these ‘deficiencies’ in Māori children’s home environments, schools ‘have a ready-made excuse if Māori children do not achieve well at school’ (Bishop, Berryman, & Richardson, 2001, p.71).

In seeking to identify the underlying teacher and school behaviours and attitudes that might result in greater Māori student achievement Bishop, Berryman, Tiakiwai, and Richardson (2003) found that the most significant influence on the educational achievement of Māori students as identified by the students, their parents and their principals (and some of their teachers) was the quality of in-class relationships between the teachers and Māori students. This was found to be in contrast to the majority of teachers who indicated that the most significant influence on Māori students’ educational achievement was the children themselves, and/or their homes and/or systemic and structural issues (Bishop et al. 2003). As McLaren (2003) noted however, placing the blame elsewhere for disparities in educational achievement is difficult to challenge because it:

...relieves teachers of the need to engage in pedagogical self-scrutiny or in any serious critique of their personal roles within schools, and the school’s role within the wider society. In effect psychologising school failure indicts the student while simultaneously protecting the social environment from sustained criticism (p.236).

Nevertheless, the cultural deficit theorizing used by the teachers to explain the underachievement of Māori students is in contrast to the findings of research aimed at addressing the issue of educational achievement in schools. For example, in recognition of the diversity within school classrooms the New Zealand Ministry of Education mandated in 2007 that student learning outcomes for all students be raised by shifting from a standardised school curriculum to a personalised curriculum in which teachers plan and teach according to individual student needs (Conner, 2013). Shields et al., (2005) indicated that changing teaching practices may not be sufficient because the issue of power imbalances regarding educators’ cultural assumptions underpinning their practices require critical examination which is difficult because of their positioning within the dominant discourse. From an

intersectionality perspective Stoll (2016) noted that it is also necessary to problematise the social location and privilege in relation to the race, class and gender of educators. I would further suggest that this might involve examining if the cultural assumptions of Pākehā teachers in relation to their social class.

From a Foucauldian perspective, Bishop (2005) has argued that a necessary precondition for improving Māori student educational achievement is for Pākehā teachers to challenge their positioning within the dominant discourses that view Māori student achievement in deficit terms and to create alternative discourses, images and metaphors to inform the development of practices which promote ‘power-sharing relationships and classroom interaction patterns within which young Māori people could successfully participate, perform and achieve excellence’ (p.84). However, the pathologisation of indigenous communities and deficit thinking has continued to impact upon educational discourse, policy and schooling practices within the New Zealand context (Shields et al., 2005). For example, schools attract government funding based upon their decile ranking which is based upon the socioeconomic status of the school community. Consequently, school administrators are required to identify students in deficit terms in order to receive funding to address students learning needs. This funding is then channeled into programs including literacy programs such as reading recovery and remedial assistance which, although designed to promote academic success for those students who experience difficulty, tend to reinforce deficit thinking. Furthermore, school administrators and teachers tend to focus on the delivery of such programs without critically examining the issues underlying the disparities in achievement (Shields et al., 2005).

This uncritical engagement with the issues relating to differential achievement and a failure to address the power relations that underpin discourses of underachievement has parallels in the United States where Ogbu (1992) suggested that students from ethnic

minorities are socialised within their cultures to oppose mainstream education and would therefore have better educational outcomes if they engaged more with the knowledge that is required to be successful and less with the cultural knowledges that reinforce their cultural identity. More recently and within the New Zealand context Lourie and Rata (2014) argued that:

The cultural approach to educating Māori students contributes to maintaining the low educational achievement of a section of the Māori student population. It does this by educating some Māori students in a curriculum based on socio-cultural knowledge rather than disciplinary knowledge. Because social knowledge (also known as everyday, cultural, tacit, doxic and folk knowledge) comes from and reinforces an individual's experiences, a curriculum based on such knowledge limits young people to the localised world of experience rather than taking them beyond experience (p.19).

Such a view could be regarded however as reinforcing Western culture and experience as the 'epistemic frame of reference through which pedagogic reality [is] comprehended and teaching practices organized' (Shields et al., 2005, p.12). As suggested by Bishop and Glynn (1999), a mainstream education system that is predicated on individual competition and achievement, compartmentalised thinking and the mastery of abstract concepts is in direct contrast to the experiences of many Māori students whose socialisation is based upon interdependence and group achievement as well as an emphasis on complementarity of abstract and concrete thought, and religion and culture. However, against a backdrop of colonisation, the issue of power imbalances remains in terms of the privileging of dominant discourses in what constitutes authoritative knowledge regarding curriculum content and pedagogies (Bishop, 2005). In the context of the continued dominance of discourses which pathologise the lived experiences of Māori students and the accompanying deficit theorising that is invoked to explain the achievement differences experienced by Māori students within mainstream educational settings in New Zealand, Bishop (2005) stated that:

The major influence on Māori students' educational achievement lies in the minds and actions of the majority of their teachers. These teachers remain adherents to the ongoing colonialist discourse that has pathologized Māori peoples lives for over a century and a half, and that explains low Māori student achievement in deficit terms. What is also significant is that teachers who explain Māori students' limited educational achievement in terms of students' deficiencies (or deficiencies of the structure of the school)

are often unable to offer appropriate solutions to these problems and in turn, through such non-agentive positioning, abrogate their responsibility for improving the achievement levels of Māori students (p.83).

As such, Bishop (2005) contended that a necessary precondition for improving Māori students educational achievement is not only for teachers to challenge their positioning within the deficit discourse but also there is a need to create alternative discourses that create power sharing relationships in classrooms and schools in which Māori students can ‘successfully participate, perform, and achieve excellence’ (p,84).

Similarly, Carabello (2011) noted that framing underachievement in deficit terms privileges normative expectations for the behaviours needed to be an engaged and successful student and fails to address the power relations inherent in discourses of achievement and engagement. In drawing on Foucault (1977) she added that: ‘these behaviors or performances of engagement have been naturalized as essential to academic achievement because they encourage the internalization of socialized practices that undergird the mission of schooling’ (p.163). Carabello (2011) argued that examining the intersection between the academic experiences and student subjectivities particularly in terms of how students create and negotiate their ‘multiple selves can serve as a lens to analyse the connections and interactions between students’ experiences of the curriculum and academic achievement’ (p.157).

Class Relationships to Underachievement

As noted above, discourses of individual and cultural deficit have been employed to explain differential academic performance for a long period of time. Typically, the neoliberal ‘solution’ to the differences in achievement is for students to avail themselves of the ‘equality of opportunity’ that public schooling provides in order to improve their academic performance and consequently their ability and effort will be rewarded with the opportunity to be upwardly mobile. Research has consistently demonstrated however that these assumptions are not supported by findings that the educational outcomes of most indigenous

students nor of most poor students are lower than their middle class counterparts. For example, Tunmer, Chapman, Greaney, Prochnow & Arrow (2013) noted within the New Zealand context that since 1991 international studies of literacy achievement such as the Progress in International Reading Literacy Study (PIRLS) which examines the reading and literacy of students from around the world in the Year 5 equivalent in New Zealand have revealed Māori or Pasifika students and /or students from low SES backgrounds were the lowest performing readers. Tunmer et al. (2013), noted that given New Zealand's relatively high level of prosperity (according to the World Bank New Zealand is ranked 30th in world in GDP per capita) it would be expected that New Zealand would perform better than countries with larger disparities in material wealth.

There has been a 'strong tradition' within the sociology of education that within the public education systems of Western capitalist societies (including New Zealand) that social class is a reliable predictor of school participation and academic success (Campbell, 2007). Moreover, it has been well documented that:

The ways schools work in relation to class formation is not always predictable. Individuals and families from different social classes and different sections within classes use schools differently, and more or less effectively. Where it is possible to detect common approaches to schooling among individuals and families who share similar occupations, wealth and social influence, it is then we are likely to detect distinctive relationships between the social classes and schooling and education (Campbell, 2007, p.128).

Indeed, research has long demonstrated a strong connection between the kinds of schooling received by different social classes and their educational and career trajectories. For example, J.A. La Nauze, an economist in Australia in the 1940s identified the relationship between private secondary school attendance by middle class students and their increased likelihood of gaining entrance to law and medical degrees than working class students attending government schools (La Nauze, 1940).

However, despite the demonstrated relationship between social class membership and academic success, a pathologisation of the poor has featured in politics and scholarship since the 1960s (Michels, 2013). For example, according to 'underclass theory', the issue is not one

of economic poverty but rather an impoverishment or pathologisation of cultural values (Bullen & Kenway, 2005). Underpinning 'underclass' theory is the notion that the poor are responsible for their impoverishment and have a 'present-orientation' which is characterised by impulsive behaviour, no ambition, engagement in antisocial behaviour, a desire for instant gratification, sexual promiscuity and an ambivalence towards education (Michels, 2013). Michels (2013) noted that this conceptualisation of the underclass has informed a disdain and a laissez faire attitude towards the poor, particularly by conservative governments, which has been used to justify cuts to welfare and social programs. This view of the poor has also been promulgated by conservative commentators such as Charles Murray in the United States who has attributed the membership to the 'underclass' as being the result of their 'moral decay' resulting in a lack of religiosity, an orientation towards family, work ethic and an education (Michels, 2013). According to Murray, the 'underclass' is composed of particular groups of poor people including the so-called 'welfare mothers' who are primarily young and black with children born out of marriage and young black men, although as Michels (2013), noted while Murray does not explicitly refer to young black men, it is implied. The underclass discourse has also gained traction in other parts of the world including Great Britain where similar themes of deficient personality, values, attitudes and antisocial behavioural characteristics are invoked to explain the underclass rather than prevailing social and economic conditions (Michels, 2013).

While the underclass discourse has been mobilised particularly by the political right to explain the ambivalence or indeed antipathy of the poor towards education, within the New Zealand context, Bullen and Kenway (2005) have proposed an alternative perspective that, rather than simply viewing the rejection of school by some children (namely, poor and working class children) as an attribute of the 'underclass community', that these students may in fact be excluded from school and respond accordingly. Bullen and Kenway (2005)

suggested that the deployment of these strategies may be necessary for survival in the classroom and the 'positional suffering they experience there' (Bullen & Kenway, 2005, p. 53). As such, they indicate that rather than being a reflection of underclass culture that the deployment of these strategies 'may well constitute a high volume of subcultural capital' (Bullen & Kenway, 2005, p.53). Thornton (1995) coined the term subcultural capital as a means of theorising club culture in the UK and uses the term to refer to the way in which young people 'imagine their own and other social groups, assert their distinctive character and affirm that they are not anonymous members of an undifferentiated mass' (Thornton, 1995, p.10).

Hodgetts and Griffin (2015) noted however the danger inherent in the use of psychological deficiencies to understand social class differences. In particular, they noted the tendency of the psychological disciplines to individualise the causes of social inequality which results in the pathologisation of working class people as deficient while privileging the normative practices of the white middle class (Hodgetts & Griffin, 2015). Moreover, they suggested that the individualisation of inequality can result in a 'blame the victim' mentality in which the 'victim' is perceived as being responsible for their social and economic situation and this is seen as justification for interventions that are designed to change the attitudes and behaviour of working class people. Within the context of educational underachievement I propose in this thesis that a similar antipathy exists towards students who are discursively constructed as underachieving and that these students are positioned as needing to be 'fixed' (I trouble the tendency of the psychological disciplines to individualise educational underachievement in Chapter Four).

Cromby and Willis (2014) referred to the deployment of psychological testing and behavioural change techniques by neoliberal governments in the United Kingdom as a 'technology of governmentality' as a means of 'reconfiguring selves and the social order in

accord with the demands of market economies' (p.241) and argued that online psychometric testing has been deployed by the UK government to 'nudge' welfare claimants to accept normative neoliberal subjectivities. Cromby and Willis (2014) note that although:

Policy documents occasionally acknowledge some of the financial constraints and institutional barriers facing those on benefits and low incomes, their overall tone serves to attribute responsibility for poverty and unemployment to the poor choices and unhelpful behaviour of individuals (p.243).

Similarly, Walkerdine (2015) cited research within the American context which has found that 'welfare dependency' and its intergenerational transmission is explained by the behaviour and choices of welfare recipients and as such they have become pathologised in psychological terms. In the next section I argue that a similar argument can be made in respect to neoliberal education policies in which responsibility for academic success lies with the student.

According to Hodgetts and Griffin (2015) underpinning the development of psychometric testing to address the character deficits of welfare recipients in order to 'nudge' them into becoming productive citizens is the discourse of aspiration. They argued that the aspirational discourse is associated with rhetoric regarding the 'importance of (these) lower class groups engaging fully in education in order to obtain a middle class cultural capital that is presented as foundational to upward social mobility' (p.157). The assumption is that working class students will 'buy in' to the discourse. For example, Stahl (2012) found in an examination of how the subjectivities of white working class boys in south London were shaped by neoliberal discourses around educational aspirations that:

Pupils are judged as having bought in or bought out, depending on whether or not they accept the socially mobile middle-class aspirations by the educational, economic and political systems prescribes, which often exist in tension with their own concepts of aspiration (p.9).

Indeed, according to Reay (2013) the reinvention of education as an 'aspirational project for the self' has resulted in social mobility taking its place where 'we are all supposed to aspire to becoming doctors and lawyers, or even princesses, footballers, celebrities and billionaire entrepreneurs' (p.666) and that middle and upper class parents engage in

strategising to ensure that their children are in pole position to beat other parents children. As Reay (2013) noted the onus is on working class parents therefore to develop attitudes towards their children's education that are comparable to normative middle class attitudes. She noted however that the aspirational discourse overlooks the structural factors that complicate the ability of working class parents to fully engage in education. In particular, she flagged research such as that by Hartas (2011), indicating that parental education and income have far greater influences on their children's school achievement than parental attitudes towards education and therefore that structural solutions to inequality such as tax policy reform are required rather than individual solutions 'in order to combat the symbolic violence that underpins commonsense understandings of the causes of working-class underachievement' (p.666). Moreover, Reay (2013) was critical of the assumption of aspirational rhetoric that working class people are inferior to those at the top of the social hierarchy and therefore have to change who they are in order to become a better class of person. In addition, Reay (2001) has previously argued that even in the minority of cases where working class children experience academic success that there remains the problem of being 'found out' (Reay, 2001). Reay (2001) argued that there cannot be discussion about working class relationships to education without problematising hegemonic representations of the working classes. She has proposed therefore that there is also a need to problematise normative conceptions of academic success and failure. For example, she found in a study examining working class relationships to education that academic success was not normative for working class students and in order to do well they had to position themselves as 'other' (Reay, 2001).

In order to trouble hegemonic discursive practices regarding students' academic subjectivities, a post-structuralist approach was mobilised by Walkerdine (1989) to foreground the way in which discourse can shape the educational 'possibilities' for children's practice. Walkerdine (1989) examined how the discourses used to understand children's

mathematical practices actually worked to differentially position children from different classes. For example, while the ‘bourgeois’ child’s conception of the mathematical concepts ‘less’ and ‘more’ were found to be similar to the school’s conception of these terms, working class children’s conceptions of these terms were positioned outside discourses of achievement in this academic content area.

Similarly, in her research on Pacific Island and Pākehā girls in New Zealand schools Jones (1993) found that taken for granted terms such as ‘teaching’, ‘learning’, ‘authority’ and ‘school work’ are ‘taken up’ by middle class Pākehā girls as ‘a product of the class cultural practices of their families’ (Jones, 1993, p.163). She found that working-class Pacific Island girls however have a different interpretation of terms such as ‘school work’ and ‘authority’ ‘through discourses shaped within their own history, and their cultural beliefs in the wisdom and authority of elders’ (p.163). Jones (1993) suggested that:

...there is a sense in which such working-class minority children have failed before they begin; they cannot be ‘good students’ within the dominant discourses of secondary schooling. Such a focus on the discursive production of school achievement invites us to approach differently such problems as ‘minority working-class girls do poorly at school work’ and ‘girls do relatively poorly in mathematics’ (p.164).

Jones (1993) lay down the challenge for researchers ‘to unpick (deconstruct) the language and texts of educators and schools in order to tease out their possible meanings – and thus their implications for practice’ (p.164). Furthermore, Jones (1993) argued that there is a need for discourses on schooling (for example, the cultural constructedness of ‘school work’ and ‘authority’) to be made explicit so that teaching and learning can be viewed as forms of cultural practice rather than simply ‘good’ or ‘bad’ work.

On the other side of the coin Reay (2001) argued that for middle class parents ‘the imperative to reproduce their privileged class position is profound’ (p.341). So much so, that the academic success experienced by middle class children masks a fear of failure that is deeply rooted in middle class subjectivities and it is this fear of failure that forces middle class parents to adopt strategies to ensure educational advantage for their children. Such

strategies include campaigning for streaming or ability grouping to be introduced; employing private tutors; and buying properties within catchment areas of high achieving secondary schools (Reay, 2001). According to Reay (2001) this only serves to widen the existing social divisions in schools and ensures that academic failure remains firmly located within the working classes. Moreover, middle class children are learning that academic failure is intolerable (Reay, 2001). This is perhaps not so surprising given the centrality of social mobility and academic success to the middle class position. Consequently, Reay argued that working class relationships to education cannot be understood independently from middle class subjectivities (Reay, 2001).

The issue of social class is also problematic from a post-structuralist perspective as it reinforces the taken-for-grantedness of social class and glosses over the complexity of how identity categories intersect and their role in the constitution of educational subjectivities. Moreover, social class is a contested category and its meaning varies depending upon the theoretical or political perspective in which it is addressed. For example, Elizabeth Skeggs (1997) demonstrated that class informed the production of the subjectivities of white, working class women in North-West England who in their desire to be recognised as ‘respectable’ were ‘painfully aware’ of being judged against middle class women, hence demonstrating the way in which social class and its intersection with gender informed their subjectivities. Within the context of education, research has demonstrated the complex issues faced by working class students wishing to enter higher education. For example, Reay (2001) found that working class students struggled to negotiate the ‘risk, cost and benefit’ (p.556) of entering higher education with feelings of inferiority and fear.

In view of the above, this thesis will examine the role that institutional discursive practices play in production of students’ educational subjectivities. Thus, rather than taking up Bourdieu’s notion of social reproduction as the way in which educational institutions

inevitably reproduce the doxa of neoliberal values and meanings of the dominant social group by virtue of the dominant groups' control over economic, social and political resources, I wish to offer a more nuanced understanding of the 'discursive rationalities' (O'Flynn & Petersen, 2007) operating within educational institutions that constitute particular subject positions. Specifically, by adopting a post-structural understanding of subjectivity as being constantly shifting, multifaceted and contradictory (Davies, 1991), this thesis will utilise subjectivity as a means of understanding the relationship between multiple identities and hence to problematise the hegemonic discourses associated with social categories and the unitary notion of the self that are often invoked to understand/explain academic underachievement. By doing so it becomes possible to destabilize and transform taken-for-granted school practices and discourses that *produce* students' subjectivities as underachieving.

Gender Discourses and Underachievement

As outlined above, ethnicity and social class differences have been mobilised as discrete categories to understand and explain underachievement. Arguably, however it is the 'gender achievement gap' that has received the greatest amount of professional, government and public attention regarding underachievement within the last twenty five years. Much of this focus would give the impression that it was and remains exclusively an issue for boys. In the following section I outline the dominant discourses and solutions regarding boys' underachievement and their critique.

While much of the gender discourses regarding underachievement have in recent years focused on boys' underachievement in particular, it is noteworthy that up until the early 1990s, the disadvantages that girls faced relative to boys in the context of education was the focus. As Weaver-Hightower (2003) noted 'schools were seen as significant causes of

inequality for women and, more important, as a key institution through which such inequalities could be dismantled' (p.471). Consequently, policy, practice and research were geared towards understanding and addressing the disadvantages experienced by girls in educational contexts. In the early 1990s however, the focus shifted to boys' education (referred to by Weaver-Hightower, 2003, as the 'boy turn') particularly in the United Kingdom, Australia and New Zealand. It is interesting to note that the issue of 'failing boys' is only of relatively recent concern in the Netherlands, France and Finland (Driessen & van Langen, 2013). The shift in focus from girls to boys was spurred on by parental pressure and media attention which subsequently informed government policy and a very large research corpus on 'boys' education'.

Since the 1980s, discourses on so-called 'gender gaps' in achievement in particular have predominated in the 'underachievement' debate both in New Zealand (Biddulph, 1995; Education Review Office, 1999; Martino, Kehler & Weaver-Hightower, 2009, Potter, 1999; Rathgen, 1998) and internationally (Epstein, Elwood, Hey, & Maw, 1998; Lahelma, 2014; Lingard, Martino, Mills & Bahr, 2002; Mac an Ghaill, 1994). Referred to by Arnesen, Lahelma and Öhrn (2008) as the 'travelling discourse' whereby 'what counts as 'facts' travel in various ways across the world' (p.79), the 'problems' experienced by boys in terms of academic 'underachievement' has spawned wide-spread media attention as well as the attention of governments in terms of official 'gender equality' policies aimed at addressing the 'issue' (Arnesen et al., 2008). As discussed below, the 'travelling discourse' of 'failing boys' has also made its way to New Zealand.

Media coverage of the so-called 'the gender gap' in education abounded particularly in the 1990s and 2000s. For example within the New Zealand context, headlines such as: "Girls on top: Boys will do anything to prove they're not girls, or geeks. Is this why girls are doing better at school?" *Listener* (1998, 17 January); "Boys will Boys – despite what we do"

Parent & School (2003, Vol 1, Summer); “Let boys be boys” *The Star* (2003, 14 August); “Lifting boys’ educational standards” *Otago Daily Times* (2004, 19 July); “But boys can do anything, too” *Otago Daily Times* (2006, 20 May); ‘Boys losing the battle of the sexes’ *Sunday Star Times* (2003, 15 June). Headlines making similar claims appeared internationally including Germany, Japan and Scandinavia (Connell, 2000). The prevalence of war metaphors used to describe boys’ underachievement is noteworthy (e.g., ‘gender wars’, ‘war against’, ‘battle of the sexes’). In addition, such headlines share the ‘zero-sum game’ where if girls achieve it must be at the cost of boys’ achievement. The concerns about boys’ are based on the perception that they are falling behind girls and therefore need to ‘catch up’ and the assumption that the better performance of girls applies to all girls (Plummer, 2000).

The media driven ‘Moral Panic’ (Epstein, Elwood, Hey & Maw, 1998; Gilbert & Gilbert, 1998) described by Titus (2004) as ‘a perceived threat to values or interests held sacred by society’ (p.145) that ensued also led to a veritable industry of popular literature about the causes for and solutions to the issues encountered by boys. For example, within the American context, books such as *Iron John* (Bly, 1991) *Real Boys: Rescuing Ours Sons from the Myths of Boyhood* (Pollack, 1998); *The Myth of Male Power* (Farrell, 1993); *The War Against Boys* (Sommers, 2000) *A Fine Young Man: What Parents, Mentors and Educators Can Do to Shape Adolescent Boys into Exceptional Men* (Gurian, 1998) and *Boys and Girls Learn Differently* (Gurian, 2001) variously ascribe boys’ academic failure, disengagement from school, suspension and expulsions, dropping out, drug use, violence and depression, to the failure of the schools to meet their educative needs (Weaver-Hightower, 2003). Within the Australian context, Stephen Biddulph’s *Manhood* (1995) and *Raising Boys* (1997) argued that boys are disadvantaged by society and that schools are “feminized”. While in New Zealand, Celia Lashlie (2005) penned *He’ll be Ok – Growing Gorgeous Boys Into Good Men*

where Lashlie (2005) advised mothers to ‘back off’ (for example, by not making school lunches for their sons) to allow boys to take more responsibility for their lives.

Referred to as ‘backlash blockbusters’, Mills (2003) has noted that many such texts were regularly cited in newspaper and magazine feature articles about men and boys and as such have had a direct impact upon discourses relating to ‘gender gaps’ in educational attainment. Moreover, Mills (2003) also noted that notwithstanding the concern expressed by the authors of such texts to ‘acknowledge a commitment to gender equity and social justice programmes for women and girls’ (p.60) that upon closer scrutiny an ‘anti feminist’ sentiment is apparent. This anti-feminism manifests itself as a ‘competing victim syndrome’ whereby males are faced with comparable forms of oppression that are experienced by females thereby inferring that feminism ‘overstates’ the privileged status of males within the existing gender order (Mills, 2003). For example, Mills (2003) cited Farrell (1993) who contended that men have been ‘victims’ of an unjust gender system where:

He draws parallels between the master-slave relationship and a female-male relationship. He argues that like slaves, men also do society’s most dangerous jobs, have their children taken away from them, act submissively to their masters (women) in the form of giving up their seats on buses and standing up when they enter the room, die earlier than their masters, and do all the work so that the money earned from it can be spent by their masters (Mills, 2003, p.61).

As a consequence of the perceived ‘feminising’ influences of women, the absence of fathers in boys’ lives and a lack of spirituality which robbed boys and men of their ‘deep masculinity, the men’s mythopoetic movement has argued that male suicide, depression, violence against women, alcohol and substance abuse, imprisonment and school failure have resulted (Mills, 2003). Books by Biddulph (1997) in Australia and Lashlie (2005) in New Zealand were written to inform parents about how best to assist their sons to negotiate their lives to become ‘Good Men’. In addition, as Mills (2003) noted, the mythopoetic discourse has informed many boys programmes in schools and the development of pedagogical practices designed to address boys’ ‘needs’.

As noted above discourses regarding underachievement which had been promulgated by the media were subsequently ‘taken-up’ by governments in ‘a policy epidemic’ (Levin, 1998) to address the ‘achievement gap’. For example, within the Australian context concern at the federal level resulted in the publication of the report, *Boys: Getting it Right* (Australian House of Representatives Standing Committee on Education and Training, 2002) which led to a number of federally funded initiatives such as the Boys’ Education Lighthouse grant program (Commonwealth Department of Education Science and Training, 2003). In 2005 the Minister for Education announced the governments funding for the *Success for Boys* program (DEST, 2005) which was justified on the ‘overwhelming evidence that boys are falling behind girls in terms of educational performance’ (p.192). However, a carefully nuanced examination of the data show the ‘achievement gaps’ between girls and boys results in literacy and numeracy were relatively small when compared to the literacy and numeracy results of the children (girls and boys) of professional and blue collar workers.

In New Zealand, the government’s initial response to the issue of ‘boys’ underachievement’ came with the publication of the Education Review Office’s report, *The Achievement of Boys* (Education Review Office, 1999) in which it outlined its concerns about the differential achievement of boys and girls in external examinations where it noted:

This pattern of achievement in external examinations is likely to reflect differences in the achievement of boys and girls throughout their schooling. In the primary sector, boys are consistently reported as having greater difficulties and poorer results than girls in the areas of written and oral language, handwriting, spelling and overall school progress. Two thirds of students who attend reading recovery programmes are boys (Education Review Office, 1999, p.7).

This report was followed up with *Promoting Boys’ Achievement* (Education Review Office, 2000) in which it reported that only a small minority of schools were responding to the issues outlined in the previous report. In their comprehensive analysis of the ‘relative’ achievement of girls and boys in New Zealand, *Explaining and addressing gender differences in the New Zealand compulsory school sector*, Alton-Lee and Praat (2000) indicated that the use of national examination results failed to account for the complexity underlying the

relative achievement of boys and girls. For example, national examination results tend to treat girls and boys as homogenous groups and ignore the diversity and differences within these groups. Furthermore, national examination results provide little information about the full picture of boys' and girls' participation and engagement in school (Alton-Lee & Praat, 2000). Alton-Lee and Praat's (2000) analysis subsequently gained support from the accumulated evidence from the National Education Monitoring Project (which monitored the educational achievement of years 4 and 8 students in New Zealand schools and covered 15 curricula twice in four year cycles from 1993 to 2010) which indicated only modest differences across the majority of subjects. The only areas found to be favouring girls generally were writing, reading and speaking at year 4 level and writing in particular at year 8 level (Crooks, 2003). Crooks (2003) indicated that:

Taken together, these results suggest that current professional and public concern about the poor achievement of boys relative to that of girls is not justified for boys at primary school level, except perhaps in regard to the development of writing skills (p.11).

Nevertheless, national examination results have been invoked by the media, the education profession and the community to incite debate about the comparative achievement of boys and girls at all levels of the education system. Notwithstanding the invisibility of the 'underachieving girl' (Jones, 2005, p.269) or any girl for that matter, media reports continued to highlight the apparent disparities between girls' and boys' achievement. Within the United Kingdom context Delamont (1999) indicated that 'the moral panic about boys' under-performance is based on a lack of understanding of the rising achievements of both sexes, and the resistance of commentators to hearing good news' (p.9). As a consequence 'most commentators, especially journalists, prefer a simple hostile myth about bad boys poorly taught to the reality of school achievement' (Delamont, 1999, p.9). Ball (1990) coined the phrase 'discourses of derision' to describe the 'hostile myths' promulgated by right-wing commentators in the United Kingdom to deride state education in the late 1970's and 1980's. Delamont (1999) contended that the media's response to English girls overtaking boys in

academic achievement (as evidenced by their performance in GCSE and A-level exams) as a 'classic discourse of derision' whereby 'There was no praise for the girls, for the schools and teachers who had achieved this enormous improvement in the attainment of women, or for the local authorities in whose schools the gains had taken place' (Delamont, 1999, p.5).

Rather, the media blamed schools and teachers for failing boys and 'willfully misunderstood or ignored' the evidence of both female and male achievement. Indeed, as Titus (2004) indicated, challenges to the claims about boys' achievement were conspicuous by their absence in the media. For example, within the United Kingdom context, the disaggregation of data relating to academic performance revealed that there was more 'overlap' than difference between boys' and girls' achievement (e.g., Epstein et al., 1998). Similarly, within the New Zealand context a great deal of the reporting of academic achievement in the media positioned boys as the 'disadvantaged' despite the evidence to the contrary.

'Failing Boys' Discourses

As noted above, the professional, government and public debate about boys' education has been influenced by a variety of discourses including the 'poor boys' discourse, the 'failing schools' discourse, and the 'boys will be boys' discourse (Epstein, Elwood, Hey & Maw, 1998). These dominant discourses about boys' achievement gained 'international currency' (Epstein et al, 1998). In Foucauldian (1980) terms these discourses constitute a 'regime of truth' while at the same time 'being the vehicle through which participants in the discourse enact and negotiate social identities, relationships, and institutions' (Titus, 2004, p.146).

The 'poor boys' discourse positions boys as the 'innocent victims' in education and has been labelled as the 'lads movement' (Kenway, 1995). Proponents of the discourse (such as Biddulph, 1995) argue that women (women teachers, mothers and feminists in particular)

are to blame for the failure of boys. Within the United Kingdom context Delamont (1999) contended that blaming women teachers for boys academic failure is problematic for a number of reasons including: it treats boys as a homogenous mass and assumes that ‘they all ‘naturally’ need caning, cold showers and paramilitary drill to succeed in their French lessons’ (p.14); it assumes that all women teachers share a ‘progressive, anti-competitive, nurturing vision of education’ (p.14); it assumes all male teachers are competitive, sports-loving, disciplinarians whose mere presence in classrooms provides automatic role models, and women teachers as ‘sports-phobic’, weak disciplinarians who are incapable of being role models for boys; and it assumes that all women teachers are committed to feminism and apply feminist theory to classroom practice. Similarly, within the Finnish context, Lahelma (2000) has noted that although the ‘problem’ of the lack of male teachers and its relationship with boys’ underachievement has been a recurrent theme in educational discourse since the nineteenth century, this concern is not borne out. For example, she found in her study in which she initially interviewed 13-14 year old students and conducted follow-up four years later that the gender of the classroom teacher was not a factor in terms of their evaluations of their ‘ideal teachers’. Indeed, Lahelma (2000) found that irrespective of gender, students indicated their preference for teachers who could teach, keep classroom order (in particular being able to maintain good control of the classroom without being overly authoritarian) and who are friendly and relaxed. Moreover, she noted that the ‘lack of male teachers’ discourse appears to be more of an issue for teaching professionals than for students but has been taken for granted as a ‘truth’.

The ‘boys will be boys’ discourse has been accorded almost universal ‘common-sense status’ (Epstein et al., 1998). This essentialist discourse posits that the aggression and delayed maturity associated with ‘boyiness’ is innate and therefore unchanging and unchangeable (Gilbert & Gilbert, 1998). The discourse posits that the poor achievement of

boys is extrinsic to boys and therefore can only be remedied by a 'boy friendly' pedagogy which engages boys' interests. For example, specific classroom approaches include the delivery of highly structured instruction and lessons; changing activities frequently; placing a greater emphasis on teacher-directed learning activities rather than 'group' work; providing opportunities for additional tuition (e.g., Slavin, Madden, Dolan, Wasik, Ross & Smith, 1997) as well as the provision of 'hands-on' learning opportunities (e.g., Martino, Lingard & Mills, 2004). As Sukhnandan, Lee & Kelleher (2000) have noted however there is little research to support the efficacy of such strategies. In an evaluation of three types of interventions designed to improve boys' educational outcomes (including single-sex classes, role modelling by adults and additional literacy support) they found none of the strategies reduced disparities in academic performance. In addition, Cuttance and Thompson (2008) have suggested that the need for structure has been misinterpreted as a gender issue. They stated that:

Interpreting the evidence that shows some boys have problems with their learning as all or most boys generally have problems with their learning, fails to recognise the fact that boys who have difficulties with their learning are most often novice learners and have weak executive control over their learning. As such, they are expected to benefit from high levels of structure in the learning process (p.31).

The 'boys will be boys' discourse also utilises the notion that girls police, teach, control and civilize boys. Epstein and Johnson (1998) argued that this approach 'rests firmly on the determined and unrelenting heterosexualisation of schools' (Epstein and Johnson, 1998, p.9). In addition, Epstein and Johnson (1998) suggested that 'Boys will not only be boys, it seems, they will be heterosexual boys; and it is because they are (assumed to be) heterosexual boys that the presumption is made that the civilizing influence of girls will work' (p.9). These 'assumptions' have been challenged however for their failure to problematise hegemonic forms of masculinity as well as being 'a covert way of reconfirming unequal gender relations between boys/girls and men/women' (Jackson, 2002, p.78).

As Lahelma (2014) has noted, although such assumptions have been extensively challenged by feminist researchers they continue to be perpetuated by the media. Moreover, politicians, the general public and ‘educational authorities often seem inclined to listen to the media discourses rather than listening to researchers or heading official policies and resolutions on gender equality’ (Lahelma, 2014, p.172). For example, as Epstein et al. (1998) have previously noted, media reports of the ‘gender gap’ in achievement would suggest that:

All girls are doing better than all boys in measured attainment at school ... There is more overlap between the attainment of boys and girls than there is difference; there are significant differences in the relative attainments of boys and girls in different subjects and different levels; and, while there are many boys who are not performing well at schools, there are many other who are doing very well indeed (p.10).

Francis (2006) noted that while the ‘boys will be boys discourse’ has lost some traction in recent years, that the ‘poor boys’ discourse has retained ‘a powerful’ hegemony particularly at a policy level.

The so-called ‘gender gap’ has been extensively challenged by feminist researchers since the mid-1990s who have observed that not all boys are underachieving and conversely not all girls are achieving either (Francis, 2006). Furthermore, researchers argue that ethnicity and social class have a greater bearing on educational attainment than gender (Epstein et al 1998; Lucey 2001; Reay 2002). The concerns raised by feminist academics around the issue of ‘boys’ underachievement’ particularly concerns the way in which it has been addressed in the media and its impact upon educational policy including: ‘(a) masking the continuing problems faced by girls in schools; (b) reinforcing male privilege by justifying greater focus and expenditure on meeting boys’ needs (at the expense of girls); and (c) deflecting attention from the larger achievement gaps according to ‘race’ and social class’ (Francis, 2006, p.188).

In addition to these concerns is the problematic presentation of ‘boy’s underachievement’ as a homogenous group. As noted above, contrary to popular rhetoric, there is no broad evidence (such as PISA, TIMMS) within the New Zealand context to support the notion that boys as a group are ‘underachieving’ although there is evidence that

there are some marginal gender differences in reading and writing as reflected by the larger number of boys involved in literacy intervention programs such as Reading Recovery (Cuttance & Thompson, 2008). However, as Cuttance and Thompson (2008) noted ‘it is fallacious to extrapolate from this to a conclusion that boys as a group are achieving at substantially lower levels than girls as a group’ (p.50). Similarly, Weaver-Hightower (2003) suggested that: ‘To argue that the disadvantages in boys’ education pertain to the majority of White, upper-class, heterosexual boys is suspect at best. Advocates for boys’ programs must work harder to disaggregate what they mean by “boy”’ (p.485). In recognition of the diversity of boys’ achievement, a number of educationalists have proposed that asking ‘Which boys?’ have the poorest outcomes and why, offers more promise in addressing issues regarding ‘boys’ underachievement’ than the essentialising ‘failing boys’ discourse’ (e.g., Arnot & Arizpe, 1997; Kenway & Willis, 1998, Epstein et al 1998; Teese et al., 1995). In addition, Lahelma (2014) has indicated that while some boys may ‘underachieve’ in terms of poor academic performance it may be appropriate to examine this in the context of research on masculinities.

‘The Crisis of Masculinity’

A number of researchers have interrogated the issue of gendered power and the construction of masculinities (Connell, 1989, 1995; Epstein, 1997; Epstein et al. 1998; Frosh, Phoenix & Pattman, 2002; Kenway & Fitzclarence, 1997; Mac an Ghaill, 1994; McDowell, 2002a; McDowell, 2002b; Skelton, 1997; Martino & Pallotta-Chiarolli, 2003). For example, Martino and Pallotta-Chiarolli (2003) used boys’ narratives as a way of examining how adolescent boys negotiate and perform their masculinities within the Australian context in response to ‘the backlash politics driving a moral panic and concern about boys in Australia,

the UK and the USA, which construct boys as the “new disadvantaged” (Martino & Pallotta-Chiarolli, 2003, p.xiii).

The main focus of the work on masculinities as applied to the ‘underachieving boys’ debate is that being ‘one of the lads’ at school (such as the privileging of ‘laddiness’ by the working class boys in Paul Willis’ (1977) seminal study) involves the display of characteristics associated with hegemonic masculinity (Jackson, 2002). Kenway and Fitzclarence (1997) argued that ‘Hegemonic masculinity is the standard-bearer of what it means to be a ‘real’ man or boy and many males draw inspiration from its cultural library of resources’ (Kenway & Fitzclarence, 1997, pp. 119-120). Hegemonic masculinities are located within a structure of gender/sexual power relations, and boys define their identities vis-à-vis the Other (those who are viewed as not possessing the qualities which are valued by hegemonic masculinity, for example those who are labelled as ‘feminine’ or ‘queer’) within the context of these relations (Epstein, 1997; Renold, 2001; Renold, 2004).

In her study of 14-16 year old pupils Francis (1999) found that being ‘laddish’ appeared to be commonly accepted among the pupils interviewed. The performance of a ‘laddish’ persona included demonstrating an ‘interest in masculine-type activities such as football, the objectification of and sexual activity with females, an irreverent and rebellious attitude to authority, physical strength, boisterousness, bravery, daring, camaraderie and “having a laugh”’ (p.124). As Martino (1999) observed, such behaviours are more consistent with sporting ability than academic performance. The construction of a ‘laddish’ persona has implications for learning, particularly in relation to schoolwork where concentration and diligence are required (Francis, 1999). When asked to speculate about the causes of ‘laddish’ behaviour, the boys in Francis’ (1999) study indicated that they did so ‘in order to portray themselves as ‘hard’ and/or to impress their friends’ (p.125). Francis (1999) suggested

therefore that boys who engage in 'laddish' behaviour may be impeding not only their own learning and achievement but also that of their classmates, and teachers' abilities to teach.

There also appears to be common acceptance by teachers that simply, some students are achievers while others are not. For example, Lingard, Martino, Mills and Bahr (2002) reported that one teacher surveyed in their study reported that 'lower ability' boys were disruptive in class if they thought they wouldn't succeed. Teachers did not question what other factors might be contributing to the boys' disruptive behaviour, rather it was simply attributed to boys' 'fear of failure'. Connolly (2004) has been critical however of the tendency to treat masculinity as if it is a 'lifestyle choice', whereby boys simply choose to adopt or discard various forms of masculinity at will. He argued for example, that the notion of 'laddish culture' implies this by focusing simply on the 'laddish' behaviours with little attempt to explain their origins. Connolly (2004) concluded from his study of young working class and middle class boys that the 'laddishness' of the young working class boys was not simply a lifestyle choice but rather 'a set of dispositions reflecting the material conditions within which boys are located' (Connolly, 2004, p. 219). Connolly (2004) suggested therefore that attempts to encourage boys to adopt more positive and constructive forms of masculinity will only have limited success unless the conditions that give rise to their existing identities are also addressed (Connolly, 2004). Furthermore, Connolly (2004) has questioned whether the term 'underachievement' is appropriate to describe the experiences of those boys whose 'masculine identities and dispositions towards education are so deeply ingrained' (Connolly, 2004, p.219). Given that they do not have the dispositions to deal with the demands of school they may simply be doing the best that they can (Connolly, 2004).

Feminist research has highlighted the complexities around the issue of multiple masculinities. For example, in *Shaun's Story*, Reay (2002) argued that there is a significant

‘psychic cost’ for white working class boys who are trying to succeed academically while also maintaining normative masculine performances:

Shaun’s text is rife with such tensions. There is a continual movement between the material and psychological consequences of poverty, which implicate both school and home, and an optimism of the will that, although at times deflated and at others fragile, Shaun manages to sustain despite the odds (Reay, 2002, p.310).

As has been reported elsewhere however, school achievement can be socially problematic for girls as well. For example, Walkerdine (1989) demonstrated in her longitudinal study of girls’ achievement in relation mathematics that:

The discursive production of femininity as antithetical to masculine rationality to such an extent that femininity is *equated* (original emphasis) with poor performance, even when the girl or woman in question is performing well (p.268).

Walkerdine (1989) found that regardless of how well girls were said to perform that this performance was invariably dismissed with a pejorative remark by their teachers. For example, the girls performance was said to be ‘based on hard work and rule-following rather than brains or brilliance’ (p.268) whereas she found that boys ‘poor’ performance was spoken about in terms of them having ‘potential’. The use of the word ‘potential’ was not used in relation to any girls in Walkerdine’s (1989) study where ‘Quite the contrary, if a girl was performing poorly there was no way she could be considered good’ (p.268). Similarly, in an examination of the gendered subjectivities of ‘high achieving girls from diverse social and cultural backgrounds’ (p.457) Renold and Allan (2006) found that girls had to negotiate the competing demands of academic achievement with normative performances of femininity. For example, being a “high achiever” or “doing clever” were not seen as being compatible with “girl femininities” or “doing girl”.

Reconceptualising Gender and Underachievement

Of particular concern regarding the discursive construction of underachievement as a gender issue is that boys *and* girls are positioned as unitary categories where the discursive practices associated with underachievement have focused on boys while excluding girls.

Lahelma (2005) suggests that the discourses associated with ‘failing boys’ are underpinned by historically produced “systems of reason” that refer to ‘rules and standards for thinking about the objects of education’ (p.79) which subsequently inform discussion on gender and underachievement. Lahelma’s (2005) comments echoed those of Walkerdine (1989) who remarked that: ‘ideas about reason and reasoning cannot be understood historically outside considerations about gender’ (p.269). Lahelma (2005) argued that these “systems of reason” are grounded in taken for granted assumptions such as the generalisation that all girls experience academic success while all boys are unsuccessful; that the success of girls is perceived as a problem while the underachievement of boys is viewed as ‘heroic’ as well as the assumption that school achievement is correlated with post school education and career trajectories. With respect to the last assumption Lahelma (2005) found that within the Finnish context, school grades are in fact of more importance for young women in terms of access to further education and employment than they are to young men. Furthermore, as Lahelma (2014) noted, the ‘boy discourse’ is ‘not helpful (politically or theoretically) for those boys who have difficulties at school’ as the discourse is underpinned by the assumption that girls and boys are inherently different. Consequently, Lahelma (2014) argued that the categorisation of girls’ and boys’ results, boys’ educational needs being distinct from those of girls, that the characteristics of some boys are generalised to apply to all boys, and that girls academic success is seen as being problematic for boys’ lack of academic success (Lahelma, 2014). As Lahelma (2005) had previously noted: ‘The real question should not be whether girls as a group or boys as a group are more disadvantaged, but which girls and which boys’ (p.87). Moreover, according to current conceptualisations of academic success and academic failure, there will always be a cohort of male and female ‘failures’ although the patterns of failure tend to differ where:

On the whole, girls fail quietly, while boys’ failure is more noisy and noticeable. While the poor achievement of boys has been regarded as an educational problem, the problems of girls with poor

achievement have been ignored even though these girls stay outside further education more often (Lahelma, 2005, p.87).

Similarly, Hayes (2003) contended that concerns about girls' achievement have historically been framed in terms of their need to achieve a status, which they have never actually held and referred to the concept of 'relative disadvantage', the notion that both boys and girls experience disadvantage within different curriculum areas and that analyses of how gender functions in discourses on achievement need to be more complexly contextualized. However, as Hayes (2003) indicated, this is not reflected in current discourses on achievement, which tend to rely on 'crude indicators of success and failure' (p.10).

Hayes (2003) noted that the use of gender as the only marker of identity has resulted in 'persistent silences' in the various educational discourses about who is advantaged and disadvantaged:

Students are not simply girls or boys, they may also be indigenous, poor, isolated, queer and/or from a non-English speaking background. By speaking almost exclusively of girls and boys as if they are unitary, stable and uncontested identities is in effect a loss of knowledge about the complexity of educational subjectivities (Hayes, 2003, p.11).

Perhaps the most significant issue that arises from categorising girls and boys into separate homogenous groups is that it fails to recognise how differences in achievement might also be considered in relation to other social categories such as class and ethnicity. As Lahelma (2014) noted:

Minor differences in achievement between boys and girls are talked about as a 'major' problem' requiring immediate intervention, whereas more important differences, based on social backgrounds of class and ethnicity, are toned down or focused on separately from gender. Ignoring social background in making comparisons between girls and boys makes the problems of working-class girls and the privilege of middle class students of both genders invisible (p.178).

As noted above however, discourses regarding underachievement in recent years have invoked gender as discrete categories which are then used to inform educational policy and practice regarding the 'issue' of academic underachievement. This focus overlooks how gender may intersect with other social categories in relation to the discursively constituted subject. Furthermore, as noted above, neoliberal discourses of accountability and

responsibility that have been invoked to inform policies to address underachievement assume that market forces (in the form of standardised testing) will raise student achievement. However, this focus also elides factors such as socio-economic status and ethnicity and fails to take into account how it is possible for the underachieving student to be spoken into existence and moreover what are its effects. There is clearly a need therefore to address how students' ethnicity and social class in addition to gender, intersect and constitute students' experiences of academic underachievement in relation to the operation of power. Moreover, there is a need to examine how students negotiate their experiences of underachievement.

Neoliberal Education Policy Reform

The impact of neo-liberalism on social policy and the marketisation of education with its emphasis on individual responsibility 'to be sufficiently flexible (in a competitive market place) to maximize the opportunities available to her/him, and any failure resides in the individual rather than socio-economic structures' has had a significant influence in the discursive construction of underachievement (Francis, 2006, p.190). As Francis (2006) noted, one of the 'benefits' of transferring responsibility from the state to individuals for their failure is that it becomes possible to blame the poor via discourses of work ethic and meritocracy for their social positioning. For example, a 'raft of punitive policies' arose in the United Kingdom and elsewhere during the 1990's and early 2000's that involved 'the surveillance, regulation, circumscription and punishment of those deemed "undeserving"' (Francis, 2006, p.190).

Similarly, within the New Zealand context, neoliberal policy reforms were ushered in by the Lange Labour government in the late 1980s to address the so-called 'crisis of the welfare state' (Peters & Marshall, 1996). The education sector was a focal point of the reforms and the introduction of the *Tomorrow's Schools* reforms in 1988 signaled the

transformation of New Zealand's education system. Tomorrow's Schools was characterised by the devolution of the administrative and operational funding to schools which were overseen by a community and parent-led 'Boards of Trustees' (Gordon, 2016). Underpinning the reforms was a neoliberal belief that like any other public enterprise, that education was a market which would improve schools and student achievement by encouraging schools to compete with each to produce the best 'product' and thereby increasing the choice for parents as consumers for the best schools (Court & McNeill, 2011; Fiske & Ladd, 2003; McMaster, 2013; Watson, Hughes & Lauder, 2003). As McMaster (2013) noted, the language reflected in the reforms including 'managerialism, privatization, accountability, standards, competition, choice' (p.525) resulted in the narrowing of curriculum, the introduction high stakes standardised testing and the deprofessionalisation of teaching.

In response to the perception of a decrease in educational standards, the 'Failing Schools' discourse has loomed large in neoliberal discourse. Underpinning the failing schools discourse is the notion that poor teaching is responsible for student underachievement, although as Reay (2013) has indicated, poor parenting and a lack of working class parenting aspirations is also implicated in poor student performance. Within the United Kingdom context this has most commonly taken the form of the so-called 'school effectiveness' and 'school improvement' policies whereby the success of schools is measured according to test scores, thus allowing the comparison of schools in league tables. These policies mobilise the nomenclature of the business world where 'targets' and 'strategies' become the primary means by which underachievement is addressed (Jones, 2005).

In the New Zealand context, 'outcomes-based' or 'standards-based' education with its emphasis on managerialism and competition has also become *de rigueur* (Ballard, 2004). National Standards were introduced in New Zealand in 2009 by the National Party led coalition government and came into effect in 2010 for students in years 1 to 8. The

introduction of the standards gave primary school teachers scope to use their own observations and a variety of assessment tools to make an overall teacher judgment regarding student achievement in reading, writing and mathematics rather than a national test. At the beginning of 2011 schools were required to report their student achievement data to the Ministry of Education. Prior to the implementation of the national standards, individual schools were able to choose their own formative assessment procedures for tracking student achievement, thereby not enabling school to school comparisons of student achievement (Thrupp, 2013). While the standards were introduced to allow comparisons regarding school performance, one of the concerns that has emerged is the increased pressure on schools to teach to the test and the narrowing of the curriculum whereby schools focus teaching and learning on the areas to be tested namely, literacy and numeracy (McMaster, 2013).

Furthermore, is the concern that standardisation fails to take into account school context and therefore ‘contributing to a situation that is far from allowing any “apples to apples” comparison of achievement across schools as well as creating the potential for schools to manipulate their reporting of results in order to ‘look good’ (Thrupp, 2013, p.99). Thrupp, (2013) examined the impact of the policy on six New Zealand schools and observed that ‘a culture of performativity’ was emerging in which schools are trying to enact assessment practices which will allow their students to perform well against the Standards. Thrupp (2013) noted that rather than avoiding the issues observed with high stakes testing elsewhere (for example, in the United Kingdom, Ball, 2003; and Australia, Lingard, 2010) that ‘it seems the New Zealand approach to standards may be destined to create a particularly incoherent version of them’ (Thrupp, 2013, p.108) where schools are expected to apply a ‘crude four-point scale’ (‘above’, ‘at’, ‘below’, or ‘well below’ the standard). This is further complicated by a large variation in assessment approaches by different schools. It is interesting to note however that one of the schools examined by Thrupp (2013), a suburban

school which caters for low-socioeconomic Māori families refused to apply the ‘well below’ category to student achievement in order to address its concerns about deficit thinking which also pertains to the issue of performativity. In particular, the ‘labelling effect’ on children who are identified as being at ‘below’ or ‘well below’ the Standard raises questions such as ‘Who determines what counts as satisfactory performance?’ (Ball, 2003).

Similar concerns have been voiced in the Australian context where prior to 2008, standardised assessment was state based, since then, students have sat NAPLAN (National Assessment Program – Literacy and Numeracy) tests in years 3, 5, 7 and 9 on Reading, Writing, Language Conventions and Numeracy and individual results are reported against a set of standards. Accordingly, schools receive a ‘ranking’ based upon the results enabling comparison with other schools within the same locality (ACARA, 2011). Results are able to be ‘compared’ on the ‘My School’ website which provides demographic information about the school including the percentages of indigenous students and ESL students, attendance rates and funding levels, the school’s rating on the Index of Community Socio-Educational Advantage (ICSEA), a table presenting the school’s average score for each area tested and the average scores for schools that are ‘statistically similar’ in the area. These results are colour coded to demonstrate if the school’s performance is above or below ‘similar schools’ (Thompson & Cook, 2012). Thompson and Cook (2012) refer to the NAPLAN tests and the My Schools website as mechanisms of ‘modulating power’ which ‘seduces by promising greater discipline through a heightened emphasis on technologies, such as surveillance, and the normalising examination’ (Thompson & Cook, 2012, p. 565). The effect of which is a form of ‘performative terror’ in which schools and their administrators and teachers are forced to ‘burrow deeper into the disciplinary space of the classroom’ (Thompson & Cook, 2012, p.566) in order to appear ‘good’ or ‘normal’.

Cormack and Comber (2013) note that within the Australian context the current ‘discourse of data’ and a concomitant emphasis on accountabilities has resulted in the proliferation of educational policies and practices to raise student achievement. They noted however that the ‘logics’ underpinning the discourse work on the assumption that competition and market forces will raise student achievement ‘on the assumption that schools operate on a level playing field within a market’ (p.79) and emphasises that the teacher is the most important factor in raising student achievement. However, this focus elides factors including ‘location, socio-economic status, race and linguistic background’ (p.79). Moreover, Connell (2013) has argued that high stakes testing not only narrows the curriculum thereby undermining teachers ability to design curricula that is appropriate to the needs of individual students, it also measures student ability that is ‘defined within the dominant Anglo upper-middle class practices of living’ and as a consequence ‘the school system’s capacity for cultural and class diversity is quietly but powerfully constricted’ (p.107).

As noted above, the New Zealand Ministry of Education introduced national standards in reading, writing and numeracy in 2010 for Years 1 to 8. Part of the rationale for its introduction was to reduce the achievement gap. According to PIRLS data, New Zealand had a disproportionate number of students, compared to other participating countries, who were underachieving. In a *Briefing to the Incoming Minister* (Ministry of Education, 2011 cited in Tunmer et al., 2013) it was noted however that:

...the gap between our high performing and low performing students remains one of the widest in the Organization of Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD). These low performing students are likely to be Māori or Pasifika and/or from low socio-economic communities. Disparities in education appear early and persist throughout learning (p.8).

The data indicated that 18% of Māori and 16% of Pasifika students were ‘not achieving’ literacy and numeracy compared to 4% of non-Māori and non-Pasifika students by 10 years of age (Ministry of Education, 2011). Consequently, strategies identified by the Ministry of Education to improve achievement outcomes included ‘Improving the quality of

teaching, placing greater emphasis on the accountability framework for schools, and establishing charter schools' (Tunmer et al., 2013, p. 143). As noted above however, such strategies are problematic.

In considering the impact of neoliberal ideology and discourse on educational policy and public education policy in particular, Connell (2013) noted that the cascade of neoliberal policy reform and its market logic has ushered in a view of education as human capital formation requiring work the production of work-ready employees. This view has resulted in the growth of 'pseudo-science, fads and fakery about education' to address the educational needs of those who are at risk of not being productive including:

Boys' special learning styles, parent training, computer solutions, gifted and talented programmes, boot camps for troublesome kids, direct instruction, tough love, parent reading schemes, zero tolerance, charter schools and many, many more slogans, programmes and devices (p.109).

Connell (2013) has argued that the production of a neoliberal knowledge base has effectively locked out alternative forms of knowledge from entering the policy debate and thereby silencing for example research that illuminates who is advantaged and disadvantaged by neoliberal education policy. Conspicuous by its absence in neoliberal discourse in education is the role that power relations play in the privileging of some students and the marginalisation of others. As Connell (2013) noted: 'The more that power relations impinge on a situation, the less scope there is for encounter and therefore for education' (p.104). Moreover, as education is increasingly connected to the vagaries of market forces, there has been a shift from blaming structural inequities and social inequalities for low educational attainment to blaming the individual, and by default their families (McMaster, 2013). In this thesis, I will trouble the taken-for-grantedness of the neoliberal assumption that responsibility for academic success or failure resides within the individual by illuminating the role that power plays in the discursive production of the underachieving student.

Chapter Summary

In this chapter I have foregrounded the many ways in which underachievement has been conceptualised and explained. For example, underachievement has been variously explained as a character flaw, as a result of low IQ and low motivation as well as a failure to achieve standardised testing benchmarks. Notwithstanding the different ways in which underachievement has been explained, underachievement remains the fault of the individual.

Differences in student achievement have also been attributed to membership of particular cultural and social groups. For example, in New Zealand ‘cultural deficiency’ was, and continues to be, invoked to explain the underachievement of Māori students. As was noted however, the uncritical engagement with ‘cultural deficit’ as a means of explaining differential achievement not only continues to impact upon educational policy and schooling practices it also fails to address the power relations that underpin educational discourses of underachievement which privilege normative expectations of success and engagement.

In addition to cultural differences, social class differences have also been invoked to explain underachievement. Although a large research corpus has examined class relationships to education and the way in which class informs the production of students’ educational subjectivities it was noted that the processes by which social class operates in relation to educational subjectivities requires more attention, particularly in regard to the extent to which gender and ethnicity intersect with social class. I also noted the impact that neoliberalism has had on educational policy and in particular the attendant discourses of responsibility, accountability and standards. In New Zealand, the introduction of national standards in literacy and numeracy has resulted in issues similar to the concerns that have been raised in other countries about high-stakes testing including the added pressure on schools to teach to the test and the narrowing of curriculum in order to be seen to perform well against the standards.

The so-called gender gap regarding the underachievement has dominated in political, professional and public concern. The travelling discourse of failing boys has predominated the media driven moral panic in which educational underachievement is framed in terms of boys' underachievement, being the victims of a feminised curriculum and teaching profession. Consequently, a raft of solutions including a more boy-friendly pedagogy and a call for more male teachers has informed policy and practice. These solutions and their underpinning assumptions have been critiqued in feminist scholarship however for failing to problematise hegemonic forms of masculinity and reconfirming unequal gender relations between girls and boys. Moreover, feminist research has troubled the tendency to present underachievement as an issue for all boys, while excluding girls who may be underachieving in the process, as well as deflecting attention from the role of ethnicity and social class. Consequently, there has been a call to ask, which girls? and which boys? experience disadvantage in the curriculum. I would argue however that asking which girls? and which boys? privileges gender as the focal issue around underachievement and therefore I propose the need, in the absence of research that examines student voices in relation to underachievement, to turn down the volume on gender by asking: "How are students' discursively constituted as underachieving?" by adopting an intersectional approach that takes into account the social categories ethnicity, social class and gender. I do so, not to uncover the 'truth' about underachievement but to better understand how is it possible to be discursively constituted as underachieving? In the next chapter, I outline the theoretical approach that will be employed in this thesis to examine the discursive constitution of students' academic subjectivities.

CHAPTER THREE

THEORISING DIFFERENCE

Introduction

Using a post-structuralist lens this study employs the concepts of discourse, subjectivity, agency and positioning theory to explore the complexity of students' academic identities and in particular the role that discursive practices play as the subject learns to recognise her/himself as an achieving/underachieving student. Foucault's theorisation of power is mobilised to examine the operation of power in normalised discursive practices in relation to the discursively constituted subject. As outlined in the previous chapter, in recognition of the tendency for race, class and gender to be employed as homogenous and normalising categories in educational research and in particular research examining underachievement, the concept of intersectionality is deployed in this project as an analytical tool to examine the intersection of the categories race, class and gender in the discursive production of underachievement in relation to the operation of discursive power. In this chapter I outline each of the theoretical approaches and how these will be used to deconstruct the achieving/underachieving binary.

Post-Structuralist Theory

Post-structuralism marked a conceptual shift in the epistemological and ontological premises and assumptions of structuralism that were *de rigueur* in the French postmodern intellectual thought in the 1960s. Post-structuralism has been described as 'a subset of a broader range of theoretical, cultural, and social tendencies which constitute postmodern discourses' (Best & Kellner, 1991, p.25). In noting the complex history that undergirds the epistemological debate between those who view knowledge as a function of reality and those

who view knowledge as being socially constructed, Edley (2001) suggested that this has also troubled the assumption that there is one-to-one correspondence between representation and reality (Edley, 2001). This is significant from a post-structuralist perspective as any attempt to describe the social world is subject to the ‘rules of discourse’ where language is the means by which we come to understand and represent the world.

Post-structural theorists also share a rejection of structuralism’s claim for the unitary and stable relationship between the signifier (the linguistic sign/symbol) and the signified (its meaning) (Olssen, 2003). Rather, they argue that the production of meaning is unstable, that:

The signified is only a moment in a never-ending process of signification where meaning is produced not in a stable, referential relation between subject and object, but only within the infinite, intertextual play of signifiers (Best & Kellner, 1991, p.21).

In other words post-structuralists argue that there is not a one to one correspondence between the signifier and the signified, but rather that the relationship between the linguistic sign and its meaning is arbitrary (Edley, 2001). As such, according to Edley (2001), rather than simply reflecting or representing reality, language (both written and spoken) constitutes reality. Therefore, in a significant departure from structuralist theorising, post-structuralists articulate the primacy of the signifier over the signified and as such highlight the productive possibilities of language as well as the instability of meaning (Best & Kellner, 1991). Within the context of this thesis, I mobilise post-structuralist theory to demonstrate the arbitrariness of the term underachievement in relation to those it is used to describe.

The theme of privileging pluralism and difference permeates post-structuralist scholarship (Olssen, 2003) and is reflected in its critique of universalism, functionalism and essentialism. Specifically, post-structuralist theorists reject theories that attempt to explain complex social phenomena with a single concept or grand theory. They also share a rejection of the notion of a universal and absolute truth to explain historical change as well as the notion of ‘universal human subject’ (Parkes, Gore & Amosa, 2010). In contrast to these epistemological and ontological perspectives post-structuralist accounts of historical change

privilege the local and specific while rejecting theories that attempt to provide a universal account of human existence. Moreover, where explanations are provided they need to be cognisant that each society has its own 'regime of truth' or its 'general politics of truth' in which:

'Truth' is to be understood as a system of ordered procedures for the production, regulation, distribution, circulation and operation of statements (which) is linked in a circular relation with systems of power which produce and sustain it, and to effects of power which it induces and which extend it. A 'regime' of truth.... It's not a matter of emancipating truth from every system of power (which would be a chimera, for truth is already power) but of detaching the power of truth from the forms of hegemony, social, economic and cultural, within which it operates at the present time (Foucault, 1980, p.133).

This is significant in post-structural research such as this project. As I indicate above, this thesis does not aim to uncover the 'truth' about the discursive construction of underachievement but rather to examine the effects of power in relation to the discursively constituted subject in a particular social and temporal context.

Thus, in its rejection of the notion of the static and unchanging 'universal human subject', central to post-structuralist endeavour is the analysis of how the subject is discursively constituted and reconstituted in a 'web of social practices, discourses and subjectivity' (Henriques, 1984, p.117). Within the political sphere, post-structuralism aims to examine relationships between power and knowledge in order to illuminate the structures and practices of domination by troubling/deconstructing institutional discourse. Within the context of educational research, researchers using post-structural perspectives aim to destabilise the rationalisation of 'evidence-based' research and policy which inform the drive towards market driven Western education systems which are increasingly characterised by accountability and performance measures (Peters & Humes, 2003). As a contemporary theoretical and methodological paradigm, post-structuralism therefore provides a lens with which current normalised, decontextualised and ahistorical discourses on educational thinking can be challenged and offers new ways of thinking so that opportunities for transformation can be effected. In this research I employ post-structural concepts to rupture

the taken-for-grantedness of individualising and homogenising discourses of underachievement outlined in the previous chapter.

While clearly the post-structural critique of structuralism has had broad reach across disciplines, Foucault's rejection of structuralism is arguably the most significant, as not only has his work challenged a wide range of disciplinary fields including literature, sociology, philosophy, medicine, social work, law and economics, it has also had a profound influence in the theorising of difference including post-modernism, post-structuralism, post-colonialism and feminism (Mills, 2003). Foucault's initial interest in structural linguistics resulted in him being labelled by some as a structuralist (although it is interesting to note that Althusser, a structuralist, was one of Foucault's teachers) which Foucault himself vehemently denied. Foucault's rejection of structuralism was primarily based upon the structuralist assumption that history is underpinned by a system of universal laws or structures which are the same in all historical periods and cultures (Olssen, 2003). His work therefore was interested in historically contextualising notions of knowledge, rationality and truth. For example, in *Discipline and Punish* (1977) he historically and critically analysed the different ways in which societies administer punishment (as well as being an analysis of the way in which we think about how we might approach the analysis of social conditions) while in *History of Sexuality, Vol. II* (1985) his analysis was directed at the critical analysis of the way that homosexuality has been perceived in different societies at different historical junctures (Mills, 2003). Foucault's rejection of structuralism's tenets of correspondence between the signifier over the signified, its ahistorical conceptualisation of knowledge, truth and rationality as well as his focus on the role that discursive practices play in relation the operation of power within particular social and historical contexts has led to his work being described as post-structuralist. I would argue that this sits well in relation to the theorisation

of this thesis and in particular in terms of the relationship between power and the discursive constitution of the underachieving student.

While I offer a more detailed explanation of Foucault's influence in post-structural theory below, his engagement with power was a significant departure from structuralism. In particular, Foucault's work emphasised the relationship between the individual and the institution and in particular he was interested in analysing the effects of institutional power on people and moreover how people affirm or resist the effects of this power (Mills, 2003). Contrary to the traditional conception of power as something that simply constrains behaviour, Foucault argued that power can be productive in the sense that it can lead to new forms of behaviour through the role that individuals play in the power relations between themselves and institutions. For Foucault therefore:

Power in the substantive sense, 'le' pouvoir, doesn't exist. What I mean is this. The idea that there is either located at – or emanating from- a given point something which is a 'power' seems to me to be based on a misguided analysis, one which at all events fails to account for a considerable number of phenomena. In reality power means relations, a more-or-less organised, hierarchical, co-ordinated cluster of relations (Foucault, 1980, p.198).

Foucault's theorisation of power and its relation to the body has been employed by post-structural writers and in particular feminism as an analytic framework to examine women's subordination and oppression and in particular his notion that rather than sexuality being an innate quality of the body, it is produced through power (McNay, 1992). It should be noted however that Foucault's work has also been subject to feminist critique for his 'gender blindness' particularly in terms of his failure to address the differential relationships between men and women and institutions. For example, O'Brien (1982) argued that in *Discipline and Punish* (1977), Foucault did not take into consideration differences in the treatment of male and female prisoners as well as the differences in the ways in which male and female criminality were perceived socially. While noting his apparent androcentricism, Mills (2003) suggested that 'It may be possible to see Foucault's sexism as determined by the

cultural milieu in which he worked' (p.123) although also noting that contemporary research must address the male centred focus of his work.

Significantly, Foucault's work did not set out to provide explanations for why events happen in a simple way but rather he sought to illuminate the contingencies between events. That is, rather than trying to establish cause and effect, Foucault's focus was on examining the process of how particular events unfold which he referred to as 'eventalisation' (Mills, 2003, p.114). His work therefore aimed to make:

...visible a singularity at places where there is a temptation to invoke a historical constant ...eventalisation means discovering the connections, encounters, supports, blockages, plays of forces, strategies and so on which at a given moment establish what counts as being self-evident, universal and necessary. In this sense, one is indeed effecting a sort of multiplication or pluralisation of causes (Foucault, 1991, p.76).

For example, rather than simply focusing on gender and its role in the production of different types of behaviour, a Foucauldian approach would examine other contingent factors (such as ethnicity for example) in addition to gender in relation to particular behaviour. This approach aligns with an intersectional approach to examining difference which I address below. Foucault's reluctance to attach himself to one theoretical position or methodological approach, to question different ways of thinking rather than simply identify themes, his advocacy for the scepticism of what is taken for granted as being self-evident, his focus on investigating issues within a temporal and local context and his commitment to addressing pluralism and difference also sit well within the post-structuralist *oeuvre*.

Discourse/Post-structuralism at work

The concept of discourse is central to post-structuralist analysis and given the complexity of its development is somewhat difficult to define. However, consistent with the epistemological framework of this thesis I will be adopting Foucault's definition of the term, notwithstanding Sawyer's (2002) argument that the term 'discourse' is a hybridisation of Michel Pecheux and Jacques Lacan's usage. In *The Archaeology of Knowledge* (1972),

Foucault referred to discourse as: ‘A vast field, but one than can be defined nonetheless: this field is made up of the totality of all effective statements (whether spoken or written)’ (p.26) where ‘statements’ can refer to either utterances which have individual meaning and effect or to a group of utterances (or discursive formations) produced by a particular grouping such as the discourse of psychiatry or for the purposes of this dissertation the discourse of underachievement. For Foucault, discourse also refers to the practices, or unwritten structures and rules that produce particular utterances. Discourses therefore, are not simply a ‘coloured chain of words’ (1972, p.48) but rather are ‘practices that systematically form the objects [and subjects] of which they speak’ (p.49). Moreover:

Of course, discourses are composed of signs; but what they do is more than use these signs to designate things. It is this more that renders them irreducible to the language (langue) and to speech. It is this ‘more’ that we must reveal and describe (Foucault, 1972, p.49).

As such, rather than simply treating discourse as groups of signs that are representative of reality, Foucault’s interest lay in analysing discourses themselves. This is an important point from a post-structuralist perspective, as discourse as a form of social practice offers a means of understanding what, and how, objects and subjects become constituted and reconstituted through discourse. In this thesis, I therefore employ Foucault’s conceptualisation of discourse to destabilise the notion of underachievement as being self-evident and is simply waiting to be ‘taken up’ by those that it is used to describe. By doing so, I wish to make the constitutive force of underachievement visible and to create opportunities for students so described to be recognised as legitimate students and not simply as underachieving. In order to make the constitutive force of hegemonic discourses visible it is necessary from a Foucauldian perspective to consider how power is exercised in discursive exchanges within their specific historical, cultural or social context (Foucault, 1980).

Foucault and Power

Of particular concern for Foucault was the way in which discourse can operate ‘as both an instrument and an effect of power’ in social or institutional contexts including educational institutions (Foucault, 1977, p.101). For example, in *The Order of Discourse* (1981) he argued that: ‘Any system of education is a political way of maintaining or modifying the appropriate discourses, along with the knowledges and powers which they carry’ (p.64). As such, it is necessary to understand the ways in which institutions such as schools produce understanding about knowledge because of the constitutive power of their discursive practices.

Foucault outlined his propositions about power in *Power/Knowledge* (1980) and argued that power is not simply wielded by groups or institutions over passive individuals but rather people are differentially positioned within networks of power. For Foucault (1980) power is:

...never localised here or there, never in anybody’s hands, never appropriated as a commodity or a piece of wealth. Power is employed and exercised through a net-like organisation. And not only do individuals circulate between its threads; they are always in the position of simultaneously undergoing and exercising this power. They are not only its inert or consenting target; they are always also the elements of its articulation (p.98).

It should be noted that Foucault himself claimed that the primary goal of his work was to illuminate the process by which ‘human beings are made subjects’. This entailed not analysing ‘the phenomena of power [as such], nor to elaborate the foundations of such an analysis. My objective instead, has been to create a history of the different modes by which, in our culture, human beings are made subjects...’ (Foucault, 1983, p. 208). Consistent with Foucault’s theorising of power, post-structuralist writers such as Valerie Walkerdine have argued that individuals are not autonomous ‘subjects’ but are ‘produced’ as ‘a nexus of contradictory subjectivities’ and therefore it becomes possible for speakers to become multiply positioned within constantly changing relations of power (1990, p.3).

Therefore in Foucault's conceptualisation institutions do not possess power as such, but the people within them enact power relations. Hence, a particularly important aspect of Foucault's conceptualisation of power is the way in which it is exercised, that is, the "how" of power (Foucault, 1994). In Foucault's words:

To approach the theme of power by an analysis of "how" is therefore to introduce several critical shifts in relation to the supposition of a fundamental power. It is to give oneself as the object of *power relations* and not power itself – power relations that are distinct from objective capacities as well as from relations of communication, power relations that can be grasped in the diversity of their linkages to these capacities and relations (Foucault, 1994, p. 339).

Foucault applied this conceptualisation of power to gain an understanding of disciplinary institutions and practices and the roles that they play in the constitution of subjectivities. In *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison* (1977) Foucault examined the changes in disciplinary practices of prisons in eighteenth and nineteenth century France and charted the shift from torture and public execution to the development of more 'humane' methods of incarceration and techniques of surveillance designed to regulate criminal behaviour (such as Jeremy Bentham's panopticon) and the production of 'docile bodies' that 'may be subjected, used, transformed and improved' (p.136). It is noteworthy that Foucault did not view these changes as necessarily being indicative of a more 'humane' penal system, rather he saw them as resulting from the adoption of the new rationalities for understanding criminality that were emerging during the industrialisation of Europe. For Foucault:

What was at issue was not whether the prison environment was too harsh or too aseptic, too primitive or too efficient, but its very materiality as an instrument as a vector of power; it is this whole technology of power over the body that the technology of the 'soul' – that of the educationalists, psychologists and psychiatrists – fails either to conceal or to compensate, for the simple reason that it is one of its tools (Foucault, 1977, p.30).

This is significant in Foucault's conceptualisation of 'power-knowledge relations'. Rather than viewing knowledge as necessarily making people powerful, Foucault argued that knowledge produces particular kinds of people, that 'power produces knowledge' by constituting subjectivities (Foucault, 1977, p.27). For Foucault, it is through the operation of competing discourses within these power relations that the subject is constructed. In this

thesis I take up Foucault's conceptualisation of power/knowledge to examine how the underachieving student is discursively constituted through the operation of institutional structures and discursive practices of the more powerful. In other words, I wish to illuminate how relations of power produce the underachieving student.

Subjectification

Foucault proposed that the subject is discursively constituted within society through the processes of social categorisation and subjectification. Foucault referred to the institutional practices by which the 'normal' is distinguished from the 'other' as 'dividing practices' where the subject is 'divided inside himself or divided by others' (Foucault, 1983, p. 208). For example, hospitals divide the healthy from the infirm, prisons divide the law abiding from the criminal, schools divide the well behaved student from the disruptive student (Foucault, 1983). In the context of this thesis I would add the achieving student from the underachieving student.

Foucault also argued that disciplinary institutions such as schools, hospitals and prisons discursively constitute the subjectivities of individuals through the interaction of 'techniques of domination' and 'technologies of the self' and as such:

One has to take into account the points where the technologies of domination of individuals over one another have recourse to processes by which the individual acts upon himself. And conversely, one has to take into account the points where the techniques of the self are integrated into structures of coercion or domination (Foucault, 1980).

This is arguably a significant contribution to post-structural theorising as it links relations of power and discursive practices to subjectivity. Foucault referred to the process by which the subject is actively involved in learning to 'recognise themselves' as subjectification (Foucault, 1983). For example, within the school context, while on the one hand a student may be passively objectified through the processes of 'surveillance, normalisation, exclusion, classification, distribution, individualisation, totalisation and regulation' (Gore, 1995) on the

other hand the student may be actively objectified as a function of the discursive production of their subjectivities. Foucault's notion of subjectification provides the researcher with the 'space to analyse ways that the research participants frame their identity in the dynamic of self and other' (Ford, 2009, p.29). Furthermore, the researcher is provided with 'clues within the discourses used by participants that perpetuate the power relations that reflect commonly held understandings of the larger society – the social hierarchies based on race, ethnicity, class and gender' (Ford, 2009, p.29). This has important implications when applied to the role of educational discursive practices in the constitution of student subjectivities and in particular those discursive practices that serve to maximize the educational opportunities for some students while limiting the opportunities of others (Saltmarsh & Youdell, 2004). As such, these discursive practices become 'crucial sites for critical analysis' (Saltmarsh & Youdell 2004, p.356). For example, Walkerdine argued that as a 'site for the construction of subjectivity' that the classroom provides a variety of potential subject positions and that these positions may be institutionally sanctioned such as teacher/student, adult/child or culturally produced such as conformist/rebel (Walkerdine, 1990). The various subject positions are constructed within a nexus of categories including (although not limited to) age, ethnicity, social class and gender.

In an ethnographic analysis, Youdell (2003) examined how discursive practices constitute African-Caribbean students subjectivities through schooling. Youdell (2003) drew on Judith Butlers' notion of performativity defined as 'discursive practice that enacts or produces that which it names' which encompasses the notion that rather than simply describing 'pre-existing subjects' that discursive practices are productive (Butler, 1993, p.130). Butlers' conceptualisation of the performatively constituted subject extended Althusser's understanding of interpellation, the 'discursive production of the social subject' (Butler, 1997b). For Butler (1997a) discursive practices are potentially performative in that in order to

be recognised it is first necessary to be ‘called a name’ (p.2) which has implications for agency (discussed below). Butler (1997a) referred to the ability of the named subject to name another as ‘linguistic agency’ which is a derivative of, rather than an effect of discursive practices. Subjection affords the intelligibility and legitimacy to make another subject intelligible (Butler, 1997a). As such, the intentional subject ‘is simultaneously enabled and constrained through discourse’ (Youdell, 2003, p.6). In her study, Youdell (2003) used this framework to understand the constitution of African-Caribbean students through their schooling. Specifically, she demonstrated how these students became performatively constituted as ‘undesirable learners’ through their bodily and linguistic practices which were read as being counter to school authority.

Such research demonstrates the performative role that discourses and discursive practices have in relation to the operation of power and the implications that this has for the constitution of students. Importantly, within the context of this dissertation, while discourses can clearly be a vector for power, they can, as Foucault (1978) noted in the *History of Sexuality, Vol. 1*, also be ‘a point of resistance and a starting point for an opposing strategy’ (p.100). That is, rather than just being viewed as a means of oppression, discourse can also function as the means of resistance and agency. Within the terms of this thesis, I aim to examine the productive possibilities of the power relations that constitute students’ academic subjectivities. That is, I wish to illuminate the instability of power and the possibility for the discursively constituted subject to resist their subjection.

Agency and the Discursively Constituted Subject

In order to address how students’ experience and understand underachievement, positioning theory will be deployed to examine how students *become* positioned as underachieving. With a nod to the exchange between Alison Jones (1997) and Bronwyn

Davies (1997) I have italicised *become* to acknowledge the complexity of the theoretical concepts of ‘positioning’ and ‘identity’ and ‘subjectivity’. At the heart of the Jones and Davies debate is the extent to which the individual is ‘produced’ (or constituted) by the assumptions inherent in everyday language and moreover how possibilities for agency can be reconciled with the discursively constituted subject.

As noted above, a key aspect of poststructuralist theorising is the challenge to the humanist notion of a unitary/stable self and an understanding that subjectivity is constituted and reconstituted through the discourses in which the person is being positioned at any given moment (Davies, 1991). For Davies (1991), the humanist notion of the agentic subject who is free, rational and autonomous is ‘fundamentally illusory’ as ‘one can only ever be what the various discourses make possible, and one’s being shifts with the various discourses through which one is spoken into existence’ (p.43). Davies (1997) argued therefore that the notion of choice should be understood as ‘forced choices’ ‘since the subject’s positioning within particular discourses makes the ‘chosen’ line of action the only possible action, not because there are no other lines of action but because one has been subjectively constituted through one’s placement within that discourse to *want* that line of action’ (p.278). Furthermore, these discursive shifts open up productive possibilities for the ‘speaking/writing subject’:

...who can use some of the understandings of poststructuralist theory itself to regain another kind of agency. The speaking/writing subject can move within/between discourses, can see precisely how they subject her, can use the terms of one discourse to counteract, modify, refuse or go beyond the other, both in terms of terms of her own experienced subjectivity and in the way in which she chooses to speak in relation to the subjectivities of others (p.46).

Jones argued however, that Davies’ use of the term ‘forced choice’ slipped into a humanist determinism which ‘unwittingly’ encouraged her education students’ confused attempts to reconcile the post-structuralist notion that we can be both discursively constituted and agentic at the same time. In response, Davies (1997) asserted that the humanist subject is not antithetical to the post-structuralist ‘anti-humanist subject’. That is, post-structuralist theory does not reject the humanist subject but rather ‘enable(s) us to see the subject’s

fictionality, whilst recognizing how powerful fictions are in constituting what we take to be real' (Davies, 1997, p.272). In contrast to Jones' assumption of a 'prediscursive self', Davies foregrounded post-structuralisms theorizing of the self as a verb rather than noun, that is, the post-structuralist subject is always in process and as such opens up discursive possibilities and opportunities for reflexivity.

I believe that it might be useful at this point to also consider Butler's (1997b) understanding of agency and subjection. While she did not make claim to resolving the debate, Butler (1997b) highlighted the apparent paradox of the debate by asking 'How can it be that the subject, taken to be the condition for and an instrument of agency, is at the same time the effect of subordination, understood as the deprivation of agency?' and 'If subordination is the condition of possibility for agency, how might agency be thought in opposition to the forces of subordination?' (p.10). In addressing the dilemma, Butler (1997b) proposed in the first instance that the subject should be identified as a 'linguistic category' rather than as 'the person' or 'the individual' (p.10). By doing so it becomes possible to understand the subject as:

...enjoy[ing] intelligibility only to the extent that they are, as it were, first established in language. The subject is the linguistic occasion for the individual to achieve and reproduce intelligibility, the linguistic condition of its existence and agency. No individual becomes a subject without first becoming subjected or undergoing "subjectivation" (a translation of the French *assujétissement*). It makes little sense to treat "the individual" as an intelligible term if individuals are said to acquire their intelligibility by becoming subjects. Paradoxically, no intelligible reference to individuals or their becoming can take place without a prior reference to their status as objects (p.11).

This of course is the essence of the debate, how can the subject on the one hand be a precondition of agency and on the other be an effect of subjection? For Butler the 'bind of agency' can be thought of as being characterised by an 'ambivalence' in the sense that the subject is neither determined by nor determining of power 'but significantly and partially both' (Butler, 1997b, p.17). She suggested that while agency 'exceeds the power by which it is enabled' (p.15) that the subject nonetheless 'exceeds precisely that to which it is bound'

(p.17). As such, the subject is unable to overcome the ‘ambivalence’ by which it is constituted (Butler, 1997b).

It is apparent that the theoretical debate surrounding agency and the discursively constituted subject is a vexed and complex issue. Nonetheless, I believe this to be consistent with the tenets of post-structuralism, it is messy business, there are no certainties, there are no claims to ‘truth’. Notwithstanding their constitutive force, Butler (1997a) suggested that the subject may be able to resist particular practices through a process of strategic reinscription whereby the subject deploys discursive practices which have ‘non-ordinary’ meanings.

According to Butler (1997a):

The possibility for the speech act to take on a non-ordinary meaning, to function in contexts where it has not belonged, is precisely the political promise of the performative, one that positions the performative at the center of a politics of hegemony, one that offers an unanticipated political future for deconstructive thinking (p.161).

This opens the possibility therefore for the discursive agency of the subject and hence possibilities for resistance. With this in mind, in this thesis I take up Butler’s notion of identifying the subject as a linguistic category rather than as a fixed individual. By doing so, it becomes possible to view the subject as neither being inherently free nor being predetermined by the operations of power. As such, it also becomes possible to identify the productive possibilities for agency in relation to the operation of power/knowledge rather than determining these in advance.

Positioning Theory

“We are positioned and position ourselves moment by moment as we make our way through the everyday world” (Davies, 1994, p.4).

As noted above, ‘Discourses make available positions for subjects to take up. These positions are in relation to other people. Like the subject and object of a sentence...women and men are placed in relation to each other through the meanings which a particular discourse makes available’ (Holloway, 1984, p.236). It is important to note however that

discourses are not simply a coherent set of statements that are waiting to be ‘taken up’ by the subject or imposed upon individuals, as discourse ‘can be both an instrument and an effect of power’ (Foucault, 1980, p.100) where power operates to make some discourses available while excluding others inclusive while others may exclude. For example, disciplines may place limits on discourses by prescribing what counts as knowledge in a particular subject area (Mills, 2003). I will elaborate on the discursive limits of the psy-disciplines in Chapter Four.

Davies and Harre (1999) used the term ‘discursive practices’ to refer to the way in which people are actively involved in the production of their psychological and social realities. However, while discourses can appear to ‘make sense’ of one’s experiences, they may include ‘taken for granted’ assumptions which can be difficult to challenge or resist and hence enable these discourses to be ‘normalised’ and hence seen by the individual to be self-evident (Burns, 2000). For example, in *Madness and Civilisation* (1965), Foucault examined the historical construction of mental illness and particularly the way in which discursive practices have shifted from religious explanations to medical explanations of mental illness. Foucault demonstrated that the shift in the way in which mental illness has been conceptualised as a category has been brought about by the development of discursive processes that distinguish the mentally ill from the sane in relation to societal norms.

The difficulty in challenging or resisting particular discourses lies in the constitutive force of discursive practices which offer particular subject positions. Specifically, when a particular position is taken up as one’s own, an individual views the world from that position in relation to the discursive practices in which s/he has been positioned (Davies & Harre, 1999). Davies and Harre (1999) suggested that because of the number of contradictory discursive practices available to each person, there is a possibility of choosing which discourses are taken up as one’s own.

Davies and Harre (1999) proposed that positioning therefore is the ‘discursive process whereby selves are located in conversations as observably and subjectively coherent participants in jointly produced storylines’ (p.37). A distinction is made between ‘interactive positioning’ whereby one is positioned by what another says and ‘reflexive positioning’ where one positions oneself. Davies and Harre (1999) cautioned however in making the assumption that ‘positioning is necessarily intentional’ (p.37) since a subject position is only ‘a possibility in known forms of talk; position is what is created in and through talk as the speakers and hearers take themselves up as persons’ (p.52). As such, Davies and Harre (1999) proposed that this helps to explain the instability and inconsistencies in the production of personhood. That is, the *subject positions* that a person ‘takes up’ as his/her own, shifts between discursive contexts (Davies & Harre, 1999). Consequently, the way an individual thinks about him/herself shifts in response to the shift in discursive context and each ‘possible’ self may be contradictory to another ‘possible’ self located in a different storyline. Davies and Harre (1999) suggested that the possibility of choice therefore offers subjects the possibility of agency. However, they noted that:

In making choices between contradictory demands there is a complex weaving together of the positions (and the cultural/social/political meanings that are attached to those positions) that are available within any number of discourses; the emotional meaning attached to each of those positions which have developed as a result of personal experiences of being located in each position, or of relating to someone in that position; the stories through which those categories and emotions are being made sense of; and the moral system that links and legitimates the choices that are being made (p.49).

Thus, a subject position is a ‘possibility’ in various discourses and ‘position’ is created through speech, text and lived experience as individuals ‘take themselves up’ as a ‘particular person’ (Davies & Harre, 1999). However (as noted above), discourses can act to provide or constrain possibilities for the establishment of subject positions (Staunæs, 2005). For example, in her analysis of the constitution of students’ gender and sexual identities in schools, Youdell (2004) utilised Foucault’s theorisation of the productive power of discursive practices to demonstrate how students’ ‘wounded’ homosexual identities could be

performatively reinscribed through a constitutive process in which the student's 'read, remake, and exceed the limits of normative discourses' (p.490). Youdell's (2004) findings are also noteworthy in that they illustrate the impossibility of separating the identity categories of gender and sexuality.

The concept of 'troubled subject positions' has been introduced by Wetherell (1998) to include subject positions which challenge normative accounts of lived experience and therefore considered to be troublesome. While Wetherell applied the concept of troubled subject positions mainly to verbal practices, Staunæs (2005) has used the concept to also include social and discursive practices. Staunæs (2005) suggested that 'Potentially all subject positions can be troubled, but in lived life there are positions that are more troublesome than others. It depends on the distribution of power' (P.154).

Social categories (i.e., gender, ethnicity, sexuality and social class) have also been used to analyse the discursive processes via which 'people find their bearings' (Staunæs, 2003, p. 104). The use of social categories to understand subjectivity has seen a conceptual shift from the essentialist 'something you are' (e.g., "girl", "boy") to the constructed 'something you do' (Butler, 1990). Stuanæs (2003) suggested that this epistemological shift resulted in the reconceptualisation of 'categoricalism' from a focus on static, homogenous groups to an understanding that social categories 'are done, undone and redone in relation to other things' (p.104). The shift also reflected development in postmodern thinking about power in the Foucauldian framework and the way in which power attends certain categories and not others and 'must include thinking in terms of power, but not just power as oppression; rather, it should allow space for reconfiguring power relations in processes of subjectification and in relations between subject positions and intertwined social categories' (p.105). In the following section I outline how an intersectional approach will be employed in

this thesis to examine how social categories intersect with the positioning of students who have been discursively constituted as underachieving.

Intersectionality

As noted above, post-structuralism provides a conceptual lens through which taken-for-granted policies and practices might be troubled through the analysis of the relations among discourse and subjection (St.Pierre & Pillow, 1999). Post-structural approaches to analysing and deconstructing what is taken-for-granted as ‘normal’ is particularly sensitive to the language of text and as such is attentive to the ways in which text ‘is always, in some sense, about authority and consequently about power’ (Alvesson & Skoldberg, 2000, p. 187). Within the context of this thesis I have deployed post-structural theory to trouble the taken-for-grantedness of normative discourses of underachievement and to examine how power relations play out in the production of the discursively constituted subject. As Iverson (2016) noted however:

When writing about identity and difference, challenges emerge in how to capture the complexity of difference and the interconnectedness of identities, and the ways in which interlocking discriminatory systems produce inequalities that structure the relative positions of various groups and individuals (p.211).

This necessitates a theoretical and analytical approach that captures the complexity of how identity differences interrelate to ‘create complex intersections at which two or more dimensions of identity converge and that determine social, economic, and political dynamics of oppression’ (Iverson, 2016, p.212). While post-structuralism doesn’t necessarily reject the existence of categories it does however challenge the essentialist assumptions that attend the homogenisation of categories and the failure of distinct categories to capture the complexity of lived experience (McCall, 2005). As Iverson (2016) noted however, the challenge for researchers is to capture the complexity of identity and in identifying how systems oppress groups and individuals. Addressing the intersection of social categories such as gender,

ethnicity, race, age, sexuality and class can serve as means to analyse the relationships between subjectivity and ‘ascribed identity’ that is, identity that is derived from the beliefs and assumptions associated with normative discourses (Ward, 2015). Therefore, rather than viewing identity categories as monolithic entities, an intersectional approach to understanding show how these categories overlap in complex ways that determine oppressive practices (Iverson, 2015). For example, Baca Zinn, Hondagneu-Sotolo & Messer (2000 cited in Iverson, 2015) used the prism as a metaphor as a means of explaining the way in which ‘gender is organised and experienced differently when refracted through the prism of sexual, racial/ethnic, social class, physical abilities, age, and national citizenship differences’ (p.1). Other Feminist scholars (e.g., Collins, 1998; Fine, 1994; McCall, 2005) have critiqued the understanding of identity categories such as gender along binary lines and have argued for ‘a schema or metaphor’ that might be used to understand how different forms of oppression intersect with identity categories (Iverson, 2015).

In response to the need for a theoretical and methodological tool that addresses the question of how multiple forms of identity intersect within different contexts in relation to the operation of power, the concept of intersectionality has been increasingly deployed. As Anthias (2012) stated, ‘intersectionality posits that different social divisions interrelate in terms of the production of social relations and in terms of people’s lives and they are seen as ‘mutually constitutive’ in terms of experience and practice’ (p.126). Given intersectionalities’ attention to the interplay of social categories and social positioning as well as the partiality of knowledge formation, it aligns well with the post-structuralist project of troubling the postmodern theorising of unitary social categories and the analysis of difference and its attention to the deconstruction of homogenising and normalising categories (Brah & Phoenix, 2004). Furthermore, an intersectional approach to examining difference coincides with the Foucauldian theorisation of power and in particular its attention to the exploration of the

contradictory workings of power (Staunæs, 2003) that emphasises the deconstruction of ‘homogenising categories’ whereby social categories such as gender, ethnicity and age are not addressed as ‘minority issues’ but ‘rather as categories that are produced, sustained and subverted in relation to one another’ (p.105) vis-à-vis power.

Feminisms’ Deployment of Intersectionality

Since its inception, intersectionality has been theorised in legal, sociological, psychological, and educational disciplines (Brunn-Bevel, Davis & Olive, 2016). Feminist theory has also mobilised the concept of intersectionality to foreground ‘a richer and more complex ontology than approaches that attempt to reduce people to one category at a time’ (Phoenix, 2006, p.187) by challenging essentialist and hegemonic notions of ‘woman’ by analysing how race, ethnicity, class, sexuality and disability interact to constitute gender and women. Although Kimberlé Crenshaw (1991) has been credited with coining the term ‘intersectionality’ (see below) the concept itself had been employed long before, particularly in the feminist anti- racist movement in the United States (for example, Denis, 2008). In the nineteenth century in the United States, feminists foregrounded the interrelationships between racism, gender, sexuality and social class in anti-slavery movements and the campaign for women’s suffrage (Brah & Phoenix, 2004). For example, Sojourner Truth in her ‘Ain’t I a woman’ speech at the Women’s Rights Convention in Ohio in 1851, challenged her subordination as an enslaved black women and the prevailing patriarchal ‘truth-claims’ about gender (Brah & Phoenix, 2004). As suggested by Brah and Phoenix (2004), Sojourner Truth’s speech demonstrated how the subaltern subject can, in Foucauldian terms, be both subject to disciplinary power and at the same time create a new subject position as a political identity. Moreover, as Brah and Phoenix (2004) noted, Sojourner Truth’s speech not only illuminated her ‘othering’ as an enslaved Black woman but also drew attention to the

subjective pain that she had experienced as a result of her othering. Her narrative also highlighted the relational dimension to power where her identity claims were 'constructed in relation to white women and all men and clearly demonstrate that what we call 'identities' are not objects but processes constituted in and through power relations' which was to foreshadow the political activism of Black feminists in the following century (Brah & Phoenix, 2004, p.77).

With growing recognition that there were (and are) many women who are marginalised through a myriad of social practices it became apparent that there is little point in addressing a single dimension of subaltern experience and therefore there was a need to theorise the multiplicity of oppressions (Brah & Phoenix, 2004). Most notably, in 1977, the Combahee River Collective, a group of Black feminists, argued in their manifesto that feminist analyses of power and oppression needed to take into account race, class, gender and sexual orientation to address the 'white solipsism' (Rich, 1980) of feminist theory and to illuminate differences in experiences of minority women and the taken-for-grantedness of white privilege (Fox, 2016). The Collective's argument that it wasn't possible to understand their experiences of oppression as Black women by compartmentalising their race informed the work of African-American female scholars in the early 1980's resulting in works such as *Women, Race and Class* (Davis, 1981) and *Sister Outsider* (Lorde, 1984). These works explored the interconnections between gender, class and sexuality in addition to gender and their role in what Patricia Hill Collins (1993) later referred to as the 'matrix of domination'. Collins (1993) examined how race, gender and class interact in relation to the positioning of Black women as the Other in a matrix of domination (which emphasises social structure and power relations) in a system which favours 'wealthy, heterosexual, white, male, Christian, slim and young people' (p.102).

In noting the necessity of analysing the interlocking categories race, class and gender in order to understand structural domination and oppression, Collins (1993) argued that it is necessary to move beyond additive analyses of oppression which are based on conceptualising difference in binary either/or terms, for example, Black/White, man/woman, wealthy/poor. (Within the context of this thesis I would add the achieving/underachieving category). In addition, Collins (1993) has noted that additive analyses are also problematic for their tendency to label one category as dominant and the other category as subordinate which assumes that different forms of oppression are quantifiable and that one particular group experiences more oppression than another group. She illustrated her troubling of an additive approach with analyses of the oppression of African-American women which typically frame *all* African-American women 'as being more oppressed than everyone else because the majority of Black women experience the negative effects of race, class and gender oppression simultaneously' (p.28). Similarly, Yuval-Davis (2006) has argued that the 'triple oppression' approach which claims that Black women suffer from being oppressed as Black, women and working class is problematic as the ontological origins of each social category is different and therefore oppression cannot be understood in additive ways, as any attempts to essentialise 'Blackness' or 'womanhood':

...often reflect hegemonic discourses of identity politics that render invisible experiences of the more marginal members of that specific social category and construct a homogenized 'right way' to be its member (p.195).

While acknowledging that some groups may well experience harsher forms of oppression than others, Collins (1993) cautioned against conflating the saliency of different forms of oppression with a theoretical framework that sought to understand how these forms of oppression intersect as: 'Race, class and gender may all structure a situation but may not be equally visible and/or important in people's self-definitions' (p.28). For example, racial oppression may be more salient in some contexts while social class oppression may be more salient in others (Collins, 1993).

Intersectional Analysis in Practice

As noted above the term intersectionality itself has been attributed to legal scholar Kimberlé Crenshaw (1991) to problematise the tendency of ‘identity politics’ within ‘mainstream liberal discourse’ to treat identity categories ‘as intrinsically negative frameworks in which social power works to exclude or marginalise those who are different’ (Crenshaw, 1991, p.1242). For example, according to Crenshaw (1991), in the context of violence against women of colour, ‘identity politics’ fails to address intragroup differences by focusing only on the dimension of gender when ‘the violence that many women experience is often shaped by other dimensions of their identities, such as race and class’ (Crenshaw, 1991, p.1242). It is worth noting that Crenshaw (1991) indicated that she wasn’t proposing a new ‘totalizing theory of identity’ nor that gender and race are necessarily the only variables that account for violence against women of colour but rather offered a methodology that will allow those engaged in researching oppression a means of disrupting the tendency to view gender and race as separable or immutable categories.

Crenshaw (1991) described three types of intersectionality: Structural intersectionality, which refers to qualitative differences between the experiences of black women (and the effects of multiple sources of subordination) and white women in relation to discriminatory practices such as in the context of domestic violence where intervention strategies are of limited help if they do not take into account the class and race backgrounds for the women affected; political intersectionality, which takes into account that the experiences of marginalized groups are often located within competing subordinated groups with opposing political agendas. For example, racism is experienced and responded to differently in terms of gender. As a result, this can lead to issues such as the perpetuation of patriarchy being elided in antiracist discourses. Representational intersectionality refers to the devaluation and marginalisation of the experiences and identities of minority groups in

popular cultural imagery such as misogynistic music lyrics which objectify Black women and justify gendered violence.

While intersectionality has traditionally addressed the interconnectedness of gender and race in relation to oppressive practices, as Crenshaw (1991) noted, race and gender are not the only variables that shape one's identity. The concept has therefore been deployed more recently to address the intersections of a variety of categories including age (Taefi, 2009), disability (Cramer & Plummer, 2009) gendered violence (Anthias, 2014) and sexuality. For example, Olive (2016) has demonstrated how intersectionality could be used in conjunction with Queer theory to trouble heteronormative assumptions in the design of restrooms. Methodologically, an intersectional paradigm allowed Olive (2016) to use Queer theory 'to include a deeper examination of how restrooms categorised by sex perpetuate a heteronormative standard that is predicated upon performative, socially constructed labels attached to gender and sex' (p.29) and 'Queer theory further calls into question how reinforcing the heteronormative standard reifies the historic view of what is deemed "normal"'. (p.29).

Intersectionality is also being increasingly deployed in educational research (e.g., Bhopal & Preston, 2012; Dill & Zambrana, 2009; Griffin & Reddick, 2011; Brunn-Bevel, Davis & Olive, 2016) where intersectionality has been used to examine how race, class and gender shape educational experiences and outcomes. For example, Nelson, Stahl & Wallace (2015) have troubled the 'boys crisis' literature (such as the 'failing boys' discourse and the 'crisis of masculinity' as outlined in the previous chapter) which they considered to be repetitive and reductive. They were particularly skeptical of the tendency of the 'boys crisis' discourse to represent boys in a 'masculinity vacuum' without consideration of the role of social class, ethnicity and sexuality in the construction of masculinities. They noted in particular the risk of hegemonic masculinity becoming deterministic because of the tendency

for hegemonic masculinity to be applied to all men without consideration of how ethnicity and social class background play out in the dominant-subordinate binary. They suggested that a more thorough operationalisation of intersectionality allows for ‘distancing from certain masculinities, where class, race, and gender are better integrated’ (p.180) by applying an intersectional approach to gain more complex understanding of boys’ school engagement.

David Gillborn (2015) has also examined the utility of intersectionality as a tool of ‘analysis and resistance’ in conjunction with critical race theory within the context of disability in education. Critical Race Theory stresses that racism needs to be understood within the social and historic context within which it occurs and to challenge the normative assumptions made by dominant groups for example, by deconstructing the assumptions of ‘Whiteness’ as a social construct (Gillborn, 2015). Gillborn (2015) deployed intersectionality as an analytical tool to examine how Black middle class parents negotiate the social construction of dis/ability in educational discourse with the intersecting roles of race, class, and gender. He found in his interviews with parents that contrary to government policy, school’s identify, assess and make relevant adjustments to students’ learning needs, that it was the parents who identified problems that their children were experiencing and organised assessments to be made which required them to draw on their economic, cultural and social capital to have their children’s needs addressed. Gillborn (2015) found that class advantage did not mitigate against the entrenched institutional racism that the parents experienced trying to have their children’s ‘special education needs’ recognised and addressed and noted that ‘the school seemed content to assume that the students’ poor performance was all that could be expected’ (p.280).

Gillborn (2015) argued that the findings demonstrate that the categories ‘disability’ and ‘race’ share similarities in terms of their social constructedness rather than relating to an individual’s subjectivity. While Gillborn has indicated that racism is not the only issue of

importance, nor that there is a 'hierarachy of oppression', he argued within the context of critical race theory for the 'primacy of racism' in the sense that racism retains an empirical primacy where racism is part of the everyday assumptions and practices of schools. He also argued that racism has a political primacy and as such, resistance to the racist status quo requires critical race scholars to strategise ways of resisting normative assertions that racism is not relevant. Gillborn (2015) argued therefore for a more 'critical' engagement with intersectionality as 'a tool for critical race analysis and intervention' (p.279) and that 'we must try to find a balance between remaining sensitive to intersectional issues without being overwhelmed by them' (p.279).

In an examination of how student teachers talk about race, disability and language in relation to their students, Young (2016) found that there were silences in the student teachers' discourse about race despite many of their students being students of colour. Moreover, she found that when the student teachers did talk about disability, it was in medicalised terms. Young (2016) suggested that the medicalisation of disability became the lens through which the student teachers viewed disability, thereby blurring the racialised identities of students with disabilities. Young (2016) argued therefore that only focusing on one category at a time to understand students' learning needs enables the perpetuation of racism and ableism in schools and that there is a need therefore for teacher educators to teach student teachers to be cognisant of their role 'within the matrix of domination' and to recognise and understand the multiple identities of their students.

Critique of Intersectionality

As an analytical tool, intersectionality is underpinned by several key assumptions. For example, no one aspect of identity is deemed to be more important than another and social categories cannot be separated into discrete strands (Brah & Phoenix, 2004). Related to this is

the assumption that the relationship between ethnicity, class and gender is interrelated rather than 'additive' (Landry, 2007). Furthermore, it attends to the role that power and power relations play in the maintenance and reproduction of inequality (Hankivsky, Reid, Cormier, Varcoe, Clark, Benoir & Brotman, 2010). At its core therefore, intersectionality provides a theoretical and analytical framework for the promotion of social justice and transformative practices (Dill & Zambrana, 2009).

Despite its growing popularity, particularly in feminist scholarship, intersectionality has been critiqued regarding the ambiguities surrounding the vagueness of its definition, its conceptualisation, its methodology and its empirical validity (Nash, 2008). Concern has been expressed for example, about which categories should be used, or whether categories should be used at all; or whether it should be used to theorise identity, or if it should be used to trouble social structures; or should it be used to examine exclusion and marginalisation or as a means of empowerment (Davis, 2008). For example, Davis (2008) stated:

It is not clear whether intersectionality should be limited to understanding individual experiences, to theorizing identity, or whether it should be taken as a property of social structures and cultural discourses (p.68).

Other critics argue that intersectionality doesn't attend enough to the process of subjectification and to the influence of particular discourses and discursive practices at particular sites (e.g., Buhrmann and Ernst, 2010) and in particular the influence of neoliberal discourses (such as choice and individualism) upon subject formation (Gill, 2007). For example, Carastathis (2008) argued that intersectionality fails 'to recognise that race, gender, and class are not the identic properties of individuals or of groups, but rather, are political relations which structure the lived experience of the subjects they interpellate' and furthermore reified 'the structural relations of power where subjects are implicated' (p.29).

The categorisation of identity has also been critiqued for privileging Western conceptualisations of identity which do not necessarily have the same meaning everywhere (Baines, 2010). There is also the danger, as Fox (2016) has noted that constantly sub-dividing

experience into an increasing number of categories risks a loss of coherence and the chance of paralyzing efforts to understand experience because of the possibility of overlooking a particular category. Similarly, other researchers have expressed concern that the division of experience into an ‘infinite’ number of identity categories can ‘easily paralyse progressive work and thought because of the realisation that whatever unit you choose to work with, someone may come along and point out that you forgot something’ (Delgado, 2011, p.1264). Although as Anthias (2014) has pointed out the relevance of any category will of course be contingent upon its political and social saliency. Moreover, there may be categories that may remain invisible within social practice (Anthias, 2014).

McCall (2005) has also raised questions regarding the *how* of intersectionality. In response to the ‘methodological vagaries’ of intersectionality, McCall (2005) has characterised the various critiques of intersectionality as a reaction to the concern regarding the need to use categories at all. In particular, she argued that the narrow range of methodological approaches that intersectionality mobilises limits the scope of the different kinds of knowledge that can be produced. As such, she argued that a more coherent methodology is required to bridge the disconnect between theory and the complexity of social life. To address the critique of categories, McCall (2005) distinguished three different levels of complexity of methodological approaches to intersectional research including anticategorical, which holds that social life is much too complex ‘to make fixed categories anything but simplifying social fictions that produce inequalities in the process of producing differences’ (p.1773). This takes into account the complexity and multiplicity of social life and therefore any attempt to fix categories is unproductive. Opponents of the anticategorical position have argued that without categorisation it would be extremely difficult if not impossible to fight for social justice within the political arena (Fox, 2016). As McCall (2005) herself noted however, the critique of categories doesn’t mean a rejection of categorisation as

such but rather an examination of categories; intracategorical, which attends to the complexity of the lived experience of marginalised social groups by recognising the utility of categories while at the same time engaging a critical eye over the process of category creation and thirdly intercategorical, which requires the adoption of categories to illustrate the changing nature of inequality within and across social groups. Although as noted by Nelson, Stahl & Wallace (2015) these different methodological approaches should be thought of as overlapping along a continuum and thereby allowing for ‘complex thinking with regard to the interpellation of identities’ (p.178); there remains the issue of whether intersectionality should be ‘limited to understanding individual experience, to collective experience, or to theorising identity’ (Nelson et al, 2015, p. 179). Similarly, Nash (2008) argued that if intersectionality is to provide a theoretical framework of identity then it must be able to demonstrate that there is alignment between intersectionality and the lived experience of subjects. This necessitates that intersectionality crafts ‘a theory of agency to grapple with the amount of leeway variously situated subjects have to deploy particular components of their identities in certain contexts’ (p.11).

In picking up on the methodological difficulties that intersectionality presents in terms of the conflict between anticategorical epistemology on the one hand and the need for categories to address subjugation and oppression at the nexus of social categories on the other, Fox (2016) noted that ‘A key to forming an ethical relationship with the Other is ensuring agency’ (p.378). As Fox (2016) has indicated however, the ability to exercise agency also requires the ability to behave independently of discourses that may limit agency at a structural level. This aligns with Foucault’s theorising of disciplinary power where the operation of multiple discourses may limit possibilities for agency and even if an individual recognises structural oppression that relations of power work to ensure that the ‘docile body’ of the social actor is individualised ‘by a location that does not give them a fixed position, but

distributes them and circulates them in a network of relations' (Foucault, 1995, p.146). The assignation of individual places enabled supervision of the individual and as such 'It made the educational space function like a learning machine....as a machine for supervising, hierarchizing, rewarding' (p.147).

Perhaps the most vexed issue regarding intersectionality's analytical framework is the amount of emphasis that should be placed on a macro or micro level of analysis (Bilge, 2010). For example, Staunæs (2003) argued that attending to the role of power structures in the production of inequality comes at the expense of analysing subjectivity whereas Collins (2009) in contrast argues that the take up of post-structuralist theory in intersectional analyses has resulted in too great a focus on narratives without enough consideration being given to the structural analysis of inequality in relation to institutional power. In response to the impasse, Bilge (2010) suggested that the association between post-structuralism and intersectionality cannot yet be generalised and adds that the emphasis on Foucault's theorising of power in intersectionality studies is problematic. In particular Bilge (2010) questioned the association of intersectionality with Foucault's conceptualisation of power because of Foucault's reluctance to specify particular subjects or groups of subjects as being sources of power but rather to examine the power relationship itself. In fairness to Foucault however, he himself argued that 'Individuals are the vehicles of power, not its points of application' (Foucault, 1980, p.98). That is, rather being viewed as the recipients of power, individuals should be seen as the 'place' where power relations are performed and more importantly where they are resisted (Mills, 2003, p.35). Moreover, Foucault argued that it is difficult to observe the operation of multiple power relations in practice since power is not necessarily located within particular institutions and hence his interest in the examination of power relations at the localised level and how these are negotiated by the individual (Mills, 2003). I would also argue that Foucault's emphasis on the local operation of power relations

aligns with more current translocational approaches to intersectional analysis which focus on the social and temporal context and the relationship between actors and structure (see below).

A Translocational Approach to Analysing Difference

The differences in the analytical approach between different countries (for example, intersectional research in European and Nordic countries tends to mobilise the post-structuralist theorisation of subjectivity whereas North American research primarily employs a structural approach to the analysis of inequality) and the different emphasis that is given to the analysis of structure and subjectivity has led Bilge (2010) to argue that these ‘national differences’ are a reflection of ‘the persistence of the tension between actor and structure in understanding and applying intersectionality as a research paradigm’ (p.63). As such, several scholars of intersectionality (including Collins, 2000; Yuval-Davis, 2006) have noted the need for the refinement of its analytical levels. For example, Denis (2008) has emphasised the importance of the consideration of social location in terms of time and place in intersectional analysis, and recognition that social location is itself a social construction that is dynamic rather than static. More recently, Anthias (2012) has proposed the need for a greater ‘analytical sensitivity’ to address the epistemological and ontological issues outlined above regarding intersectional analyses and in particular the issues associated with a hierarchical approach to interpret social inequality with the use of a translocational approach which she described as ‘a tool for analysing positions and outcomes produced through the intersections of different social structures and processes, including transnational ones, giving importance to the broader social context and to temporality’ (p.130). By focusing on the social location of actors rather than groups, a translocational framework takes into account the social and temporal context in relation to the operation of power which produces social divisions in a particular location. It becomes possible, therefore, to examine the discursive effects of the

operation and intersection of social categories in relation to the operation of power in different societal arenas in different focuses of research (Anthias, 2012). By taking into account the structural, discursive and narrational spaces within which the subject finds her/himself, a translocational framework not only takes into account the structural and subjective spheres of the social actor but also ‘recognizes the importance of context, the situated nature of claims and attributions and their production in complex and shifting locales’ (p.131). As such, a translocational framework conceptualises difference as a process (rather than a function of individual characteristics) in which the saliency of any given category is contingent upon its social and temporal context.

Applying Intersectionality to Analyse Difference in this Project

Notwithstanding, the concerns outlined above about the ambiguity surrounding the conceptualisation of intersectionality, as Davis (2008) noted, it is this uncertainty and vagueness of intersectionality where its success lies where:

It is precisely because intersectionality is so imperfect – ambiguous and open-ended – that it has been so productive for contemporary feminist scholarship. Its lack of clear-cut definition or even specific parameters has enabled it to be drawn upon in nearly any context of inquiry. The infinite regress built into the concept – which categories to use and when to stop – makes it vague, yet also allows endless constellations of intersecting lines of difference to be explored. With each new intersection, new connections emerge and previously hidden exclusions come to light (p.77).

This is noteworthy from an ontological perspective in terms of what characterises a ‘successful’ theory? Davis (2008) has urged researchers to embrace its ambiguity as a means of ‘interrogating one’s own blind spots and transforming them into analytic resources for further critical analysis’ (p.77). Similarly, while noting the issues that attend the theorization of intersectionality, Nash (2008) indicated that it is not enough to simply to critique the apparent paradoxes and contradictions in intersectional theory but rather these should be viewed as ‘the first step in a larger theoretical and political project’ (p.11) that troubles monolithic categories in the theorising of identity and examines the relationship between

power and oppression. Moreover, intersectionality invites us to consider questions of marginalisation and exclusion in new ways that recognises ‘that identity is complex, that subjectivity is messy, and that personhood is inextricably bound up with vectors of power’ (p.13).

I would argue therefore that the open-endedness of intersectionality sits well with the inherent messiness of post-structuralist thought and indeed with my approach to this project, namely to destabilise the taken-for-grantedness of the achieving/underachieving binary. Social categories are not applicable just to the non-powerful, non-privileged Other but also to the privileged and powerful (Staunæs, 2003). As such, a ‘majority-inclusive’ approach focuses ‘on *how* someone becomes un/marked, non/privileged, how these processes are produced, sustained and subverted and how power is part of this’ (Staunæs, 2003, p.105). This point is echoed by Anthias (2012) who has mobilised intersectionality as a heuristic device in her work (Anthias, 2008, 2009) as a means for exploring both advantage and disadvantage in social relations. This is an important point as it appears that to date a great deal of scholarship has mobilised intersectionality to explore disadvantage alone.

Although intersectionality has been increasingly mobilised in educational research as a conceptual framework to analyse the relationships between race, class and gender (in addition to other categories such as disability) within educational contexts, the vast majority of this research has focussed on secondary and post-secondary education largely within the North American context. As Jones (2015) has noted the paucity of research examining the intersection of gender, class and race among students in educational institutions can be accounted for by the inherent complexity of intersectionality as a methodology. Notwithstanding its complexity, intersectionality does however offer an analytic framework for the exploration of the experiences of students and, within the context of this dissertation, it provides the means to illuminate the experiences of students who to date have been

underrepresented in educational research, in particular the experiences of students from marginalised groups. As noted above, until recently there has been very little research directed at examining student experience in relation to the intersection of gender, ethnicity and social class. Rather the influence of ethnicity, gender and class have been analysed as a separate and distinct categories, thereby failing to offer a more complex understanding of the educational experiences of the diverse student population.

In the absence of intersectional research examining the educational experiences of students in relation to attainment, I will therefore apply an intersectional lens to analyse the experiences of a small cohort of students while considering issues of sameness and difference in relation to the operation of power. Specifically, this project will therefore critically engage with an intersectional analytical framework to make visible the complex ways in which upper primary school aged students within a New Zealand school who are discursively constituted as underachieving are multiply positioned in relation multiple positioning of students who are discursively constituted as underachieving in relation to the operation of power and moreover how this positioning is negotiated/resisted/subverted. By doing so it becomes possible to problematise the taken-for-grantedness of the achievement/underachievement binary and in particular the homogenisation of the underachieving student. That is, the project aims to illuminate how student subjectivities cohere around the achieving/underachieving binary. The project will therefore focus on the social location of the research participants rather than on groups, to take into account the complex processes in which the production of difference plays out within a specific situational context.

Chapter Summary

Post-structuralism rejects theories that propose single concepts or ‘absolute truths’ to explain complex social phenomena. Given this thesis’ aim to make the constitutive force of

hegemonic discourses of academic underachievement visible by examining the positionalities among students from diverse backgrounds to shed light on the complexity of the process in which students become discursively constituted as underachieving, post-structuralism provides a 'good fit' for the study. In particular, the post-structuralist concepts of discourse, subjectivity, agency and positioning theory enable a fine grained examination of the role that discursive practices play in the formation of students' academic identities. Intersectionality is deployed as an analytical tool to examine what discourses are mobilised in relation to the intersecting categories ethnicity, social class and gender to discursively produce the underachieving student within a specific New Zealand context. In the next chapter I will outline the ethical and methodological considerations involved in facilitating the aims of this thesis.

CHAPTER FOUR

REPRESENTING DIFFERENCE

“It is not a matter of looking harder or more closely, but of seeing what frames our seeing – spaces of constructed validity and incitements to see which constitute power/knowledge” (Lather, 1993, p.675).

Introduction

As outlined in the previous chapter, this project aimed to examine the conditions under which discursive power acts to make the underachieving student possible as well as the conditions under which the subject ‘takes up’ the available discourses of underachievement as their own and moreover, how does the subject negotiate them? A post-structuralist understanding of discourse, positioning and subjectivity has been employed to address these questions. Moreover, an intersectional approach has been deployed to examine the operation of normative discursive practices in relation to the discursively produced student. What follows is an explication of the methodological considerations to facilitate the aims of the study that have been addressed including my own positionality and reflexivity in relation to the research participants and the potential readers of this thesis.

Reflexivity/Positioning Myself as Researcher

I am cognisant that my positionality in terms of why I have undertaken the research and how I have interacted with the research participants cannot be separate from the data which I collected and interpreted ‘as the complexity of the movement and intersections amongst knowledge, power and subjectivity require the researcher to survey life from within itself’ (Davies, 2004, p. 5). To invoke Herman Melville’s (cited in Deleuze, 1992) fishing line analogy, in order to comprehend the complexity of the interaction between knowledge, power and subjectivity it is necessary for the researcher to position her/himself on the ‘lines of force that make up the social apparatus’. That is, in order to disentangle the lines of force

and make sense of what a subject describes, the researcher has to be ‘located in and on’ those lines (Davies, 2004, p. 5). As such, I have attempted to position myself ‘along the lines of force’ in order to destabilise the taken-for-assumptions regarding underachievement.

As noted by Davies (2004), the take-up by some of post-structuralist theorising and methodology is characterised by ambivalence, as one is usually required to trouble previously held structuralist epistemologies. For example, later in this chapter I illustrate the epistemological tensions that I experienced in my analysis of the data and in particular my representation of one of the educational subjects, Maria. I am mindful, for example that I am not the ‘final arbiter of meaning’ nor can I necessarily control meaning (Davies, 2004, p.6). Rather my desire is to understand the subjective realities of the research participants in view of ‘rendering explicit the discursive space’ (Lather, 1993, p. 674) while at the same time being mindful of my own ‘partiality and investments’ (Pillow, 2002, p.547) by continually engaging with ‘a reflexive exploration of [my] own practices of representation’ (Lather, 1993, p. 676). It requires recognition for example, that language does not reflect necessarily what an individual intends or how they act but rather language should be viewed as producing what is discursively possible or otherwise. The subject becomes an effect of language (Mazzei & Jackson, 2012). For Judith Butler, the question becomes therefore ‘How does discourse foreclose the field of what can be intended or said?’ (Butler, 1993, p.190).

Some of the influences of the researcher’s identity lie ‘beyond the reflexive grasp’ however, since it is ‘one thing to write about reflexivity and yet another to operate reflexively in practice’ (Reay, 1996, p.444). For example, I can state simply that I am a Pākehā, middle-class, heterosexual male and that these aspects of my identity have the potential for alliances across sameness and difference. Reflexivity however requires that I take into account that this project was a moment in time for the research participants as well as for myself. As such, reflexivity requires recognition that this research project is limited by this subjectivity and

that this subjectivity inflects my interpretation of the participants' stories. The ways in which I spoke with the participants and the way in which they responded is itself informed by power relations between myself and the participants. A reflexive engagement with the data and my interpretation of the data therefore required a continuous interrogation of my own academic, personal, political and professional preconceptions and how these have mediated my reasons for undertaking the research, my research questions and my interpretation and analysis of the data. My continual engagement with my own positioning and subjectivity along with a commitment to challenging the 'taken-for-granted' discourses attending academic underachievement opens up the possibility of critical representation and destabilisation.

Epistemological and Ontological Considerations

Not only does post-structuralist research attempt to disrupt what is taken for granted it also aims to generate 'lines of flight that make new realities' (Davies, 2004, p.3). For example, St Pierre and Pillow (2000) have suggested that feminist post-structuralist writers 'have found possibilities for different worlds' (p.1) by asking questions that produce different ways of looking at the world. Within the context of education, questions that may be posed by post-structuralists include: 'How does it [education] function? Where is to be found? How does it get produced and regulated? What are its social effects? How does it exist?' (Bove, 1990, p.54 cited in St Pierre & Pillow, 2000, p.8). By troubling established ways of thinking and doing, and developing different understandings of 'intelligibility', different 'epistemologies, ontologies, and methodologies (are produced) that may make education unintelligible to itself' (St Pierre & Pillow, 2000, p.2).

It follows that a post-structural methodology will necessarily require 'other ways of thinking about our research' (St Pierre & Pillow, 2000, p.11). For example, Stronach and MacLure (1997) argued that a post-structural methodology needs to abandon the 'myths' of

‘representational clarity’ and the emancipatory discourses of the Enlightenment in favour of a methodology that attempts to ‘rupture’ and disrupt the so-called ‘epistemologies of certainty’ by embracing a practice of ‘strategic uncertainty’. Significantly, they also argued for a practice of uncertainty on political grounds as well as on the basis that if educational research is to inform policy, it offers a better strategy for addressing complex issues in education rather than trying to ‘deliver simple truths’ which ‘amount to a surrender to populist rhetoric about education’ (p.6). Within the context of this research project, this meant foregrounding and troubling discourses of academic underachievement that constitute and maintain normalised dominant discourses and practices.

To foreground and trouble normative discourses and practices required a methodological approach that connects with the theoretical framework outlined previously. That is, it required a means by which I could embrace a strategic uncertainty with which I could make my knowledge claims that are empathic with the post-structuralist underpinnings of this thesis. This research project is therefore informed by a constructionist epistemology. At the heart of constructionism is:

The view that all knowledge, and therefore all meaningful reality as such, is contingent upon human practices, being constructed in and out of interaction between human beings and their world, and developed and transmitted within an essentially social context (Crotty, 1998, p.42).

Crotty (1998) suggested that meaning is constructed (rather than discovered) by individuals as they interact within their social context. As such, there is no one true way of interpreting meaning. This of course has implications for the methods employed in qualitative research including the collection of data and its interpretation and the relationship between the researcher and the researched. Moreover, the choice of research practices will be contingent upon the research questions posed which will in turn depend upon their context (Nelson, Treichler, & Grossberg, 1992).

A research approach that embraces a strategic uncertainty therefore needs to take into account an ontology that is consistent with the post-structuralist rejection of research

practices that treat language (and data) as being self-evident or ‘given’ (St.Pierre, 2013). An approach is required that does not:

...assume there is a given, a real world (data) that can be gathered together (collected) and described (analyzed and known) as in logical positivism/empiricism nor do they assume, as in interpretive theories like phenomenology, that there is an underlying meaning in an already existing lifeworld that interpretation can bring to light and describe (St.Pierre, 2013, p.225).

Moreover, St Pierre indicated that in a positivist analysis of data in qualitative research that there is no requirement for the interpretation of data to be located in relevant theory as the data ‘speak for itself’. As such, St. Pierre (2013) suggested that by failing to theorise data in its interpretation, that a positivist approach to qualitative research does not ‘provide evidence of anything much’ (p.225).

In contrast to the data and evidence driven process that characterises conventional qualitative inquiry which assumes that data is simply waiting to be collected, transcribed and interpreted, there has been a turn in qualitative research inviting researchers to rethink and disrupt taken-for-granted approaches to data collection and analysis. For example, Honan (2014) referred to the work of Denzin (2010) who described the qualitative researcher as a *bricoleur* who experiments with new ways of writing and representing data by blurring the boundaries between different narrative strategies (although it is interesting to note that when Denzin and Lincoln (1998) originally referred to the researcher as *bricoleur*, they did so in the context of the researcher using whatever tools they have at their disposal to engage in research practice. However, Crotty (1998) dismissed this as being a form of relativism. In particular, Crotty (1998) suggested that this was an imprecise use of the *bricoleur* originally described by Claude Levi-Strauss in *The Savage Mind* . For Levi-Strauss the *bricoleur* is someone who uses whatever materials are available to make something new. Crotty (1998) suggested in Denzin and Lincoln’s (1998) usage of the term, the *bricoleur* is focused on the materials that they have to work with sans self-reflexivity (Crotty, 1998).

Notwithstanding the differences in the interpretation of the researcher as *bricoleur*, MacLure (2013) in drawing on Deleuze's (2004) *Logic of Sense* argued for a post-qualitative approach to research that challenges the primacy of language and representational thinking in conventional qualitative research by engaging a materialist ontology. In particular, she argued for the 'need to find ways of researching and thinking that are able to engage more fully with the materiality of language itself - the fact that language is in and of the body; always issuing from the body; impeded by the body; affecting other bodies' (p.663). She noted for example that conventional qualitative research privileges both spoken and written language practices such as the interview, focus groups, transcripts, field notes and journal articles while focusing less (if at all) on the 'bodily entanglements of language' (p.664).

Similarly, Mazzei (2013) drew upon Deleuze and Guattari's (1983) concept, the *Body without Organs* to trouble the reliance of humanist qualitative research on material explanations of 'a unique, essentialist subject' (p.732) by theorising a *Voice without Organs* in which the voice of the subject cannot be separated from the research process in which they are produced. In other words, 'voice' cannot be thought of as belonging to an individual who is separate from the social milieu from which it emanates. Rather, voice can be thought of 'as an assemblage, a complex network of human and nonhuman agents that exceeds the traditional notion of the individual' (p.734). As Mazzei and Jackson (2012) noted, an assemblage is a process rather than 'a thing' that arranges, organises and fits together. As such, rather than privileging the one voice of the research participant, the qualitative researcher 'plugs in' to the *voices* of our participants, our own voices, the voices of our teachers and our theoretical voices (Mazzei & Jackson, 2012). The notion of assemblage aligns well with the stated aim of this thesis to examine the processes involved in the discursive production of underachievement. To that end, I connect the participants' voices with the aforementioned in ways that enabled a multilayered treatment of the data.

Mazzei (2013) described the research interview that characterises humanistic qualitative inquiry as a process in which the researcher ‘centres’ the subject by asking participants to tell about their experiences in order to produce ‘a supposedly coherent narrative that represents truth about the person and their lived experiences’ (p.735). Mazzei (2013) argued if the interview is thought of as an assemblage instead, that:

There can no longer be a division between a field of reality (what we ask, what our participants tell us, and the places we inhabit), a field of representation (research narratives constructed after the interview, and a field of subjectivity (participants and researchers (p.735).

I must readily admit however, that notwithstanding my commitment to engage with a post-structural remit of troubling the representation of the humanist subject, that I have had considerable difficulty ‘escap[ing] the “I”’ (MacLure, 2013). MacLure (2013) noted the reason that qualitative research tends to default to the humanist position is her suspicion that it is ‘associated with our failure to engage fully with the materiality of language and its challenge to the workings of representation’ (p.666). This I consider to be a work in progress. For example, it was apparent from an initial draft of the first analysis chapter of an interview with one of my research participants, ‘Maria’, that despite my articulation of the post-structuralist underpinnings of the thesis, I had unreflexively defaulted to psychologising in my analysis, that is, I had uncritically engaged psychological knowledges to produce *the* real story about Maria, where *the* expresses the singularity and objectivity of the story that I aimed to produced. In other words, my own positionality in terms of how I engaged with Maria, the power relations between myself and her, and my take up of an individualising psychology to produce Maria’s subjectivity, remained invisible and unchallenged. What follows is an explication of the epistemological issues that I encountered representing Maria as a problem to be solved and in particular my (ongoing) work towards engaging a critical reflexivity towards the normalising knowledges produced by the psy-gaze and the implications that this had for my (re)engagement with the data.

Representing Maria

As noted above, it was apparent from an initial draft of the analysis that I had unreflexively engaged my psychologist's 'expert' gaze to produce a particular 'picture' of Maria, a Pākehā New Zealander, from a working class background (as identified by school administration). Maria had indicated that she was not doing particularly well academically at school. In the draft analysis of my interview with Maria I enlisted some psychological concepts and knowledges to accomplish my aim to produce Maria as a knowable subject. For example, I used the psychological term 'perception' in the analysis to describe how Maria had viewed herself as an underachieving student. In this context, my use of the term 'perception' relied upon the humanist notion of a stable self and constructed Maria as an individual who is independent from the social world. By drawing on my background in psychology I had taken up psychological discourse to observe (and produce) Maria's stable self in order to render her as a knowable individual. In doing so, I had unreflexively positioned myself as expert with the power to 'know' others. I was attempting to make sense of Maria's narrative by mobilising my expert psy-gaze and psy-knowledges, which was contrary to my stated goal of being 'epistemically responsible' (Code, 1987).

Erica Burman's (1994) comments in her introduction to *Deconstructing Developmental Psychology* resonate where she acknowledges her own 'multiple and contradictory' subject positioning within psychological discourses, and in particular the power that developmental psychological discourses have upon her subjectivity. She does so:

...not, or not only, to engage in the confessional mode of expression conventionally adopted within an 'Introduction', but to emphasise that I, as author am as subject to the power of the discourses developmental psychology produces and reproduces as the putative children and families I discuss in this book (Burman, 1994, p.8).

Notwithstanding my own 'confessional' narrative (see below) I too had been subject to psychology's discursive power as a consequence of my own taking up of psychological

discourses. By drawing on my own psy-knowledges I was in the words of Rose (1989)

claiming:

...a particular expertise in the disciplining of the uniqueness and idiosyncracies of childhood, individualising children by categorizing them, calibrating their aptitudes, inscribing their peculiarities in an ordered form, managing their variability conceptually, and governing it practically (p.132).

In post-structuralist terms it might be argued that I had become discursively constituted through my take up of psychological discourses and consequently mobilised these discourses as authoritative statements in order to be considered intelligible (Parkes, Gore & Amosa, 2010). It is also interesting to consider Petersen and Millei's (2015) contention that to varying degrees we are all caught up with/under the psy-gaze. For example, within the context of Initial Teacher Education they have suggested that such is the discursive power of the psy-disciplinary gaze that both students and lecturers alike 'are actively produced by the discourses that are upheld as relevant and authoritative' (p.142).

Arguably, my subjectivity, at least in the initial stages of the analysis was constituted by psychological discourses, despite my engagement with and articulation of the post-structural underpinnings of the thesis. I was subject to the very discourses which I wished to resist and exceed. The effects of which were to produce a particular set of psychological knowledges about educational discourse. In the context of this analysis I mobilised the power of the psy-gaze to individualise Maria as a case to be studied. In other words I had presupposed the inevitability of Maria's 'condition' of academic underachievement and had set about establishing a 'case' to substantiate my 'truth claims'.

Producing Maria's 'Case'

Having positioned myself as expert in the analysis, I mobilised psychological discourses to produce Maria's biography by collecting multiple data sources in order to enable her to be 'described, judged, measured (and) compared with others' (Foucault, 1977, p.191). Specifically, I borrowed the voices of her teacher and mother to triangulate who

Maria ‘really’ was for me rather than focusing my attention on the discourses she mobilised and the way in which she negotiated these, and how others - including myself - were doing the same. In *Discipline and Punish* (1977) Foucault proposed that the introduction of the ‘biographical’ was important in the history of penalty because it ‘establishes the ‘criminal’ as existing before the commission of a crime and even outside it’ (p.252). This required that the life of the prisoner be examined from top to bottom so that not only the circumstances but also the causes of the crime could be taken into account in order to arrive at an appropriate penalty. Similarly, by producing a biographical account of Maria’s ‘true story’, it becomes possible to establish who Maria ‘really’ is as a pre-existing subject before discourse ‘works on her’ and the causes of her underachievement in order to be able to provide a cure. Here again, I had defaulted to the psychologist’s gaze and disciplinary power/knowledge to ‘diagnose’ Maria’s ‘problem’ and to find a solution. My attempt to produce Maria’s ‘case’ by triangulating her teacher’s and mother’s stories about her overlooked that this had nothing to do with how Maria positioned herself nor addressed the ways in which she negotiated the discourses which positioned her as academically underachieving. My desire to ‘know’ Maria was privileged without any consideration of my implicatedness in the production of this knowledge. Rather than examining the effects of Maria’s multiple positionings I was attempting to build a picture of Maria by using the psychological knowledges that governed my understanding.

The Problem of Knowledge and Self-Knowledge

Despite my stated aim in the methodology to trouble claims to represent the realities of others by reflexively foregrounding my epistemological assumptions, as noted above my initial attempts at discourse analysis invoked psychologising discourses in which I had attempted to represent Maria from the position of expert with no acknowledgement of the

power relations between us. Consequently, in order to atone for my lack of reflexive insight I confessed that my personal location in the research initially was simply articulated as a researcher who happened to have previously taught at the school with no acknowledgement of the implications that this may have had for the power relations between me and the student research participants, including Maria. According to Foucault the confession is a form of truth telling, a technique that constitutes the self. Indeed, Foucault asked ‘How did it come about that all of Western culture began to revolve around this obligation of truth...?’ (Foucault, 1997, p.281). As such his work sought to analyse how in Western culture, so called ‘truth games’ in the social sciences including the psy-disciplines (including psychiatrists, psychologists, psychoanalysts and counsellors etc.) developed technologies (such as speaking, listening, recording and transcribing) for individuals to understand their own selves. In this context my confessional narrative, a culturally circumscribed performance could be regarded as an attempt to transform or to ‘constitute, positively, a new (reflexive) self’ (Foucault, 1988, p.19).

Arguably, my attempts to find my reflexive voice as a beginning researcher were derailed in part by my adherence to an expert positioning through the mobilisation of psychological discourses as well as by my failure to make the operation of these powerful discourses visible and in particular to examine how these discourses had created relations of power between myself and the research participants. Fox and Allan’s (2014) article resonates where in discussing reflexivity in the context of the fraught journey of the doctoral process as one of ‘unbecoming and becoming’ (p.101) the doctoral student states that at the beginning of her doctoral study: “I was comfortable with what I thought I ‘knew’ and as Drake (2010) suggested I probably knew what I expected to find” (p.105). Similarly, I felt comfortable with my psychological knowledge which I had duly mobilised to substantiate my ‘truth claims’.

It should also be noted that in the context of this research project (in which the students I interviewed were subject to the normative practices and discourses of academic underachievement) as a beginning researcher, I too am subject to the ‘discursive rationalities’ (Petersen & O’Flynn, 2007) of the institutional practices and discourses of the academy and academic knowledge that work to constitute my academic subjectivities. For example, my candidacy as a doctoral student is regulated ‘through mechanisms such as confirmation of candidature, milestone reporting, annual reports and the incorporation of timely completion rates in academic workload agreements and measures of research activity’ (Bansel, 2011, p.548). It is interesting to consider Bansel’s (2011) account of his doctoral experience in which he contested and resisted ‘the neoliberal technologies of audit and accountability through which academic subjectivity is constituted, regulated and ascribed value’ (p.544) and framed doctoral study as an ‘embodied and performative academic labour’ (p.543). As such, he argued for an ‘ambivalent’ resistance to the neoliberal indices of knowledge production and for the process of knowledge production and the lived experience of doctoral study to be recognised as a ‘complex, messy and not-always-rational process’ (p.554).

Epistemology Reconsidered

It is from this vantage point that I reflected upon my positioning and my struggle regarding a post-structuralist endeavour. I was cognisant that rather than engaging a form of post-structuralist reflexivity in the initial analysis, that I had engaged a psychologising self. Moreover, I had failed to address my own implicatedness in terms of my multiple positionings and my subjection to psychological discourse/s during my initial attempt at representation. My psychological expert positioning had lent itself to me a footing, a sense of place, academic legitimacy, and a particular confident version of all-knowing competence. However, my subjection to psychological discourse remained unacknowledged and hence

unchallenged. As Butler (1997b) noted ‘As a form of power, subjection is paradoxical’ in that one is dependent/subjected on a discourse while at the same time this subjection ‘initiates and sustains our agency’ (p.2). I had taken up psychological discourses without realizing the possibility of gaining agency to ‘speak/write meaningfully and convincingly beyond the terms of my subjection’ (Laws & Davies, 2000, p.206).

As noted in the theoretical framework however, the way one thinks about one’s self shifts in response to the shift in discursive context and each ‘possible’ self may be contradictory to another ‘possible’ self located in a different storyline. Skeggs (1997) noted that the ‘positioning process is not without contradiction’ as our positioning as researchers is informed by a myriad of factors including history, disciplinary practices and dominant paradigms. As a consequence ‘these positionings impact upon what research we do, when and how we do it’ (p.18). Significantly, she added however, that there is ‘no straightforward correspondence between our circumstances and how we think: we are positioned in but not determined by our locations’ (p.18). Accordingly, who I am and how I choose to ground myself epistemologically is dependent upon the positions and discursive practices which I take up and indeed ‘within those practices, the stories through which [I] make sense of [my] own and others lives’ (Davies & Harre, 1999, p. 15).

In view of the above therefore and consistent with the ‘post-structural thesis of the knower’s implicatedness, multiple and shifting subjectivities, and the negotiated and situationally contingent nature of stories’ (Choi, 2006, p.437) I believe that my continuing engagement with my own positioning and subjectivity along with a commitment to challenging the ‘taken-for-granted’ discourses attending academic underachievement (such as ‘laziness’, ‘lack of motivation’ and ‘lack of self-control’) opened up the possibility of critical representation and destabilisation. In particular, it became possible to examine and to trouble how the underachieving student can be spoken into existence and to relate these discourses to

the reality of being constituted as underachieving. Hence, rather than try to ‘solve a problem like Maria’ through the psy-gaze by finding the ‘truth’ about academic underachievement in order to provide a solution, my desire to be ‘epistemically responsible’ is to attend to the contradictions in my positionings and to recognise my implicatedness in the way in which I came to ‘know’ my research subjects.

Analytical Strategy

Given the claim of post-structuralism to ‘reject the possibility of arriving at a ‘truth’ about the essence of a phenomenon’ (Sóndergaard, 2002, p.188) it is necessary to outline a methodological approach that allows the possibility of ‘truth claims’ to be made while taking into account the ‘crisis of representation’. Citing Derrida, Sóndergaard (2002) stated that the post-structuralist emphasis of the signifier over the signified means that ‘truth claims become very interesting to study, not for their assumed reflection of reality but with Foucault for their production of social and cultural effects and thereby for their inductions of regular effects of power’ (p.188). As such, a post-structuralist engagement with discourse and discursive practices enables the possibility for the researcher to engage with identifying the processes involved in the subjectification of identities and to trouble the categorisation of social categories and in particular the processes through which the operation of power constructs categories in relation to the binary other (Sóndergaard, 2002). For Foucault (1980) one of the main effects of power is that ‘certain discourses’ constitute the individual. As such ‘The individual is an effect of power, and at the same time, or precisely to the extent to which it is that effect, it is the element of its articulation. The individual which power has constituted is at the same time its vehicle (p.98). It is important to note however that rather than simply provide an account for the ‘other’, I aimed to trace how power operates both on and through the discursively constituted subject as a ‘vehicle of power’ (Foucault, 1980, p.98). In other

words I was not simply trying to identify who has power over whom but rather *how* is power exercised and *what* are its effects.

As outlined previously, subjection denotes the process by which one becomes subordinated by power as well as the process of becoming a subject and as such ‘Subjects emerge through and within discursive power’ (p.189). Foucault cautioned however against trying to analyse the operation of power deductively, that is, working from the centre outwards in an effort to ‘discover’ its effects. Rather, he urged the researcher to undertake an ascending analysis of power in which it is analysed in ‘a cluster of relations’ (p.199). In other words, he was arguing that the shifting and multiple functioning of power should be analysed, including its effects within a specific network of power relations (Mazzei & Jackson, 2012). It is also important to note that in Foucault’s conceptualisation of power that it is not simply an ‘organ of repression’ but also has productive possibilities in that it produces knowledge about the self as well as providing the potential for resistance. Therefore, rather than trying to identify the meaning of discursive practices (as it is not possible to identify the intentions of individuals), Foucault’s focus was on identifying how power relations maintain or disrupt discursive practices. As I outlined in the previous chapter, Foucault’s analytic focus was on how power is deployed through social relations and practices. This project can therefore be viewed as my attempt to deploy Foucault’s methodological approach (or what he referred to as ‘gadgets’ (Foucault, 1980, p.65) as Foucault never viewed his work as being a template for the work of others) to map relations of power between educational discourse and students, and its effects, and also the relations of power between myself (researcher) and the study’s participants (researched). Within the context of this thesis therefore, I *think* with Foucault’s reading of power/knowledge in order to map out how power/knowledge relations, including how power is manifested and operates in the maintenance of the discursive practices that constitute students’ academic identities.

Intersectional Analysis

From a post-structuralist stand-point discursive power acts on the subject by providing the conditions as to what makes the subject possible and what is ‘taken-up’ by the subject. S ndergaard (2002) suggested that the conditions within which this discursive power operates becomes the focus for investigating the constituting process and lends itself to asking questions such as: ‘How is the body spoken into existence? Through which discursive processes does it emerge, and in what kinds of contexts? How are the autonomous identities of the Western world spoken into existence and practiced? What conditions do this or that particular speech and practice impose on particular individuals for understanding themselves and others? How do they take up discursive practices as their own and how do they negotiate them?’ (p.189). With these questions in mind a methodological approach was required within the context of this project which enabled the analysis of the discursive practices which constitute students academic identities in addition to the effects of these practices.

As I outlined in the previous chapter, an intersectional approach aligns with the post-structural project of troubling static conceptualisations of identity as well as with the Foucauldian conceptualisation of power in terms of its focus on challenging the homogenisation and normalisation of categories. In addition, it provides a methodological tool to analyse how multiple forms of identity intersect within different contexts in relation to the operation of power within a specific locational and temporal context. Specifically, this project has taken into account the structural, discursive and narrational spaces of the research participants by deploying an intersectional approach to the analysis of the lived educational experiences of six intermediate school aged students (differentiated in terms of ethnicity, social class and gender) at the points of intersection of the social categories, ethnicity, social class and gender in relation to the operation of discursive power.

Methodologically therefore, the analysis identifies pertinent categorical intersections in the participants narratives. It also identifies any implicit subject positions that spontaneously arise from the interviews while being mindful not to pre-empt any categories in interviews in order to void their reification (Winker & Degele, 2009). Hegemonic representations of societal norms and expectations in relation to educational achievement that are articulated by the research participants are also made explicit, in addition it identifies social practices and structures which inform the research participants' experiences and understandings of academic underachievement which are then referenced to the social categories ethnicity, social class and gender. Finally, the analysis addresses how power operates in relation to the social practices and structures identified by the participants by adopting a majority-inclusive approach (Staunæs, 2003) by taking into account how social categories condition the experiences of the more powerful and privileged in addition to those who have been positioned as other. It should be noted that in recognition of the issues of power inherent in the research relationship, I was mindful of the importance of reflexively addressing imbalances of power between myself and the research participants. I was particularly mindful of taking into account any issues of power that arose between and within myself and the Maori research participants and my attempts to understand their experiences as Maori. Moreover, intersectionality has been employed to ground the research to take into account the complexity of Maori students experiences of academic underachievement.

Ethical Considerations and Method

Following approval being granted by the University of Otago ethics committee (Appendix A) and the Ngāi Tahu Research Consultation Committee (Appendix B), permission was sought by letter from the Board of Trustees of an Intermediate school in a small New Zealand city to conduct the research project. The New Zealand Primary schooling

sector progresses from Years 0-1 (five year olds) to Year 8 (12 year olds). Secondary schooling is from Years 9-13 (13-18 year olds). The school was a convenience sample and selected because students of intermediate school age had already spent six years at school and would therefore be able to engage and articulate their understandings of their academic experience. The school is predominantly middle-class and has a decile rating of nine (decile ratings are a measure of the way in which the New Zealand Ministry of Education allocates funding according to socio-economic backgrounds of the students at the school on a scale of one (lowest) to ten (highest). Following approval being granted by the school Board of Trustees (school management committee comprising the school principal, a staff representative and community members) to conduct the research, an Information Sheet (Appendix C) outlining the research project was given to teachers who expressed interest in participating. A teacher of a Year 7 class who was willing to participate and very supportive of the research process was interviewed following receipt of Informed Consent (Appendix D) regarding her understandings, her beliefs and personal philosophies with regard to academic underachievement and in particular how she accounted for differential levels of achievement.

Following the teacher interview, the entire class of 'Room Seven' (28 students) was invited to participate in individual audiotaped interviews which were of approximately 20 minutes duration. An Information Sheet for the children (Appendix E), their parents and other carers (Appendix F) was given to each child in the class to take home. The Information Sheet outlined the purpose and nature of the research, what the participants would be asked to do and the possible benefits, costs and outcomes. Informed Consent (Appendix G) advised the students that their participation in the research was entirely voluntary, that they would not be individually identified and that they could refuse or withdraw from the interview without question. I wish to acknowledge that the notion of informed consent is problematic in that although assurances to maintain anonymity are given, Alderson (2012) has argued that it is

questionable the extent to which it is possible to conceal identity from those directly connected with the research (such as peers, parents and teachers). Furthermore, although participants are assured of the right to withdraw, no mention is made of potential risk and harm which betrays the degree to which participants have been 'informed'. As such Alderson (2012) suggested that an alternative approach to conducting research with children should include an awareness of: 'how to define, respect and promote the rights and informed autonomy of participants at every stage of research through to the potential influence on policy and practice and on professional and public opinion, which affect children's daily lives' (p.238).

Of the class of 28 students, 25 agreed to take part in the interview. The students who agreed to take part were asked to indicate how they experienced and understood themselves achieving at school academically and to indicate why and how they knew this (i.e., what information were they basing their understanding of their performance on?). I am mindful that when people are asked to speak about themselves they do so with reference to the Other (Winker & Degele, 2011). Therefore, to avoid pre-empting categories of achievement I used the whole class interviews as an opportunity to identify categories of academic achievement from the students themselves which would serve as 'self-positioners' for the in-depth interviews (Winker & Degele, 2011). Following the whole class interviews a smaller sample of students (three girls and three boys) and their parents/guardians were identified using purposive sampling, and asked to participate in in-depth interviews. The students were identified according to a range of self-identified academic ability (Good, OK, Poor), gender, ethnicity, and socio-economic status according to parental occupation (according to Elley-Irving Socio-Economic Index: 2001 Census Revision) (see Table 1).

Table 1

Characteristics of students and their parent/caregiver selected for in-depth interviews

Ability	Student	Parent/Caregiver	Ethnicity	SES
Poor	Maria	Sue	Pakeha	Working Class
Poor	Robert	Meghan	Pakeha	Working Class
OK	Jennifer	Angela	Pakeha	Working Class
OK	Lance	Tina	Pakeha	Middle Class
Good	Hania	Margaret	Māori	Working Class
Good	Sean	Linda	Pakeha	Middle Class

The information pertaining to ethnicity and parental occupation was uplifted from school records and the students and their parents were advised accordingly. I am cognisant of the issues that are inherent with the identification of the socio-economic status of research

participants and am mindful that there is ‘no single scale of social class categories that is universally recognized; the categories are multiple and difficult to interpret’ in educational research (Gillborn, 2009, p.21).

In-depth Interviews

Søndergaard (2002) indicated that there are a variety of ways in which the researcher can analyse the process/es where categories are constituted such as, the interview, diaries, public documents or observations. That is, any material which describes how life is lived and how people understand and interpret everyday life and furthermore how they practice these understandings can be used by the researcher to examine the constituting process. The researcher:

...focuses on which acts among the subjects seem to be comprehensible and in which ways, on why something is spoken into existence as taken for granted, on how and when something is taboo or a subject on which there is silence, on what is told as a rupture, though it is acceptable, or at least potentially can be made legitimate in special circumstances or legitimate by particular subjects through their particular positioning (p.191).

As such, by making processes of constitution explicit the analysis attempts to challenge and destabilise discourses and practices that are taken for granted and ‘expose it for reflection’ (Søndergaard, 2002, p191).

Within the context of this research project, the interview was utilised to identify the effects of discursive power on subjects. In particular, to identify discursive practices that offer particular subject positions to students and how discourses associated with academic underachievement might provide or constrain possibilities for the establishment of particular subject positions. At this point it is worth considering within the context of the post-structural lens that informs this project what might be considered to be normative discourses and practices that are employed in qualitative educational research such as the ‘habit of interviewing’. For example, in her interrogation of the ‘habit of interview’, Honan (2014) noted that: ‘Early career researchers and doctoral students undertaking research writing for

the first time glibly and unreflexively toss out terms and descriptions: semi-structured interviews, participant and interviewer, interview schedule, informed consent, guaranteed anonymity and confidentiality, transcriptions, coding categories' (p.1). Honan (2014) has encouraged early career qualitative researchers to experiment with and disrupt such taken-for-granted research practices associated with the interviewing process. With this in mind I used the interview to foreground the constituting processes with the aim of making these processes explicit and hence to trouble what might otherwise be taken for granted. As noted in the previous chapter social categories such as age, gender and class are implicit in the discursive processes of subjectification. However, given the assertion of post-structuralists that experience is relationally constructed and situational as well as the notion that 'data' are also mediated by the 'invisible' positioning of the researcher such as hunches, preconceptions and theoretical predispositions (Choi, 2006) I privilege the positioning of the research participants vis-a-vis my own positioning when undertaking the analysis of the data collected. As such, with an understanding of the relational constructedness of experience the analysis utilises positionality to address the complexity of the lived experience of the research participants with consideration of how students' lived experience of education constitutes their academic subjectivities.

Tangaard (2009) proposed that the interview can be: 'viewed as a social setting for the proliferation of polyphonic dialogues, in which there are many voices and discourses that cross each other simultaneously to produce knowledge about personal narratives and social life' (p.1500). As such, semi-structured interviews were conducted with the six students identified and their parents/guardians. An information sheet (Appendix H) was given to students and their parents/guardians (Appendix I). The decision to limit interviews to six students was predicated on the basis that 'researchers may manage to identify central aspects of typical variations in social discourses about particular phenomena [with] relatively few

interviews' (Tangaard, 2009, p. 1510). In other words the aim of the research was not generalisability of the data but rather to obtain an account of the discursively constituted subjectivities of the research participants.

Following receipt of students' consent (Appendix J), two interviews (each audiotaped) were conducted with each of the students. Interviews were conducted in a utility room in the school's Administration building. I advised students in advance that I was coming to speak with them and arranged to meet with each of the students at a time that did not interfere with any special activities that may have involved the student concerned. The first in-depth interview (of approximately 40 minutes duration) focused on the issues identified above. Kvale and Brinkman (2008) have indicated that: 'The purpose of the qualitative research interview is to understand the themes of the daily world from the subjects' own perspective' (p.24). To that end, the in-depth interview provided students with an opportunity to discuss experiences and understandings of themselves as learners as well as an opportunity to examine the discourses pertaining to academic achievement that constituted their learner subjectivities. In addition the in-depth interview sought to understand how the students felt about this positioning.

Following receipt of their consent (Appendix K), interviews with parents/guardians were conducted in their homes and aimed to obtain their views and understandings about their children's educational experiences generally and academic achievement in particular. I was also interested to hear the parents/guardians' own experiences of school and their views about what they would find helpful from the school/teacher in relation to their child's academic performance. The progression of the interviews (i.e., their direction and pace) and questions asked were dependent upon the participants' engagement in the conversation. A second shorter interview of approximately 20 minutes duration was offered to provide an opportunity for each of the interviewees to comment on the transcripts of the first interview

(which were returned well in advance of the second interview) and to elaborate on issues that arose during the first interview. An aide memoire (Appendix L) was used to facilitate discussion with the students, parents/caregivers and teacher when the issues identified as being relevant did not spontaneously arise.

Researching with Children

Issues relating to the interview as a means of data collection are particularly salient when conducting interviews with children. Haudrup Christensen (2004) suggested that research with children should not in principle entail treating children differently from adults. However, different ethical standards are required when researching with children because ‘the problems faced during the research process are unique to working with children’ (p.166). Of particular concern to research conducted with children are issues relating to power, rapport, voice and representation (e.g., Williamson & Butler, 1995; Swain, 2006; McGarry, 2007; Alderson, 2012).

It is perhaps with the benefit of hindsight and a reflexive gaze that I now appreciate the perfunctory and naive manner in which I approached establishing rapport with the research participants. As noted by McGarry (2007) rapport is often regarded as a key factor in the relationship between researcher and researched. However, it also tends to be taken for granted as good. Indeed, in a previous draft of the methods section of this thesis I simply stated that:

I did my utmost to put the interviewees at ease and to establish a comfortable environment in which the students could relax and engage in the conversation. I reassured the students that our conversation was confidential and that I would not divulge the contents of our conversation to anyone else. In addition I encouraged them to initially share details about what they enjoy doing both inside and outside of school (e.g., sports, hobbies, music interests). I shared some information about myself and indicated to each of the participants that they could call me by my first name.

It is apparent that I viewed rapport with the participants as a *fait accompli*, that by simply sharing some details about me and asking students to do the same rapport would result. This is in keeping Springwood and King's (2001) observation from an ethnographic standpoint that:

Ethnographers have not thought through the ways in which engaging others critically rather than empathetically does or should shape ethnographic enquiry. Ethnographers have not asked themselves often or reflexively enough about the ideopistemological, ethical, and interpersonal implications of using the words and actions of their informants against them (p.404).

In addition to questioning the shift in the ethnographic gaze from the empathic to the critical, they also ask: 'How do researchers maintain rapport with informants when they do not share a mutual understanding about the ways in which informants' everyday practices inscribe and reproduce power relations' (Springwood & King, p.406). As such, in terms of my treatment of the data I am mindful that I have constructed the spaces of interaction between myself and the research participants and that in my analysis I wished to critically foreground the complexity of not only the discourse that occupies these spaces but also relations between the researcher and the researched to which I direct my attention.

Notwithstanding the above I am mindful that the issue of power in conducting research with children is complex in that the production and negotiation of power relations shifts in the social interaction between participants (Haudrup Christensen, 2004). Furthermore, I am theoretically opposed to the common refrain that research conducted with children as means of empowering them is also problematic. For example, research employing 'participatory' methods often makes the claim to 'empower' children to change their life circumstances or to create knowledge (Gallacher & Gallagher, 2008). In other words the assumption is made that such empowerment will provide children with a 'voice'. However, this is conceptualised on the premise that the adults are already in possession of power which must be bestowed upon children 'if they are to act in the world' (p.503). Gallacher and

Gallagher (2008) considered this to be somewhat ironic in that: 'The very notion of 'empowerment' implies that, without the aid and encouragement from adult-designed 'participatory methods', children cannot fully exercise their 'agency' in research encounters' (p.503). In this conceptualisation of 'empowerment', power is simply viewed as a 'commodity' which can be acquired and exchanged and equates children's participation in research with 'agency' (Gallagher & Gallagher, 2008). This assumes that by simply taking part in knowledge construction about themselves as part of the research process, children will be enabled to exercise their 'agency' (Gallagher & Gallagher, 2008). They proposed that in order to address the 'messiness' of the research process, that researchers should adopt an attitude of 'methodological immaturity' in which the notion of the 'fully formed, rational, competent and autonomous [agent]' (p.511) is decentred and the binaries of adult/child, powerful researcher/vulnerable participant and competent adults/incompetent children are problematised. As such they suggested that rather than approaching research as an 'expert' the researcher should 'proceed from a position of ignorance' whereby our vulnerability in terms of 'sometimes feeling lost and out of place, asking stupid questions, being corrected and having our preconceptions destroyed' (p.512) is acknowledged and a position of 'immaturity' adopted.

Haudrup Christensen (2004) noted that children's sensitivity to adult-child differences necessitates careful consideration of the role of adults in the research setting. While Mandell's (1991) 'least adult role' has been lauded for enabling engagement in research with children, it has been critiqued for not taking into account the complexity of the constitution of adult-child subjectivities and may actually reinforce children's social position of lacking power in the research setting (Haudrup Christensen, 2004). I was mindful that the children were aware that I had previously worked at the school as a 'teacher' and wanted to avoid producing a 'teacher/student' relationship in which the students thought there was a 'correct'

or ‘right’ answer to my questions. I therefore adopted the ‘least teacher role’ (Swain, 2006) who had a genuine interest in listening and understanding how the students made sense of their experiences of academic achievement.

Transcription of Interviews

Interviews with students, their parents/guardians and classroom teacher yielded a large amount of transcribed material. I wish to acknowledge however, the problematic nature of the transcription of audiotaped interviews and in particular the ‘implicit ontological and epistemological baggage’ that accompanies it and the ‘possibility of the verbatim transcript’ (Poland, 2002, p.630). While typically the quality of transcription is concerned with the accuracy of verbatim accounts and hence on the minimisation of transcription error, this tends to overlook the privileged status of the transcript as ‘the indisputable record of the interview’ (Poland, 2002, p. 635).

In response to the question ‘What is a valid translation from oral to written language?’ (Kvale, 1996) some authors have suggested that the socially constructed nature of the interview must be acknowledged and as such the interview transcript should be open to multiple alternative readings and interpretations. Quasi-positivist assumptions regarding the ‘trustworthiness’ of textual representation should therefore be problematised and a more carefully nuanced representation of the research interview adopted. For example, a number of authors have indicated that issues of authenticity, audience, positionality and reflexivity should be taken into account as a means of ‘capturing voice’ (Poland, 2002, p. 636). With this in mind I attempt to make my presence known in this thesis with an active research voice where I write in the first person to not only foreground my presence in the research but also to highlight my own ideological beliefs that underpin the research process.

Discourse Analysis

As noted by Graham (2011) ‘Discourse analysis is a flexible term’ (p.663) in that the work that one is engaged in is informed greatly by the epistemological frame of reference in which the work is located. As such, and in recognition that truth is always contingent and subjective in the sense that no two analyses of language by different people will result in the same interpretation, and in keeping with the post-structuralist aim of questioning the ‘intelligibility of truth/s we have come to take for granted’ (Graham, 2011, p.666), discourse analysis has been employed to examine students’, parents’/guardians’ and the teacher’s understandings of academic underachievement and the ways in which these are ‘constructed’ (or shaped) by various social forces and hence to challenge current conceptualisations of academic underachievement as ‘the way things are’ (Cameron, 2003). In other words I wished to make the constitutive force of the discourse of academic underachievement visible by foregrounding and ‘denaturalizing’ the effects of power at work in this discourse. Furthermore, the analysis has aimed to examine not necessarily what the statements of research participants *say* but rather what they *do* (Graham, 2011). In Foucauldian terms this means attending to the processes involved in the constitutive effects of ‘statements’. For Foucault, the statement is ‘The atom of discourse’ (Foucault, 1972, p.80) and it is the role of the analyst to describe the ‘function’ of the statement ‘in its actual practice, its conditions, the rules that govern it, and the field in which it operates’ (Foucault, 1972, p87).

In terms of my treatment of the data it is important to emphasise that discourse analysis rejects the assumption that ‘language acts as a neutral, transparent medium between the social actors and their world’ (Wetherell, 1998, p. 267). Therefore the students interviewed were asked to reflect upon their understanding/perceptions of their academic performance. I was also mindful that in my treatment of the data that the narratives produced,

the interviews should be viewed as being located within broader structures of discourse and power and therefore must be analysed as such (Tangaard, 2009). This necessitates acknowledging the potential for the existence of conflict and struggle between the different discourses that are voiced as a consequence of the interview process (Tangaard, 2009). As such, in my analysis I was cognisant that the data generated from the interview may not necessarily constitute a 'progressive and harmonious exchange of meanings and experiences in which the hidden voices of the interviewee are brought into the public sphere' (p.1507).

The Question of Validity

The issue of validity in qualitative research is a vexed one to say the least, as it is 'one that can neither be avoided nor resolved, a fertile obsession given its intractability' (Lather, 1993, p.674). As such, Lather (1993) suggested that this has necessitated a 'reconceptualised validity that is grounded in theorising our practice' (Lather, 1993, p.674). Lather (1993) proposed that this reconceptualisation should entail 'getting smarter' in our practice where a reflexive approach is adopted to interrogate our own practices of representation. This should involve:

Taking a position regarding the contested bodies of thought and practice which shape inquiry in the human sciences, negotiating the complex heterogeneity of discourses and practices. This ability to establish and maintain an acceptable dialogue with readers about "how to go about reality construction" (Goldknopf, quoted in Conrad, 1990, p.101) involves making decisions about which discursive policy to follow, which "regime of truth" to locate one's work within, which mask of methodology to assume (Lather, 1993, p.676).

The 'contested terrain' of validity in qualitative inquiry is viewed by some as a consequence of qualitative research being dependent upon 'a variety of theoretical positions with very different implications' (Silverman, 2000, p.539) and that the approach taken by the researcher is framed by his/her assumptions or 'prejudices'. However, according to Wolcott (1995) this doesn't necessarily mean foreclosing on differing perspectives on validity but rather 'Qualitative researchers need to understand what the debate is about and *have* (italics

original) a position; they do not have to resolve the issue itself' (p.170). To this end, Sparkes (2001) encouraged researchers to consider how various forms of validity might coexist rather than being viewed as mutually exclusive. Sparkes (2001) suggested that this coexistence may take a variety of forms. For example, researchers may refuse to consider particular approaches to research altogether in preference to their own paradigmatic approach although according to Sparkes (2001) this amounts to 'a form of intellectual imperialism that builds failure in from the start so that the legitimacy of other research forms is systematically denied' (p.549). An alternative form of coexistence according to Sparkes (2001) is a 'respectful acknowledgement' of different forms of inquiry with regards to 'their process and products, so that each could be judged using criteria that are consistent with its own internal meaning structures' (p.549). In other words criteria should be selected in accordance to the particular paradigm in which the research is located.

Similarly, Aguinaldo (2004) argued that what is required is a conception of validity that does not 'foreclose' on knowledge within an either/or binary according to positivist epistemological assumptions. Rather Aguinaldo (2004) argued that validity operates in qualitative research as a form of power and that as such reformulation of validity requires recognition and interrogation of the practices of discursive power by making practices that maintain unequal social relations explicit. Thus, rather than assessing validity as an either/or binary (i.e., valid versus not valid) Aguinaldo (2004) argued that the issue of validity in qualitative research should be characterised by a continual process of interrogation of these practices of power.

It should be noted that from a post-structuralist perspective, text is not a representation of reality which therefore brings into question the authority of the researcher to represent the lives of others (Choi, 2006 p.441). Choi (2006) suggested:

Questioning the researcher's authority to be able to represent others' lives conceptually is congruent with the researcher as positioned subject, in the sense that both bring us to attend to the 'power' inherent in knowledge production: who represents what? (p.440).

As such, it is the responsibility of the researcher to make his/her readers aware that the text is ‘a site of political struggle over the real and its meanings’ (Lincoln & Denzin, 1998, p.417 cited in Choi, 2066, p.441). This requires reflexive engagement with the text to cast light upon the crisis of representation as well as illuminating the operation of discursive power. While I certainly don’t make claim to solve the crisis of representation in this thesis I wish at the very least to trouble claims to represent the realities of others by reflexively foregrounding my epistemological assumptions and political beliefs that guide the research process and in particular as they apply to the deconstruction of power relations between me and the research participants as well the implications that this positioning has for my analysis and interpretation (and reinterpretation) of the data.

Chapter Summary

Chapter Four outlined the project’s analytical strategy. Interview was employed to foreground the constituting process with the aim of making these processes explicit and hence to trouble what might otherwise be taken for granted. With an understanding of the relational constructedness of experience, the analysis mobilises positionality to address the complexity of the lived experience of the research participants (six in-depth interviews with students, their parents/caregivers and classroom teacher) and how this constitutes students’ academic subjectivities. The chapter also troubled the interview as a means of data collection and addressed issues attending representation and the question of validity.

The chapter also addressed the epistemological tensions that I experienced in the initial analysis of the data. That is, despite my stated aim to foreground my epistemological assumptions and my own positionalities in terms of how I engaged with one of the research participants, Maria, the power relations between me and her and my motivation for conducting the interview remained invisible and unchallenged. I therefore addressed the

question of how we can 'know' our research participants and map the journey of representing Maria and the pitfalls that were encountered along the way with particular consideration of my own implicatedness in what was produced. In particular, I recognised that the data were collected in a different time and place under a thinly veiled positivist stance and that I could no longer assume that the data 'were' a reflection of 'reality'.

Moreover, I recognised that undertaking a self-reflexive analysis of the data did not require a 'confession' but rather acknowledgement of my implicatedness in terms of my multiple positionings and my subjection to the powerful influence of psychological discourses. With this in mind, rather than attempting to provide the 'final word' on the matter in the following chapter I re-engage with the analysis of the data with the aim to illuminate the 'possibilities of sense making' within the available discourses of each of the research participants, including Maria.

In view of the above, the following analysis aims to address the following questions: How do students account for their experiences of underachievement and how do they negotiate their positioning? What are the conditions under which discursive power acts to make the underachieving student possible and what are its' effects? And, how do power relations intersect with gender, ethnicity and social class to inform the understanding of underachievement?

CHAPTER FIVE

“I’M NOT THAT SMART EITHER”: DISCURSIVELY PRODUCING THE UNDERACHIEVING STUDENT

Introduction

In the previous chapter I troubled my initial attempt at data analysis in which I had unreflexively invoked psychologising discourses to represent the experiences of one of the research participants, Maria, with no acknowledgement of the implications that this may have had for the power relations between me and her. In this chapter I therefore move beyond the powerful influence of psychologising discourses by re-engaging the analysis with a different understanding of the implications that my positioning had for the power relations between myself and the research participants. The following analysis will therefore foreground not only how students become un/marked and non/privileged but will illuminate the processes by which students’ academic subjectivities are produced, sustained and subverted vis-a-vis relations of power. Specifically, the following analysis addresses the questions: What are the discursive practices that make the underachieving student possible and how do students who indicate that they are not ‘doing well’ academically account for and negotiate their subject positioning?

“I’ve always been in the lowest groups”: Caught in the ‘Normalising Gaze’

I began the analysis by re-engaging with the data collected from my interviews with Maria, a Pākehā New Zealander, from a working class background (as identified by school administration). Of all the interviewees in this study, Maria’s ‘life in process’ continues to resonate with me long after the initial interview. What struck me particularly were the discursive possibilities that were made available to her (which I outline below) and moreover

how she negotiated her subject positioning. In the initial interview Maria's narrative suggested that she was not doing particularly well academically at school. In the second interview I asked Maria to elaborate on what she based her understanding of not doing well:

Maria: ...I'm a bit slow um and everyone else is a bit faster um ...oh in reading like it might take a few minutes to sound a word or something. I'm not the fastest.

Matt: Do you think that's a problem though?

Maria: No, because you'll learn it one day.

Matt: OK, are there any problems that you are having with any other aspects of your work?

Maria: Ah, well maths is not the best.

Matt: Why is 'maths is not the best'?

Maria: Oh because, because I'm in the lowest group and just that I'm a bit slower like I said.

Matt: Do you enjoy reading or maths at all?

Maria: No, not really. I probably actually like maths better than reading though. I hate reading and spelling.

Matt: What is it that you don't like so much about spelling and reading?

Maria: Well, I've never been good at it and so um it's just not my thing, I just don't like it.

Maria mobilises the discourses "I'm a bit slow" and "I'm not the fastest" to position herself as not doing well academically at school. The fast/slow dichotomy works to construct a binary that constitutes Maria's subjectivity as an underachieving student. Implicit in Maria's narrative is the equation of 'being faster' with normality. As noted by Davies & Hunt (1994), there is a tendency for the ascendant subject category in a binary pair:

...to be understood as normal and the latter to be the dependent term that takes its meaning in terms of its difference from the former. The first term is the privileged term and is often equated in an unstated way with humanness, normality, the way anyone would be and could be if they were not "different", that difference being understood as a deviance from the ascendant term (p.390).

As a consequence of her difference, Maria was consequently relegated to the 'lowest (maths) group'. Maria mobilizes the practice of grouping/streaming, "I'm in the lowest group" and her overall 'ranking' within the class to position herself as not doing well

academically at school. In *Discipline and Punish*, Foucault (1977) indicated that ‘normalisation [became] one of the great instruments of power at the end of the classical age’ and enabled ‘hierarchization and the distribution of rank’ by making it possible ‘to measure gaps, to determine levels, to fix specialities and to render the differences useful by fitting them one to another’ (Foucault, 1977, p.184). The fast-slow and high-low binaries mobilised by Maria could be viewed as a response to the constant normalising judgement of the ranking gaze to which she was subject. Her relegation to the ‘lowest group’ is an effect of the normalizing gaze whereby her performance in Maths and Reading has been observed, classified and marked as ‘deviant’ and in need of correction. The effect of being caught in the normalising gaze is that she doesn’t like Maths and has an even greater disdain for reading and spelling (“I hate reading and spelling”). Having been ‘marked’ as not being competent in Maths and Reading (placed in the ‘lowest’ groups), Maria had positioned herself as not being ‘the fastest’ and not ‘the best’. Her subject position as someone who is not doing well academically was affirmed by her ranking. Maria accounted for her positioning by stating: “I’ve never been good at it and so um it’s just not my thing. I just don’t like it”. It is hard to envisage Maria ‘liking’ spelling and reading when she had already been marked through the disciplinary practice of ranking as ‘underachieving’. That is, in Foucauldian terms, Maria’s subjectivity had been constituted (her knowledge of herself as underachieving) in relation to the operation of institutional practices.

The effects of the normalizing practice of ranking are also apparent in the narrative of one of Maria’s classmates, Robert, identified by school administration as a Pākehā student from a working class background:

Robert: ...it’s kinda hard because I’m not that good a speller and I’m not very neat and I’m not that smart either.

Matt: Why do you say that?

Robert: Well, I’ve always been in the lowest groups.

Matt: Do you think that being in the lowest group is a reflection of how 'smart' you are though?

Robert: Not really, you see you might be terrible at Maths but might be really good at something else.

Similar to Maria, Robert mobilises the practice of ranking ("I've always been in the lowest groups") to position himself as not being a good speller nor 'very neat'. The effect of ranking, 'always being in the lowest groups', is that Robert accounts for his positioning as being 'not that smart either'. A gendered account of Maria's and Robert's narratives regarding their academic positioning might suggest that Maria and Robert's subjectivities have been derived from normative masculine and feminine discourses of achievement where feminine school achievement is seen as being the result of hard work (Maria: "You'll learn it one day") while for boys it is a matter of intelligence (Robert: "I'm not that smart either"). However, both Maria and Robert had positioned themselves as not doing well in response to the normalising practice of ranking which was further affirmed for each of them by the schools requirement that they attend Reading Recovery.

Both Maria and Robert indicated in their narrative that they received individualised reading tuition once a week for 30 to 40 minutes which meant leaving the classroom and going to the school library:

Maria: I go to Mrs L and Mrs R to reading and spelling class and you just play on the computer and do spelling and stuff and sounds and a bit of maths in your book and stuff.

Matt: Does that help?

Maria: Um, I don't know (laughs) um ...probably a little bit, just a tiny bit.

Matt: Yeah? Why just a little bit do you think?

Maria: Oh cause ... some parts of it are a bit easy and we only do it like every Friday.

Matt: OK.

Maria: But it's fun.

Matt: It is fun? What makes it fun?

Maria: Oh me, Lisa and Annie go to it and Mrs L and Mrs R are nice.

Matt: Oh, Ok so you enjoy going there?

Maria: Yeah.

Here, the act of being removed from the classroom to attend Reading Recovery could be viewed in Foucauldian terms as the disciplinary practice of ‘correct training’. An effect of ‘not being a good reader’ has resulted in both Maria and Robert becoming a ‘case’ that requires ‘correction’. That is, having been subjected to the gaze of the normalising practice of ranking and measured and compared with their peers, Maria and Robert have been judged as requiring correction, resulting in their exclusion from the class to attend their reading recovery program. As noted by Davies and Hunt (1994) however, correction may not be possible since their ‘category membership may specifically preclude the behaviour defined as normal for those positioned in the ascendant category’ (p.390). Maria herself responds to being asked if she thought that attending Reading Recovery helped with “just a tiny bit”. As noted previously, the effectiveness of Reading Recovery has been widely questioned (Tunmer et.al., 2013). Despite the New Zealand government’s national literacy strategy to reduce inequities in the achievement outcomes of students in literacy education, data derived from international studies of reading achievement have consistently demonstrated that students who are most at risk of experiencing literacy problems were more likely to come from Māori and/or low-income backgrounds and this has led to the claim that the Reading Recovery program is of limited benefit to those students most at risk of not learning to read (Reynolds & Wheldall, 2007). In response, Tunmer et al., (2013) have argued that reading recovery programs should be reconsidered and replaced with intervention programs that are informed by contemporary research to target those students who are most in need. As I have previously indicated however, such intervention may not necessarily address the underlying issues and conditions from which students’ reading difficulties arise. Furthermore, I would

argue that reading intervention programs such as reading recovery are based upon the neoliberal assumption that individuals remain responsible for their success or failure, and do little to illuminate the role that power plays in the discursive production of students who struggle with literacy. An intersectional reading therefore of Maria and Robert's academic subjectivities might take into account the role that their social class backgrounds have played in shaping their educational experiences and outcomes rather than the normative gendered explanations that have been previously offered. Moreover, normative gendered accounts of underachievement very rarely take into account the emotional effects for students who are withdrawn from their classrooms to attend reading recovery programs with specialist reading teachers. While noting that Maria's narrative indicates that she enjoyed going there and that the teachers were 'nice', the narratives of both her mother and Robert's mother illustrate the emotional effects of the normalising practice of reading recovery upon both themselves and their children which I address in the following chapter.

“Mum says I’m brainy but I don’t really think she (means it)”: Accounting for Underachievement.

In response to why she thought some children do better at Maths and Reading than others Maria responded:

Maria: Um, well ...I’m always kinda in the lowest group and um and (pauses)

Matt: How do you think that your teacher and your friends and parents think that you’re doing at school?

Maria: Um, well my friends they probably don’t think that I am as brainy as them. I don’t really know about my friends but mum says I’m brainy but I don’t really think she does.

Matt: Why do you say that?

Maria: Oh, cause like I’m not a very good reader or anything and mum thinks I am but I just don’t think I am.

Matt: What do you mean by 'brainy' as you put it?

Maria: Mmm ...just to know questions and stuff and to be like at the same level as everyone else in the class.

According to Foucault (1977), the hierarchization of 'good' and 'bad' subjects in relation to one another operates through a 'micro-economy of perpetual penalty' (p.181) which becomes integrated into the subject's knowledge of her/himself. In this instance the 'penalty' for not being a 'good reader' or 'brainy' is to be in a lower group. The effect of being ranked for Maria therefore is twofold: the knowledge that she "is not a very good reader" in addition to not being as 'brainy' as her peers. Maria dismisses her mother's belief that she is 'brainy' and a 'good reader' with "I don't really think she does". Maria's subjectivity of not being 'brainy' or a 'good reader' has been constructed in response to being classified and ranked vis-a-vis her peers and 'integrated into [her] cycle of knowledge'. Arguably, the '(not being) brainy/smart' discourse is one of the most taken for granted of the psychological discourses in terms of its being an obvious explanation for not achieving academically. As noted above, Robert also constituted his subjectivity as being "not that smart either". It becomes possible for Robert and Maria to dismiss their relegation to the lowest groups as almost inevitable on account of their '(not being) smart'. Indeed, Maria is able to dismiss her mothers' belief that she is 'smart' outright because of her subjection of not being smart. The valorisation of the brainy/smart discourse may in part be ascribed to the practice of ranking/streaming. It might also be attributed to the practice of the quantification of student 'knowledge' through standardised testing regimes.

In contrast to Maria's and Robert's comments regarding their academic subjectivities, Hania's narrative, a Māori student from a working class background as identified by school administration, indicated that she was doing well academically at school. The neoliberal meritocratic discourse regarding academic success may simply attribute Hania's academic success as a Māori student from a working class background to hard work and taking

responsibility for her own learning. However, as I discuss in the next chapter, following my interview with Hania's mother, it was apparent that when considered from an intersectional perspective, that Hania's academic success is significant as it disrupts the Māori underachievement discourse that has been a feature of postcolonial schooling discourses in New Zealand.

When asked how she knew that she was doing well academically, Hania responded:

Hania: If we do a test or something we'll talk about our scores and stuff. You're sort of with people that are at your level. You're with people that you know are quite smart (referring to Maths and Reading groups).

Here, ranking has enabled Hania to compare and identify peers that are at 'her level' and as such have enabled the production of her subjectivity as someone who is 'quite smart'. Hania's positioning of herself illustrates Foucault's (1977) conceptualisation of the examination as a disciplinary mechanism that has become 'less and less a question of jousts in which pupils pitch(ed) their forces against one another and increasingly a perpetual comparison of each and all that made it possible to both measure and to judge' (p.186). When I put the observation to the classroom teacher that students' were aware of being 'ranked' she replied: "They think they know". It was as if the students were 'not allowed' to possess this knowledge as this was the preserve of the teacher only. In Foucauldian terms the teacher might be read as exercising her power to produce knowledge that positions her students as 'unknowing'. As Foucault (1977) noted:

The examination in the school was a constant exchanger of knowledge; it guaranteed movement of knowledge from the teacher to the pupil, but it extracted from the pupil a knowledge destined and reserved for the teacher (p.187).

The teacher might also be seen as taking up the 'teaching as usual' discourse. Davies and Hunt (1994) referred to the notion of 'teaching-as-usual' as a category position taken up by the teacher 'as the one who unquestionably knows what is going on and who has the authority to assert the correctness of that view' (p.390). In this instance, the teacher is asserting her authority/power as the one 'who knows' and the student's as 'unknowing'. In

Chapter Seven I examine how the teacher and parents/caregivers position themselves in relation to the achieving/underachieving binary and in particular how this positioning plays out in relation to social categories.

“They’re just a bit better”: The Effects of Being Discursively Constituted as Underachieving.

In response to why she thought some children do better at school academically than others Maria responded:

Maria: Um, probably ‘cause they listen better, they watch the teacher more and ah don’t talk to their friends and ...they know what the teacher’s talking about and like they’ve got their hands up a lot.

Matt: Why do you think some children listen better?

Maria: Um ...oh cause like they’re brainier and they’ve got like ...they know what the teacher’s talking about.

Matt: Any other thoughts about why you think some children do better at school than others?

Maria: Um...maybe because they’re um...they just like they just know...

Matt: They just know?

Maria: Yeah, they’re just a bit better.

Maria registers her recognition that ‘good’ students ‘just know’ and that ‘they’re just a bit better’. By implication Maria doesn’t ‘know’. Maria is drawing on the good/bad binary and by doing so makes it visible. Maria recognises the behaviour/s that make a student ‘good’, they “listen better, watch the teacher more, don’t talk to their friends, know what the teacher’s talking about and have their hands up a lot”. A normative gendered interpretation of such behaviours could be seen as being consistent with what is expected/accepted as being ‘appropriate’ not just by the teacher but also in the collaborative work that is undertaken by Maria’s classmates to maintain ‘order’ within the classroom. An alternative interpretation of

Maria's understanding of academic success is that she does so with reference to the achieving Other which 'entails the radically disturbing recognition that it is only through the relation to the Other, the relation to what it is not, to precisely what it lacks, to what has been called its constitutive outside that the "positive" meaning of any term – and thus its "identity" – can be constructed' (Hall, 1996, p.4). In other words Maria's subjectivity as an underachieving student has been formed in relation to the achieving students from whom she delineates herself.

Maria recognised the way in which students become positioned as being 'good' students. Her knowledge was informed by her own subject positioning of being 'always kinda in the lowest group' and not being 'as brainy' as her friends. The teacher however positioned her students as being 'unknowing' in terms of their knowledge of her ranking/streaming practices. As noted above the teacher was asserting her authority/power as the one who possesses the knowledge regarding ranking. In Foucauldian terms, the teacher's power to rank and stream her students produced Maria's knowledge. However, when asked how about always being in the lowest group she responded:

Maria: I kinda do want to be at the same level as my other friends but um now I don't really think that I'm that much behind like at primary school I use to think I was way behind.

The practice of ranking is implicated in Maria's narrative. Her desire to be 'at the same level as everyone else' in the class is a response to the explicit gaze of ranking. The effect of the practice (being streamed in the 'lowest group') is that Maria positions herself as not being as 'brainy' as her peers although she would like to be 'at the same level as everyone else'. Maria's comments could be read as a desire to be recognised as legitimate however the existing authority relations within her classroom have meant that she has been marked as 'different'.

A Foucauldian power/knowledge reading might view Maria's subjectification as an effect of the way in which she was in a continual process of constructing and transforming

her subjectivity through her interactions with her peers. That is, while on the one hand she is responded to the situation at hand, not recognising herself as being as ‘brainy’ as her peers, on the other hand, she signalled her desire to ‘disrupt, contest, and resignify’ her subjection (Jackson, 2013, p.842), to be ‘at the same level as everyone else’. As Foucault (1980) noted ‘there are no relations of power’ without resistances’ (p.840). I would argue therefore that far from becoming a ‘docile object’ of the normalising practices to which she was subjected, that Maria responded to her positioning within the relations of power by expressing her desire to resist these practices by being ‘at the same level as everyone else’. According to Jackson (2013), “Resistances, then, are agentic practices by subjects in spatial, local relations of power/knowledge. A power/knowledge practice of resistance exists as a mode of action that acts on others’ actions” (p.841). Therefore, Maria’s response to her subjection can be interpreted as an agentic one which opens other possibilities for resistance.

When asked if she thought her teacher thought that she was a ‘good’ student Maria replied:

Maria: Um, yeah I’d say so. I don’t know ...Um, I think she thinks that I’m not the worst like I’m not actually ...I’m *catching up* kind of like ...I don’t know.

Matt: What gives you the sense that your teacher thinks you’re catching up?

Maria: Oh because ... I kinda feel I’m doing well at school.

Matt: OK, alright. When you are doing well in something at school how do you know that things are going OK?

Maria: Oh, ‘cause like your teacher might go oh you’re doing well or something and that’s great and you’re *improving* or something and yeah um you’re just getting like better and better.

Here again, we see the shifting ways in which Maria constructs her subjectivity as underachieving. While on the one hand, her narrative positions her as not being as ‘brainy’ as her peers and acknowledges experiencing difficulty with her schoolwork, on the other hand

she feels that “I’m catching up” and “improving”. Indeed, Maria positions herself as doing ‘OK’ on her understanding that she believes her teacher doesn’t consider her to be ‘the worst’ student in the class. It might be argued that Maria’s subjectivity is informed by a ‘dialogic form of recognition’ in that she ‘recognise(s) the recognitions of others’. For Skeggs (1997) such recognition “is central to the processes of subjective construction” (p.4). Like the women in Beverley Skeggs’ (1997) study on the production of subjectivity through social and cultural relations, it might be argued that Maria is ‘constantly aware of the judgements of real and imaginary others’ (p.4). Maria is constantly aware of the judgements of those around her including her peers, family and teacher which are used to inform her own processes of recognising herself. From an intersectional perspective however I would argue that Maria’s comments, “I think she thinks that I’m not the worst” and “your teacher might go oh you’re doing well or something and that’s great” also lend themselves to taking into account a more nuanced understanding of the teacher’s power and privilege. In alignment with Staunæs (2003) argument that social categories condition the lives of both those who are positioned as minority and those who have the power to position the minority it is necessary to make visible the teachers power to position which remains invisible. As Dreyfus and Rabinow (1983) noted ‘it is power itself which seeks invisibility and the objects of power – those on whom it operates – are the most visible’. From an intersectional perspective I would argue that generation might also be invoked as a social category in which those who are in positions of authority and power, that is, adults (including teachers) tend to remain invisible while the child (student) is the most visible. In the following chapter I therefore illuminate the discourses and practices of the more powerful.

“I will catch up one day”: Negotiating Subjection

As noted above, Maria’s narrative indicated that she wasn’t at the same level as the rest of the class. I enquired about how this made her feel:

Maria: I’ll catch up one day.

Matt: You’ll catch up?

Maria: Yeah.

Maria’s comment of wanting to “be at the same level” as her friends and her belief that she “use to think I was way behind” is indicative of the emotional energy that she invested in trying to be recognised as a properly subjected student like her peers. As will be elaborated upon in the next chapter there is an assumption (particularly by her teacher) that Maria’s subject positioning as an academic underachiever is a matter of choice, that she has made a rational decision to not ‘get it right’. In this instance her belief that she’ll ‘catch up one day’ could be read as her way of eclipsing her subjection as someone who is ‘underachieving’, as a way of being recognisable as a legitimate student. When I enquired why she thought that ‘catching up’ and ‘improving’ were important she replied:

Maria: if you don’t do well at school you won’t kinda get a good education and if you don’t do well at school you won’t get a job that you absolutely want and won’t be probably as brainy cause you’ll um be naughty or um I don’t know ...you just gotta do well at school.

Maria articulates her understanding of the relationship between the normative discourse of the importance of school for education and vocational desire and success with being ‘brainy’ and ‘good’ behaviour. Maria is aware of the potential ‘consequences’ of not ‘doing well at school’, that is, not being ‘brainy’ and being ‘naughty’. As Laws and Davies (2000) note however taking up the practices associated with being a ‘good student’ are ‘extraordinarily complex’. In order to enjoy recognition as a ‘good student’ it is necessary not only to take up these behaviours oneself but also to be recognised to take them up in order to achieve legitimacy (Laws & Davies, 2000). As will be noted in the following chapter Maria doesn’t appear to enjoy such recognition from her teacher.

In this instance Maria's subject position is constituted by the 'discursive rationality' of 'doing well at school in order to get a job'. This is consistent with Foucault's contention of the role that institutions and institutional practices play in the constitution of subjectivities through the processes of normalisation by which the 'normal' well-behaved student is distinguished from the 'other' disruptive student. Foucault (1977) proposed that the effect of dividing the well behaved and poorly behaved students was twofold:

It distributed pupils according to their aptitudes and their conduct, that is, according to the use that could be made of them when they left the school; it exercised over them a constant pressure to conform to the same model, so that they might all be subjected to 'subordination, docility, attention in studies and exercises, and to the correct practice of duties and all the parts of discipline'. So that they might be like one another (p.182).

In this instance Maria makes the distinction between the neoliberal imperative of doing well at school in order to secure employment and the consequences for not doing well at school, being 'naughty'. Therefore in order to avoid being the unproductive delinquent 'other' "you just gotta do well at school".

Like Maria, while there is the same sense of resignation in Robert's comment that he's "always been in the lowest groups", he takes up the discursive possibility of being "really good at something else". However, it is noteworthy that Robert negotiates his subjectivity with an understanding that he 'might be really good at something else' (which I address below). For example, when I enquired about how he thought his teacher, parents and friends thought he was performing at school he replied:

Robert: Um, well not very good, well my mum and stuff, most of the friends I have don't think I'm very good at school work, but when it's sports I'm really good.

Matt: How do you know? What gives you that impression?

Robert: Well 'cause you can tell if you're in a lower grade like a lower level and if the works hard.

Matt: So how do you feel knowing that you're not in one of the top groups?

Robert: I don't really mind.

Matt: Yeah, why is that?

Robert: Ah, I don't really plan on having much to do with school work and stuff. I'm just going to play hockey.

Matt: You're going to be a hockey player?

Robert: Yeah, I'm just good at sports.

Of interest here, is Robert's dismissal of school work with his plans to play hockey. He negotiates his subject positioning of not being "very good at school work" with "just being good at sports". Having been discursively constituted as academically underachieving Robert forecloses on 'having much to do with school work' and focuses on his strengths in sports. Robert, like Maria understands his subjection as someone who is "not very good at school work" by drawing on his knowledge of being in a lower grade and yet negotiates this with his belief that "I'm just going to play hockey". As I outlined in the Literature Review, the 'gender achievement gap' between boys and girls has featured prominently in professional, government, scholarly and social discourse from the early-1990s to present. The so-called 'moral panic' regarding 'failing boys' has informed educational policy, programs and interventions with a great deal of this attention focusing particularly on the underachievement of working class boys (Epstein et al., 1998). Scholarly attention regarding the underachievement of working class boys has theorised the role that hegemonic masculinity plays in the construction of a 'laddish' persona which privileges sporting ability over academic performance (e.g., Martino, 1999). Such a reading might be applied to Robert's narrative to understand his underachievement. That is, because he is "not very good at school work" he is "going to be good at sports". However, as noted previously, the laddishness associated with the so-called 'crisis of masculinity' has been troubled for treating laddish behaviour as a 'lifestyle choice' instead of reflecting the material conditions of boys (Connolly, 2004). Furthermore, the 'crisis' discourse has also been troubled for representing boys in a 'masculinity vacuum' without consideration being given to the role that ethnicity,

social class and sexuality play in the construction of masculinities (Nelson, Stahl & Wallace, 2015). Nelson et al., (2015) argued for example that an intersectional approach to examining the dynamics of hegemonic masculinity may allow for a more nuanced understanding of how power differentials intersect with class, ethnicity, and sexualities to produce certain masculinities. It would be easy within the context of the current analysis to ascribe Robert's negotiation of his positioning as underachieving (that is, "I'm just going to play hockey") to hegemonic masculinity rather than to the normative educational practices that have constituted his academic subjectivity. I would argue therefore, that from an intersectional perspective, that rather than privileging a gender-specific focus to understand Robert's subjectivity, it may be more useful to illuminate the role that normative discourses and practices play in constructing his subjectivity as underachieving. I would further argue that Robert has negotiated the effects of his current positioning which has informed his focus on who he wishes to become. As Davies (1992) suggested, individuals who understand their subordination 'are better positioned to resist particular forms of subjectivity rather than cling to them through a mistaken belief that they are their own – that they signal who they are' (p.56). It could be argued that both Maria and Robert destabilised the power of normalisation of their subjection by exercising their belief in different discursive possibilities. Laws and Davies (2000) note such an understanding of one's own subordination may facilitate the conditions for the possibility of agency. They suggest that:

As power subjugates, it may be that at some point, a reversal and concealment occurs and power emerges as what belongs exclusively to the subject (making the subject appear as if it belonged to no prior operation of power). Power forms subjects but subjects may come to believe that they own the power. Moreover, what is enacted by the subject is enabled but not finally constrained by the prior working of power. The power that forms the subject, may in that very formation, be transformed – be different from the power that is/can be exercised by the subject (p.217).

Chapter Summary

From the above, the effects of the normalising gaze are readily apparent in Maria's and Robert's narratives and are implicated in the constitution of their subjectivities as

underachieving. The normalising gaze of the teacher and the institution's practices are manifested in the disciplinary techniques of testing, ranking and description which enables the individual to be 'described, judged, measured, compared with others, in his very individuality; and it is also the individual who has to be trained or corrected, classified, normalized, excluded etc' (Foucault, 1977, p.191). In Maria's and Robert's 'case' their individual difference as 'not being good readers' marked them as being in need of correction and hence their attendance at the school's reading recovery program. Their individualisation as 'cases' had resulted from their difference from the 'norm' as determined by their teacher.

The effects of normalisation ("always being in the lowest group"/ "not being the fastest"/ "being slow") enabled Maria and Robert to speak themselves into existence as 'underachieving'. Each of their narratives mobilises the discourse of 'not being 'smart'/'brainy' to constitute their subjectivities. It is interesting to compare their subjectivities with that of a 'high achieving' student, Hania who mobilised the ranking discourse and the comparison of peers at the same 'level' to constitute her subjectivity as being 'quite smart'. This is consistent with Foucault's (1977) observation that:

The distribution according to ranks or grade has a double role: it marks the gaps, hierarchizes qualities, skills and aptitudes; but it also punishes and rewards. It is the penal functioning of setting in order and the ordinal character of judging. Discipline rewards simply by the play of awards, thus making it possible to attain higher ranks and places; it punishes by reversing the process (p.181).

Notwithstanding their difference from the norm, both Maria and Robert negotiated their discursive constraints. Maria's narrative deploys the strategies of 'catching up' and 'improving' to allow her to be recognised as a legitimate student albeit as a particular sort of student while Robert's narrative mobilises his sporting success to mitigate against his academic subjectivity as someone who is not doing well. It might be argued therefore that on the one hand, notwithstanding the limited discursive possibilities that are available to Maria and Robert with regards to their academic subjectivities that scope exists for opening up alternative discursive possibilities and opportunities for agency. On the other hand however,

it raises the question of who has the power to determine the discursive norm and call the ranking in the first place? Davies and Hunt (1994) suggested that:

The positions from which seeing and knowing are done are more readily visible for marked category positions, whereas those who are habitually positioned in unmarked categories, such as male, white, heterosexual, and the ruling class, often manage to generate an illusion of positionless speaking (p.391).

In the context of this thesis it is necessary therefore to bring the knowledge claims of the more powerful to account. How was it possible for the ‘more powerful’ to speak the underachieving student into existence and to uphold the positioning of students marked as underachieving? And, how do social class, ethnicity and gender intersect to inform the discursive constitution of the underachieving student? In the next chapter I therefore continue to examine how the story of the marked/unmarked student develops and how the subject categories play out in its development.

CHAPTER SIX

“SHE JUST CHOOSES NOT TO THINK THAT SHE CAN DO IT”: SPEAKING THE UNDERACHIEVING STUDENT INTO EXISTENCE.

Introduction

In the previous chapter I unpacked the complex ways in which discursive practices constituted the academic identities of two students who identified themselves as not performing well academically and how they accounted for their positioning. This raises the issue of who has the power to speak the underachieving student into existence and how it is possible to maintain the positioning of students who have been discursively constituted as underachieving. This chapter brings the knowledge claims of the more powerful to account and specifically interrogates the discursive practices that are mobilised by others in relation to social categories to discursively constitute the underachieving student.

As outlined in the theoretical framework, the concept of intersectionality will be deployed as an analytic tool to examine how the categories, social class, ethnicity and gender inform the discursive practices of the more powerful. According to Phoenix (2006) intersectionality ‘aims to make visible the multiple positioning that constitutes everyday life and the power relations that are central to it’ (p.187). Moreover, it aligns with Foucault’s theorisation of power/knowledge that allows for the troubling and deconstruction of normalising categories (Staunæs, 2003) while taking into account the situatedness of knowledge (Haraway, 1988). Intersectionality will be mobilised in this context to specify the un/troublesomeness of the categories, gender, ethnicity and social class in the subject discursively constituted as underachieving and particularly how does the ‘doing’ of social categories co-constitute students’ academic subjectivities. This doing takes into account the notion that ‘social categories are not something you are or something you have; rather, social

categories are something you do' (Staunæs, 2003, p.104) and reflects that social categories are 'performed' and as such are 'not the cause of certain behaviour but rather the effect of certain behaviour' (Staunæs, 2003, p.104). As noted by Staunæs (2005) 'categories do not mingle equally' (p.155). It is not social class first then gender or vice versa. She acknowledged however that:

In lived life, there might be a hierarchy in which certain categories overrule, capture, differentiate and transgress others. It is very difficult to juggle various categories at the same time and the manoeuvre might take your breath away (Staunæs, 2005, p.155).

As such, she proposed that the categories should be read simultaneously. With this in mind, the following analysis examines how it is possible for others to speak the underachieving student into existence and how ethnicity, social class and gender play out in its production. In other words, what discourses are mobilised vis-a-vis male and female students, pākehā and non-pākehā students and working class and middle class students? Furthermore, how do different distributions of power work in the production of un/marked subject positions in relation to the social categories ethnicity, social class and gender. That is, how does being positioned as underachieving intersect with ethnicity, social class and gender and how does this impact upon discursively produced subjectivities.

“She doesn’t choose to do well”: Not Getting it Right.

In the preceding chapter, Maria mobilised the discourse of “not being brainy” and the practice of ranking to position herself as someone who is not doing well at school. When I suggested to Kylie, Maria’s teacher that Maria’s narrative did not suggest that she was doing well academically she responded:

Kylie: Only because she doesn’t *choose* to do well. She’s off on another wee planet. If she applied herself and if she thought about and actually hmm, she’s frustrating because she doesn’t - like Lance and Jennifer will try and you know put the effort in whereas Maria will just not even try and put the effort in. Like doing Maths she will be looking up at other things and you know she has got a little further just doing structured things. She’s having little bits of success where she can see herself doing better but it takes a long time to find those things that she hooks into.

Maria is positioned by her teacher as having made the *choice* not “to do well”.

According to Davies (1991) within humanist discourse is embedded:

...an understanding that each person is one who has an obligation to take themselves up as a knowable, recognisable identity, who “speaks for themselves” and who accepts responsibility for their actions. Such responsibility is understood as resting on a moral base and entailing personal commitment to the moral position implied in their choices (p.42).

Within the context of the ‘good school behaviour’ discourse there is an assumption that students will “choose” to “get it right” of their own volition (Laws & Davies, 2000). In this instance, Kylie indicates that Maria makes the choice not to ‘get it right’ academically. In doing so, Kylie’s competence as a teacher is not brought into question, since choosing to underachieve is Maria’s responsibility. As Laws and Davies (2000) noted:

We come to believe that schooling involves a freedom to *choose*, through observing “choices taking place”. As teachers we position ourselves and the students within discourses which entail the making of choices. This consistent positioning creates an appearance for self and others that the choices made are a feature of each person rather than of educational discourses (p.21).

It is for this reason that Davies (1991) has suggested that from a post-structuralist perspective agency is ‘fundamentally illusory’ and that ‘choice’ should be understood as ‘forced choice’ because the subject is constituted through their placement within a particular discourse. In Maria’s case, her positioning within the choice discourse makes her chosen line of action (to ‘choose’ not to do well) the only possibility, not because that is the only action possible but because she has been constituted by her teacher as *wanting* that line of action. Maria is spoken into existence as making the choice of not wanting to do well and her placement within the ‘choice’ discourse distinguishes her from those students who make ‘good choices’ that is, who ‘choose’ to do well. Kylie also commented that:

Kylie: But I think that it’s not that she’s not smart, she’s very smart, probably too smart in lots of ways but she just *chooses* not to think that she can do it. (Italics my emphasis)

The apparent contradiction in Kylie’s comments may be read as a dividing practice. Maria is not distinguished from other students as such but is divided within herself. She can not be recognised as being ‘smart’ in the normative sense because she has already been positioned as someone who “*chooses* not to think that she can do it”. It is interesting to note that while Maria positions herself as

“not being brainy”, her teacher positions her as being “too smart”. Here, I am reminded of the saying “being too smart for one’s own good” which is often mobilised in the context of delinquency.

Implicit in the discourse is that ‘being too smart’ or being a ‘smart Alec’ is somehow linked to ‘getting into trouble’. Kylie added:

Kylie: She’s frustrating because she doesn’t try like Lance and Jennifer (who indicated that they were doing ‘OK’ academically) they will try they will you know and put the effort in and try whereas Maria will just not even try and put the effort in like doing Maths, she will be looking up at other things...I don’t think there’s enough time to address everyone’s needs. She’s one that flies under the radar. That’s why she responds really well to the reading group thing where it’s smaller...it’s more one on one um...

Matt: Right

Kylie: It’s just a time thing I think for her. You know how it is? Thirty kids and um you try to do as much as you can ...but she responds lots to one on one.

Kylie’s comments might be considered within the context of Valerie Walkerdine’s (1998) observation in her study that the working class girls who were deemed to be ‘poorly achieving’ (in Mathematics) were ‘characterised by teachers and peers not as *working* hard, but as *trying* hard’ (p.87). Maria’s apparent failure to achieve what might be regarded as normative conceptions of success at school is viewed as being her fault simply because she ‘will just not even try’. Consequently, Maria’s lack of academic success becomes her responsibility. Rose (1989) has observed that discourses of individual choice are usually linked to the ‘responsibilisation’ discourse whereby responsibility is shifted towards the citizen in neoliberal society to make the ‘right’ choice. In this instance responsibility for not doing well academically is shifted towards Maria who has been deemed to have made the ‘wrong choices’. Furthermore, Kylie invokes class size as also being responsible for Maria’s poor academic performance. Again, responsibility is shifted albeit in this instance to systemic issues. However, the effect remains the same. Through the combination of Maria’s failure to exercise the right choices and the systemic impediment of class size, Maria’s poor

academic performance is rationalised. Although, Kylie does suggest however that Maria responds well to the ‘one on one...reading group thing’ which I address below.

Kylie’s comments about Maria contrast with those that she made about Robert’s academic performance. When I suggested that Robert had indicated that he was performing well academically she responded:

Kylie: Maybe I’m biased when it comes to Robert. No, I don’t think so at all and quite the reverse in some ways. He’s a bit like Jennifer too in that I’ve moved him in Maths and things like that. Given time and confidence he’s actually come forward with a lot more strategies and understandings than perhaps he was able to offer before so I sort of moved him a little bit as well and once again he’s taken the bull by the horns a bit and started to work harder at what he’s doing and more seriously. He’s quite a serious kid and with him it’s latching onto things that he’s into but he gets disheartened because his spelling’s so bad but he writes beautifully. He writes some awesome stuff and I often say to him ‘That’s a great sentence, how you put that together’. I don’t care about his spelling and I put his work up on the wall with the others and I read it out because he’s still got the understanding and knows how to put words together, it’s just that if it’s on paper he’ll be like mm...

There is an absence of the choice discourses as it was applied by Kylie to Maria in this comment. Notwithstanding her comments that Robert’s ‘spelling’s so bad’, he is positioned by Kylie as being a good writer. Unlike Maria, Robert’s spelling is not a matter of choice or a failure to take responsibility for his learning, he simply does not spell well which aligns with Jones (2005) comment that ‘The problem for boys’ is “what they are”, the problem for girls is “what they lack”’ (p.279). I indicated to Kylie that like Maria, Robert had indicated in my interview with him that he ‘was not that smart’ to which Kylie replied: “I don’t think that he’s not smart at all. I think he’s very smart”. Of note here, is that while Kylie had qualified her comments regarding Maria’s ‘intelligence’ that she is ‘probably too smart in lots of ways’, no such qualification was given for Robert. The teacher had also commented that Maria was ‘difficult’ and ‘non-compliant’. As noted by Butler (1997a) in order to be recognised as a subject it is first necessary to be called a name. Maria is performatively constituted by her teacher as an ‘undesirable learner’ by virtue of her bodily and linguistic practices. As such, she can’t be recognised as a legitimate student. Curiously however, when asked what type of student she believed teachers like to teach Kylie replied:

Kylie: Compliant ones (laughs) um but generally I like teaching kids that just have an individuality something a spark in some form ...I don’t particularly like, oh compliant kids are easy um but I

actually like knowing who they are rather than being aware of whether they are good children to teach.

Despite being positioned as someone who was “non-compliant” and “one of the difficult girls” the teacher’s comments would suggest that Maria was indeed one of those students that she liked to teach however, her comments that Maria was “difficult” and “non-compliant” may be read as betraying this contention. Kylie also indicated that Maria’s apparent “lack of motivation, focus and self-control” was responsible for her academic difficulties as well as getting her into trouble at school. As above, the contradiction in the teacher’s comments may be read as the teacher’s attempt to make Maria intelligible. In order for Maria to be intelligible she has been performatively constituted as an ‘undesirable learner’. Maria’s undesirableness played out in the discourses mobilised by the teacher including “choosing not to do well”, “being too smart” and being “non-compliant”. It is interesting to consider such positioning in the context of Valerie Walderdine’s (1998) seminal study where she asserted that: ‘teachers tend to think that boys fit the role of ‘proper learner’ – active, challenging, rule-breaking’ (p.129). However, girls who demonstrate such attributes tend to be met with resistance by their teachers. Girls who engage in challenging behaviour ‘are not necessarily expected from a female member of the class; they do not accord with teachers’ preconceptions of ‘correct’ femininity’ (p.128). Kylie’s positioning of Maria as “one of the difficult girls” would suggest that Maria did not ‘fit’ with the normative conception of ‘correct’ femininity. As such, her positioning as an ‘undesirable learner’ was reinforced by her apparent failure to be the ‘right kind of the girl’.

In the previous chapter, Maria’s narrative demonstrated her awareness of these ‘appropriate’ behaviours, however, her teacher positioned her as making the ‘choice’ not to observe these behaviours. Laws and Davies (2000) note that:

As teachers we position ourselves and the students within discourses which entail the making of choices. This consistent positioning creates an appearance for self and others that the choices made are a feature of each person rather than of educational discourses. Thus choosing to do good behaviour in school makes a “good student” and a “good child” – and a “good person”, that is, one who recognisably “knows” how to behave and does so willingly (p.210).

For Maria, ‘good’ students ‘just know’ how to ‘behave appropriately’ and by implication (in addition being positioned as ‘problematic’ by her teacher) she did not share in this knowledge. Arguably, while the majority of students take up the practices associated with being positioned as a ‘good student’ (for example, listening to the teacher, putting up your hand, not calling out), the take up of such practices are ‘highly situation specific’ in that they vary from situation to situation and from student to student (Laws & Davies, 2000).

Furthermore, these practices are not simply available for the taking up since:

It is necessary not only to achieve yourself as the person who can be recognised as one who can legitimately take up these behaviours, but also to be recognised as actually taking them up (Laws & Davies, 2000, p.211).

Maria’s visibility however, marked her as someone who is recognisable as being the Other in the good/bad binary. Her recognisability is enabled by her difference from the ‘normal’, the taken for granted way in which the dominant discourse is maintained in the classroom in which the ‘good’ students remain ‘unmarked’. This aligns with Stojovs et al.’s, (2008) conceptualisation of underachievement which proposes that students who are positioned as not being academically successful can only exist in one of two ways, as an underachiever or as a bad student. Maria had effectively been forced into an inevitable state determined by her teacher. Maria was positioned as both by her teacher. In contrast to the successful student who implicitly accepts the teacher’s normative expectations, as the object of the schools and teachers ‘normalising judgement’ and disciplinary practices Maria had been positioned by her teacher as both an underachiever and as a bad student. Normative hegemonic educational discourses might be invoked to explain Maria’s positioning as an ‘illegitimate desire’ that is ‘not catalogued in the authorities’ list of “normal” social needs, such as being well educated’ as ‘irrational’ (Stojnov et al., 2008, p.53). However, rather than being ‘irrational’, as she had ‘failed’ to adopt the teachers normative expectations of what constitutes a ‘good’ student, Maria’s underachievement and non-compliant behaviour could be as read as her resistance to these normalised expectations. Through the operation of

competing discourses, Maria positioned herself and was positioned by her teacher as not being successful and yet in her narrative, Maria articulated her understanding of what constitutes a ‘good’ student. Maria’s underachievement could therefore be read as her resistance to the taken-for-granted assumptions that underpin the teacher’s normative educational expectations and her attempts to mobilise her *own* power and a reflection of her own ‘values and life priorities’ (Stojnov et al., 2008).

**“Um, the teacher thinks I’m average, I could work a little harder”: An Effect of the
‘Normalising Judgment’**

Laws and Davies (2000) noted that one of the ‘tools’ that teachers use to persuade students to ‘take up’ ‘good school behaviour’ is the notion of consequences, that appropriate and inappropriate behaviours have positive and negative consequences respectively. Located in the ‘scientific discourse’ the idea of consequences is that there is a reaction for every action. Rose (1989) has argued that:

The invention of the behaviour therapies transformed this task (of ‘re-shaping’ human behaviour) into a science capable of direction by psychological expertise and thus made possible a technology of the self that could be deployed wherever human conduct needed to be channelled into certain patterns (p.229).

In the context of the classroom, ‘behaviour management’ practices may include both positive and negative verbal and non-verbal responses. For example, positive verbal and non-verbal responses may include comments such as “great job”, a smile, a nod, stamps and stickers while negative verbal and non-verbal responses might include comments such as “you can do better”, a ‘look’ of disapproval, a frown, detention, being sent to another classroom or the principal (Laws & Davies, 2000). It is interesting to note comments made by Lance, a student from a ‘working class’ background as indicated by school administration who indicated that he was ‘average’ at school work. In response to how he thought he was going at school he responded:

Lance: Um, the teacher thinks I’m average, I could work a little harder.

Matt: What do you think?

Lance: I think that yeah around the same.

Matt: What gives you the impression that your teacher thinks that you're 'average'?

Lance: Um well when the teacher gives you good comments or sometimes if you just think your school work's really good and stuff like that yeah.

Matt: So, how do you know when you're not doing so well?

Lance: Um like when they talk to you about your poor work or something and stuff and their facial expression and stuff (indicates a frown).

As a subject of the teacher's disciplinary practice of surveillance (through her observation of work and behaviour), Lance's subjectivity as an 'average' student is informed by his teacher's comments and facial expressions. Under the teacher's disciplinary gaze, Lance engages in self-surveillance and self-correction in order to ensure that he does not deviate from the normalised expected norms of achievement and behaviour he mobilises the need "to work a little harder". Lance knows the penalty for not 'getting it right' from the teacher's negative comments and frowns. These disciplinary practices may therefore be read as producing Lance's subjectivity of what is required to 'get it right' in terms of school work and in particular what it means to be a 'good student', that is, to work harder.

“Oh you must be dumb, you have to go to reading”: The Effects of not ‘Getting it Right’

As discussed in the previous chapter, both Maria and Robert indicated in their narratives that they were not 'good readers' and that as a *consequence* this required their attendance at individualised reading tuition once a week which meant leaving the classroom and going to the school library. It should be noted that the classroom teacher was not necessarily responsible for the decision to send these students to the reading recovery program since benchmarks for inclusion in the program were determined and implemented on a school wide basis. Nonetheless, as a consequence of their reading 'competency' both Maria

and Robert were deemed to require ‘treatment’ for their reading difficulties. For Foucault (1977) as a form of disciplinary power, the individualising and totalising effects of the education system means that those who do not meet the standards of the normalising judgement are adjudged as requiring correction. In the case of Maria and Robert, having been deemed not to be reading at the same level as their peers, were diagnosed as underachieving and required to attend Reading Recovery for their treatment. However, I would argue that the operation of power at work in sending Maria and Robert to reading recovery and its effects remain invisible to school authorities.

When I asked Sue, Maria’s mother about Maria’s attendance at the reading recovery program she commented: Sue: she used to get really embarrassed because there was only maybe two or three in a class that went to that, so it must mean ‘I’m the dumb one’ and she just shrunk when [she] had to leave the room to go and do it and some children would you know say things like ‘oh you must be dumb you have to go to reading’.

Matt: Did Maria talk to you about it?

Sue:...she’s often asked me to go and stop it you know ‘I promise I’ll improve my reading on my own because I’m embarrassed doing that’ because she does get comments from some girls and the other thing I tend to notice with her too is her *peers* (emphasis added) are of the same um level too like she feels better, she’s actually made comments that um two of her friends are dumber than her and that makes her ... I think that is why she um chooses them as friends you know that’s really sad too when you think if that’s how you’re going to rate yourself in society right through life.

While Sue’s narrative indicates that Maria had felt ‘othered’ by the experience of attending the reading recovery program, her comment that Maria ‘actually made comments that um two of her friends are dumber than her’ may be read as another strategy that Maria deploys to negotiate her positioning vis-a-vis her peer group. Perhaps of greater concern is the distressing emotion that is imbued in Sue’s narrative regarding Maria’s attendance at

reading recovery. For Sue, the risks for Maria attending reading recovery are twofold. If Maria complies with attending she risks continued embarrassment and sustaining her subjectivity of being “the dumb one”, if she resists attending, she risks falling further behind her peers. Sue’s narrative also illustrates the complicated nature of the power relations that are at work within Maria’s classroom. Rather than simply being an issue between teacher and pupil, power relations are also operating between different groups of students. That is, for Maria, her peers are perhaps more salient as a point of reference for her own subjectivity as underachieving as suggested by Sue’s comment that Maria had “actually made comments that two of her friends are dumber than her”. Hence, rather than being fixed and stable, Maria’s subjectivity as underachieving should be read as a function of the multiplicity of understandings that attend her social practice. Sue also indicated that:

Sue: She’s improving in her own time but I still worry that you know by the time she hits high school she might really really struggle and then the easy way out is to opt out rather than bear with it.

Matt: Maria indicated that she would eventually ‘catch up’. What do you make of that?

Sue: I wonder if she’s sort of got that idea going to Kip McGrath⁴ and that they’ve tried to put her at ease by saying you know ‘don’t worry you’ll catch up’ but she doesn’t realise that you actually have to put effort into that ...it just doesn’t happen. It does worry me that she might just drop out, that she will want to leave as soon as she can and you know that is a huge concern because without education everything now is just a lot harder.

Again, emotional distress is apparent in Sue’s narrative. Notwithstanding Maria’s attendance at Kip McGrath and their reassurance that Maria will “catch up”, Sue expresses her “worry” that she will not catch up, struggle at high school and ultimately “just drop out”. The onus however, is on Maria to catch up. Not only does Maria’s achievement have to align with the normative assumption that she will achieve to a similar level as her same age peers,

⁴ Kip McGrath is a privately owned tuition company.

there is also an assumption that she will achieve at a similar rate. Sue's comments echo those of Robert's mother, Meghan when discussing his attendance at the reading recovery program:

Meghan: I don't want him to fall between the cracks especially when the potential is there, to me it would be such a crime to let him stay behind all the time. I think he has missed out on some things he wanted to do because he got sent there (reading recovery) and so he goes there with an attitude of you know? He gets grumpy about it – 'I don't want to be here' and so he's not going to perform well as he didn't want to be there in the first place. Kip McGrath, I mean even if I could afford it, what's the point? He doesn't you know?...To me it's just extra hard work for him, you have to find a more natural way...

Like Sue, Meghan's narrative illustrates the tension between the regulatory practice of her son's attendance at the school's reading recovery program and the emotional effects not only for Robert – "I don't want to be here", but also her own emotional investment to ensure that he does not "fall between the cracks". The sense of discomfort expressed by both Sue and Meghan with regard to their children being constituted as underachieving and the emotional distress upon themselves and their children by attending reading recovery is particularly noteworthy.

Sue and Meghan's comments might also be considered in terms of the marketisation of education. Layton (2014) suggested that:

The extension of market rationality into social life entails "marketing" the subjective practices that will turn subjects into entrepreneurs who rationally choose to maximise opportunity when possible and, at the same time, will agree to shoulder much of the responsibility formerly taken on by public agencies (p.163).

In this instance both Sue and Meghan indicated their awareness of private tuition as a strategy for improving their children's reading abilities in response to the apparent failure of the school to meet this responsibility. Notwithstanding the financial costs associated with such tuition, both parents speak of their ambivalence about the 'value' of sending their children there in terms of the emotional costs of the additional effort and work that this would ask of their children. I would argue that Sue and Meghan's narratives make visible the operation of power relations in the processes of their children's subjectification and in particular troubles the taken-for-granted neoliberal assumption that as *rational* actors, the onus is on both Sue and Meghan to develop the attitudes of their children's education that is comparable to middle class attitudes and therefore should *choose* to send their children to private tuition to maximise their opportunities to learn how to read, but such a

perspective fails to take into account the emotional costs for both themselves and their children. From an intersectional perspective, their narratives also trouble the neoliberal discourse around aspirations and the assumption that their children will take responsibility for their learning and ‘buy in’ to the aspirational discourse of engaging with education to facilitate their social mobility.

According to Allen (2014):

The rhetoric of aspiration that saturates the present not only positions the working class as something to escape. It also disconnects young people from the social, material and emotional landscape within which their aspirations are (per)formed and realized. More so, aspiration rhetoric contributes to a wider shift towards a hardening of public attitudes and growing contempt for the poor, where the causes of poverty are located in individuals rather than structural changes effected by neoliberalism (p.776).

Given that the aspirational discourse overlooks the structural factors such as parental education and income that complicate the ability of the working class it is necessary therefore to problematise hegemonic representations of the working classes as simply lacking aspiration.

“You’re just going to be a check-out chick”: Intersection of Gender, Social Class and the Discursively Constituted Subject

Maria’s mother, Sue also articulated her concerns for the long term consequences of Maria’s academic underachievement.

Sue: She gets a hard time from them [older sisters] and they’ll say ‘you’re just going to be a check-out chick at the Warehouse⁵ or something’ and so it’s sort of like fall into that and then fall into early pregnancies and that’s your lot you know? I really hope that doesn’t happen.

Matt: How does that make Maria feel do you think when she hears that?

Sue: Well I think you know being the youngest of three you do get a hard time from your family anyway but it does worry her and I think in some ways it does make her think things through and she realises that she does want to do more with her life.

Sue’s concerns are reflective of normative conceptions of a ‘normal life-course’ namely that “it is expected that a young person will have an education, acquire a vocation and

⁵ The Warehouse is large chain of ‘discount’ retail stores operating in New Zealand.

enjoy one's youth before s/he starts a family. Having children is not part of this model of youth" (Aapola, Gonick & Harris, 2005, p.103). Of particular interest here is the notion that Maria's gender vis-a-vis her academic performance is mobilised to limit her post school options to an early pregnancy or "check-out chick". Implicit in Sue's comments about her concerns for Maria leaving school early and teenage pregnancy is that this will be Maria's 'choice'. As noted by Aapola et al., (2005) this is consistent with the tendency of the narrative of 'choice and risk biographies' in regards to education and employment to shift responsibility to the individual while ignoring the structural disadvantage faced by some youth. Depending on the onlooker's perspective (doctor, social worker, teacher, parent or sibling): 'It appears that it is difficult for young women to make the "right" reproductive choices; if they become pregnant early, they are easily seen as educational failures and "welfare cheats"' (p.105). In this instance, Maria is positioned as not just an academic underachiever but when intersected with her gender and social class places her at 'risk' of an early pregnancy and an uncertain vocational future which in normative terms is tantamount to failure.

In recent years, schooling has become increasingly characterised by marketisation with a concomitant increased emphasis on 'lifelong learning, and pressure to constantly upgrade their skills effectively requires them to get more education to compete for fewer jobs in an ever-changing labour market' (Aapola et al., 2005, p. 61). These changing conditions have been reflected in the growth of choice and individualisation narratives in which the individual's capacity to make 'good personal choices' and to change and adapt to changing economic circumstances has become vital. With this increased emphasis on personal responsibility for economic security has come the necessity of balancing 'risk alongside opportunity' (that is, to make the 'right' choices). As noted by Aapola et al., (2005) however these 'individual' processes of young people are 'highly gender-specific, as well as deeply

affected by their social and ethnic backgrounds'. Consequently, Aapola et al., (2005)

indicated that:

The socio-economic changes and educational restructuringhave had a pronounced effect on young people. It can be claimed that education in late modern society is the singular most important social institution shaping children's and young people's everyday lives and identities as well as their understanding of their future life chances. Its crucial importance to future life chances also comes at a time when in many countries educational systems are facing devastating budget cuts and reforms from governments (p.59).

As noted above Sue comments that Maria "realises that she does want to do more with her life". Again, the 'importance of education' discourse is invoked to express her concerns about Maria's 'future life chances' and yet Maria has been spoken into existence as being at risk of unemployment and, by virtue of her gender, as being at risk of an early pregnancy. Moreover, while Sue's narrative reflects her uneasiness with the possible implications of such positioning particularly with regard to Maria's post-school options, the fear of academic failure and concomitant unemployment was conspicuous by its absence in the narrative of the parents of students from middle class backgrounds which I address in the next section.

"And so unfortunately it probably does come down to like a social thing really": Middle Class Success and Underachievement

As noted above, Maria's gender was invoked as a risk factor by her family for limited career opportunity and early pregnancy as a consequence of underachieving. In this section I address the discourses that were mobilised by a parent from a middle class background when discussing her son's education. As I indicate above, both Sue and Meghan were fearful of the spectre of academic failure and unemployment for their children. This discourse was notably absent however in the narrative of Linda. For example, according to Linda, (the mother of Sean, middle class Pakeha student who indicated that he was doing well academically): "We

feel that our kids need to be educated to be successful. Perhaps there is a bit more pressure like that on society these days you know yeah”. She indicated that:

Linda: Sean is quite a ...he’s really driven he’s quite a driven soul to do his best, he wants to be the best, he wants to come first in the running race, he wants to...and that’s just his attitude and it’s his personality and so he tries quite hard I think.

At work here in Linda’s narrative is the meritocratic belief in the ‘logic of competition’ (Nairn & Higgins, 2011) whereby being competitive benefits those who ‘if they worked hard enough, would be rewarded by entry to the ‘best’ schools, and therefore to positional advantage in the education and labour markets’ (p.181). Sean’s teacher also indicated that Sean was destined to do well academically: “Sean would sit quite well into just the Riverview⁶ scene”. There is a classed assumption that Sean will attend an affluent boy’s school by virtue of Sean’s academic ability and background. Sean’s educational trajectory is assured it would seem. Unlike the narrative of Maria’s family the notion that he may not succeed is not entertained. Sean’s gender together with his academic ability and social background assure him not only educational success but also presumably promising life and career opportunities. As Reay (2013) noted, the ‘aspirational project for the self’ is central to middle class aspirations for social mobility and as such there is an imperative for middle class parents to reproduce their class privilege which is profound where the fear of failure is such that parents strategise to ensure the educational success for their children. I return to this point in the next chapter.

When asked why some children appear to experience greater academic success at school than other students Linda replied that:

Linda: it probably comes down to their background really...we’ve got three boys and Sean is the oldest, and they’re all doing really well at school, they’re all achieving and I guess they probably are privileged in that they’ve got parents who take education fairly seriously...I guess you know I just always did things with our kids right from when they were little like read books and stuff like that ... you know that it’s sad that some of our kids don’t get those opportunities in terms of you know having language available to them at such an early age...And so unfortunately it probably does come down to like a social thing really and how education is valued by parents yeah.

⁶ ‘Riverview’ (pseudonym) is an integrated (Years 1 to 7) secondary, day and boarding school for boys located in an affluent suburb.

She states that her partner and herself “take education fairly seriously” and that the disparities in children’s academic performance can be explained by how much (or otherwise) education is valued by parents. Each of the parents/caregivers interviewed mobilised the ‘importance of education’ discourse. Yet implied in Linda’s narrative is an underlying belief that some parents may not hold the same ‘values’ regarding education that she does. In citing Diane Reay (1998) Brah and Phoenix (2004) noted that there is no difference in the value that the working and middle class place on education, middle class mothers are more readily able to draw upon success related discourses than their working class counterparts.

When asked why she thought that some students perform better academically at school than others, Kylie replied that:

Kylie: Well at the end of the day all sort of individuality aside and knowing that they’ve all got such great things going on um the kids who inevitably seem to do well are the ones that come from solid base families, that um you know have support at home, parents that ah you know interact with stuff you’re doing in the classroom, it’s sort of kids that have parents who come on the camps all the time or you know um have an interest in theirs um ...I mean you hate to classify in that way but the amount of, the kids that are usually in the bottom end may go home to one parent um a lot of other siblings in the family perhaps um and just sort of...I would say that what happens at home is what transpires at school.

Implicit in Kylie’s comments is that social class membership and family composition are key determinants of academic success (or otherwise). Notwithstanding that Kylie admits that she would ‘hate to classify in that way’ her narrative nonetheless invokes the ‘single parent’ discourse to explain differences in academic performance. In comparing Kylie’s comments with those of Linda, they both constitute underachievement (implicitly and explicitly) as a familial problem and in particular a working class family problem. As Reay (2013) noted, middle class discourses of success (including aspirational discourses) overlook the influence that structural factors such as, parental education and income have on their children’s school achievement. She was also critical of the middle class aspirational rhetoric and the meritocratic assumption (such as that implied in Linda and Kylie’s narratives) that all the working class need to do is to work harder and aspire more to be

become better people. Parallels may be drawn between this deficit view of working class relationships with education and Māori students underachievement which I address in the next section.

“They’re growing up basically in a white people’s world”: Māori Underachievement.

Since the publication of the Hunn Report in 1960 which located the ‘problems’ experienced by Māori as a result of cultural differences, deficit explanations for disparities in Maori academic achievement have continued to be espoused both institutionally and in the academy. For example, Bishop (2005, cites Nash, 1993) who concluded that ‘family resources both material and cultural, are the big transmission mechanisms of educational disadvantage rather than the structure of the education system’ (p.124). As noted previously, Bishop (2005) argued however, that deficit perspectives such as Nash’s provide schools with ‘a ready-made excuse if Maori children do not achieve well at school’ (p.71). In my interview with Margaret, Hania’s mother, she indicated that Hania’s education was important:

Margaret: I’m Māori and our children are part Māori um we just sort of feel that they’re growing up basically in a white people’s world sort of thing so yeah their education is important to them because the Māori statistics aren’t flash and that’s been something that we’ve been staunch on right from a very young age and they’ve always had you know tons of support from us...education is very important to us.

Margaret’s narrative demonstrates an awareness of “the Maori statistics” vis-a-vis academic underachievement. As I have previously indicated, international studies of literacy and numeracy reveal that Māori and Pāsifikā have consistently been among the lowest performing compared with non-Māori and non-Pāsifikā students (Tunmer et al., 2013). Margaret indicates that because of these statistics, her husband and herself provide their children with “tons of support” to ensure that the children achieved academically. Margaret’s comment that her children are “growing up basically in a white people’s world” may also be read as her understanding of the lived experience of Māori students and their families in relation to the pathologisation perpetuation of cultural deficit theorising that continues to be invoked to explain Māori educational underachievement in post-colonial New

Zealand in educational discourse, policy and schooling practices. For example, as Bishop (2005) noted, power imbalances remain in the privileging of dominant educational discourses in terms of what constitutes authoritative knowledge regarding curriculum and pedagogy within the post-colonial New Zealand. From an intersectional perspective, I would suggest that Margaret's narrative illustrates that discourses of underachievement are differentially experienced by Māori students and their families. In particular, her awareness of the relative underperformance of Māori students was notably absent in the narratives of the parents of Pākehā students presumably because they can take for granted their membership of the dominant racial group in New Zealand.

Furthermore, despite the apparent academic success that Hania was experiencing at school, her mother's narrative suggests the 'burden' that she carries regarding the broader societal expectations of academic failure. In their study exploring post-school transitions for young New Zealanders, Nairn, Higgins and Ormond (2007) noted that for the young Māori and Pacific Island women in their study were 'burdened by expectations of success (from family, school and university, themselves and their peers) *and* by expectations of failure' placing a 'considerable burden to carry with implications for their physical mental well-being' (p.360, original emphasis).

Curiously, although Hania's teacher also indicated that she was doing well academically she believed that:

Kylie: She could do better. I think she rests on her laurels a bit um and she coasts because she can do well although you know she's still, she's got a good head on her shoulders, she doesn't get caught up in the girlie stuff, she can't be bothered with all that rubbish and she's got a good mind but I still think she could do more than what she's doing but she knows that she's got enough to get ...good marks, but she kind of coasts and rests on her laurels you know?

While viewing Hania's academic performance in deficit terms is not explicitly linked to her ethnicity it was noted that comparable comments were not made about the performance of Pākehā students who perceived themselves doing well academically. It is also noteworthy that Hania's gender is also mobilised: "she doesn't get caught up in the girlie stuff". Implicit in this comment is the incompatibility of the 'girlie stuff' associated with being female and doing well academically.

There is a tension between femininity and intellectuality. This might be considered within the context of Walkerdine's (1989) comments that 'the literature on girls' attainment is full of the idea that they achieve only through hard work or by regurgitation of facts or following rules and that 'no matter how successful girls are, their success may be discounted if they present evidence of rule-following and work' (p.72). Although Hania is academically successful and does not get caught up in the "girlie stuff", her success is mitigated by Kylie's comment that "she kind of coasts and rests on her laurels". Here, Kylie undermines Hania's academic success which is consistent with Walkerdine's (1989) concern that: 'the discursive production of femininity as antithetical to masculine rationality to such an extent that femininity is *equated* with poor performance, even when the girl or woman in question is performing well' (p.268). This would appear to be analogous to the way in which Hania is positioned by Kylie. Despite her being academically successful and despite having "a good mind ...she could do more than what she's doing". As noted above, Hania was the only high achieving student to have been afforded such pejorative positioning. Thus, if the intersections of ethnicity and gender are considered in relation to the discursively constituted student, the picture of underachievement becomes even more complex. Hania appears to be in a double bind. As a high achieving Māori girl, her achievement is contextualised by Kylie in relation to her gender only. Although Hania's academic success as Māori girl in "a white people's world" is not remarked upon by Kylie, her gender is. Similarly, an awareness of cultural differences in achievement between Māori and Pākehā students was absent in the narratives of both working class and middle class Pākehā parents. I would argue that the social location of Kylie and the Pākehā parents in the dominant social group makes them less sensitive to the educational challenges faced by Māori students and their families.

"She's gaining heaps of confidence lately": Psy-discourses and Underachievement

As noted in the introductory chapter, in response to the privileging of male underachievement in both the popular media and research literature, gender based educational disparities have been addressed extensively in feminist scholarship (e.g., Driessen & van Langen, 2013; Skelton, Francis & Valkanova, 2007; Lahelma, 2014).. It was noted that of particular concern in feminist research has been the uncritical and somewhat simplistic ways in which girls' academic performance has been represented primarily as an issue of self-concept, self-esteem and self-confidence (Jones, 2005). In her study examining teachers' perceptions of the underachieving girl Jones (2005) found that 'The reasons for underachievement in boys were seen to be poor concentration, immaturity and poor behaviour, while for girls the overwhelming belief is that if she underachieves at all, it is because she lacks confidence' (Jones, 2005, p.275). The use of psy-knowledges to explain gender differences in achievement (i.e., 'lacking confidence') was evident in the current study. For example, in response to being asked what she perceived to be the barriers to learning for girls and boys categorised as underachieving the teacher replied:

Kylie: Um girls at this age I've noticed how much difference comes between the boys and the girls um sporting wise it's like the boys just over um the girls just end up in corners gossiping and because the boys never involve them there's sort of...they feel that they're not sporty or confident in sport because of the differences coming through from primary school and yet um sporty girls will always come through I guess um boys, outspoken boys seem to be more prevalent than outspoken girls ...sometimes I say OK for this morning no boys are going to answer the questions and they're just (clicks fingers) dead quiet you know?

Although the teacher's request that only girls respond to questions may be well intentioned, she may have inadvertently reinforced the expectation that girls are quieter and more passive than boys (Nieto, 1992). Moreover, her narrative suggests that the girls are deficient in terms of their sporting ability and as a consequence the girls end up "in corners gossiping". Implicit in the teacher's narrative is her belief about the girls' inability to successfully negotiate the masculinist practices ("the boys never involve them") at work in school sport. With the exception of the 'sporty girls' (it is interesting to note that Maria indicated in her narrative that she liked sport and PE, and in particular identified running and

cross country as a source of enjoyment) the girls have been constituted as being deficient in sport. The teacher invokes a 'lack of confidence' to explain girls' disinterest in sport and yet 'the sporty girls will always come through'. Thus, while reinforcing essentialist notions of girls' ('lack of') sporting ability on the one hand the teachers' narrative regarding this on the other hand would seem to imply that the 'sporty girls' possess the 'confidence' lacking amongst what is presumably the majority of girls.

Gale and Densmore (2000) have previously noted that a certain irony exists in the literature regarding self-esteem and self-confidence, in that such literature:

...reinforces sex stereotypes by its assumption that girls passively and uncritically absorb these messages. Females tend to be treated as all alike when the specific cultural and class backgrounds of schoolgirls and gender-biased, educational and occupational rewards are ignored (p.131).

Although the discourse has been challenged in feminist scholarship, particularly in terms of the way in which Western perspectives of sex roles tend to undermine other cultures' perspectives (eg., Connell, Ashenden, Kessler & Dowsett, 1982; Wenner, 1990) there remains a tendency to privilege ethnocentric and the dominant group's conceptions of self-confidence (Gale & Densmore, 2000). For example, with respect to Jennifer, a Pākehā girl who indicated that her academic performance was 'OK' the teacher indicated:

Kylie: She's an interesting one Jennifer, she's gaining heaps of confidence lately and I think it's a confidence in herself that she's starting to see herself move from the sort of lower groups, like I try to mix them up and let them not know where they're at', I've started pushing her through to other groups and that's really lifted her confidence in herself and brought our more and she's applied herself more once that started happening whereas I think sometimes in the lower groups they sort of give up a little bit or just say I'm not gonna go anywhere or do anything but because it's sort of started moving her a little more up and challenging her a wee bit more and saying 'oh you're doing really well and that's you know, she's gained confidence which has moved her into doing more.

Kylie also invokes the 'confidence' discourse when discussing Robert's (Pakeha, working class boy who indicated that he was doing poorly academically) academic performance:

Kylie: He's a bit like Jennifer too in that I've moved him like in Maths and things like that, given time and confidence he's actually come forward with a lot more strategies and understandings than perhaps he was able to offer before, so I sort of moved him a little bit as

well and once again he's taken the bull by the horns a bit and started to work harder at what he's doing and more seriously.

The teacher's narrative indicates that these students are lacking in confidence and suggests that the problem is located within the students themselves. According to Gale and Densmore (2000) 'those that speak of student deficits and disadvantage - tend to remove significant responsibility for students' academic failure from those things over which interested people could exercise some influence, namely, school practices and relations and relations of power in society' (p. 110). As noted previously concepts such as 'confidence' and 'self esteem' are a feature of modern psychological discourse and in particular in the context of child development. According to Walkerdine (1997) such terms have become 'central to the modern "truth" about pedagogy' and consequently have become 'central to modern regulation practices. The "facts of child development" form the bedrock of modern pedagogy, and the teacher must know them' (p.68). Indeed as Walkerdine (1997) noted in her study:

The teachers with the 'best' qualifications rely on a psychological model of the child as learner which presupposes that knowledge is internalised activity. This model draws for its overall rationale on the encouragement of mixed ability teaching in 'progressive' educational ideas, focusing on each child as a learner with different sets of experiences, abilities and aptitudes, all of which must be capitalised on (p.119)

Furthermore, such teachers characterise 'good' students as being 'competent' where 'Good children show 'confidence', 'perseverance', 'solid background': both boys and girls 'have the ability to get on by themselves and also initiate new ideas' (p.119).

It was apparent in the narratives of the students' parents that they also mobilised 'psy-discourses' including 'confidence', 'self-esteem', 'motivation', 'personality' and 'intelligence' to account for student underachievement. For example, in response to why she thought that some children perform better academically at school than other children, Meghan replied:

Meghan: It's their intelligence for a start, it's their self-esteem, their confidence, it's who believes in them, it's their own personality. I think the personality has a lot to do with it.

In commenting on Roberts's attendance at the reading recovery program Meghan commented that:

Meghan: It bothered him a lot and he had very little self esteem. At the end of year six his teacher, he had a great teacher in year six and she worked really hard on this self esteem part because she knew he had it all. He's bright enough, he knew his stuff and so he started getting some self esteem at the end of the year.

The take up of these taken-for-granted discourses of 'intelligence', 'self-esteem' and 'confidence' as explanations for underachievement in the context of the discursive power of psy-discourses appears to be common place. Indeed, such is the pervasiveness of discourses of modern developmental psychology in the mass media (for example, on any given morning show on television there is a 'resident' psychologist willing to dish out advice about various aspects of child development) that the take up by broader society is rarely (if ever) challenged. What is particularly noteworthy is that while Foucault (1977) noted the productive power of the knowledges and disciplinary practices of psychology to regulate and normalise the population, in more recent years there appears to have been a shift to people regulating themselves (and their families) as a consequence of their take-up of normative discourses associated with modern development psychology. According to Rose (1989):

What began as a social norm here ends as a personal desire. Individuals act upon themselves and their families in terms of the languages, values and techniques made available to them by professions, disseminated through the apparatuses of the mass media of sought out by the troubled through the market (p.88).

As noted above, Meghan commented that 'intelligence' is a contributing factor to academic underachievement. According to Rose (1989) one of the earliest contributions to the project of the 'psychological individual' was the notion of intelligence and the intelligence test. While originally the intelligence test was used to identify the 'feeble-minded' individual in order to provide 'treatment' it also 'produced a new mode of social perception of variability, a way of disciplining difference and making it socially usable' (Rose, 1989, p.138). In particular, the 'technology of intelligence' not only enabled academic

ability to be quantified hence allowing for the normalisation and ‘judgement’ of children and adults, the language of intelligence has become part of lay discourse regarding academic underachievement. It is noteworthy however, that while the psy-discourses of ‘confidence’, ‘self esteem’ and ‘intelligence’ were mobilised by the teacher and working class parents to account for ‘underachievement’ that these were conspicuous by their absence in the narratives of middle class parents. Arguably, there ‘is no problem to be solved’ for their children have already been discursively constituted as academically ‘achieving’.

Chapter Summary

The analysis provided in this chapter has explored the complex and situational ways in which social categories play out and intersect in the constitution of the underachieving student. For example, as an underachieving student Maria from a working class background, Maria was positioned by members of her family as being destined to become “a check-out chick” as well as having the potential to “fall into an early pregnancy”. Maria’s positioning as underachieving intersected with her gender which placed her ‘at risk’ of limited employment opportunities and an early pregnancy.

The choice discourse was mobilised explicitly by Maria’s teacher and implicitly by her mother to position Maria as an underachieving student. According to Maria’s teacher her status as someone who was not performing well academically was a matter of ‘choice’ (“She doesn’t choose to do well”). Within the context of the neoliberal responsibilisation discourse Maria was held to be responsible for not making the ‘right choice’ and was positioned outside of hegemonic discourses of what it means to be a ‘good’ student (‘to try’ ‘to work hard’ ‘to make good choices’). As noted previously however, the choice discourse assumes a free, rational and autonomous subject who makes choices based upon the rational assessment of the pros and cons of potential options. However, the humanist notion of the autonomous,

agentic subject is illusory as ‘one can only ever be what the various discourses make possible’ (Davies, 1991, p.47). In this instance, Maria was not only discursively constituted as an underachieving student but her underachievement intersected with her gender to place her at risk of early pregnancy in addition to unemployment. Furthermore, Maria was positioned as an ‘undesirable learner’ by virtue of her ‘challenging behaviour’ by her teacher which not only brought into question her femininity but also worked to further cement her positioning as an underachieving student.

The analysis also demonstrated the complex ways in which ethnicity plays out in hegemonic discourses of underachievement. The analysis of my interview with Margaret has highlighted the complex way in which ethnicity intersects with the educational subjectivities of Māori New Zealanders. Although her daughter Hania was spoken into existence as a ‘high achieving’ student, Margaret indicated her ‘awareness’ of the overrepresentation of Māori in discourses of underachievement and that this had had a significant impact upon ensuring that her children received “tons of support” to achieve academic success in “a white people’s world”. It was noted that such an awareness was absent in the narratives of both working and middle class Pākehā parents who can take for granted their membership of the dominant ethnic group. It was also noted however, that although Hania positioned her herself and was positioned by her family as “doing well” at school that her teacher indicated in her narrative that “she could do better”. Although, the teacher’s comments weren’t linked explicitly to Hania’s ethnicity, similar comments were not made about Pākehā students who were positioned as “doing well”. Furthermore, I noted that the teachers comments in respect to Hania not getting “caught up in the girlie stuff” implied that being ‘girlie’ was incompatible with academic achievement. In other words there is a tension between femininity and intellectuality – if you’re ‘girlie’ you can’t be intelligent.

The analysis also illustrated the way in which social class locations played out in relation to the discursive production of underachievement. In particular, it was noted that while each of the parents spoke of the ‘importance of education’ in regard to post-school career and educational opportunities for their children, the narratives of one of the middle class parents, Linda, and the classroom teacher implicated that student ‘background’ (read social class membership) and family composition are required for academic success. In other words it becomes possible to speak the underachieving student into existence simply as a function of social class. That is, academic success was attributed to having parents who ‘take education fairly seriously’, who make ‘language available to (their children) at an early age’, who provide ‘support at home’, who ‘interact’ with the classroom, and who ‘come on camps all the time’. By default, academic underachievement was seen as a family problem and in particular a working class (single parent) family problem. As the analysis illustrated however, far from being a simple matter of social class, underachievement is a much more complex issue that involves the mobilisation of multiple discourses to discursively constitute students as underachieving.

The analysis revealed that ‘psy-discourses’ and their attendant assumptions were used to explain underachievement. In particular, the notion of ‘confidence’, ‘self esteem’ and ‘intelligence’ were mobilised by some of the parents and the classroom teacher to explain differences in achievement. The use of these normative discourses of child development illustrated not only the taken-for-grantedness of these discourses but also how they provided for homogenised descriptions of student underachievement. The effects of the discursive power of these discourses is that they provided a ready-made explanation for teachers and parents to pathologise (both individually and collectively) those children who did not ‘fit’ normative accounts of underachievement.

The analysis also demonstrated that normative conceptions of underachievement also overlook the complex way in which anxiety informed the subjectivities of the working class

parents of students who had been discursively constituted as underachieving. The narratives of the working class parents were imbued with a fearfulness for their children's prospects if they were not succeeding academically. This anxiety was absent in the narratives of middle class parents for whom the possibility of their children not achieving academically was not entertained. In view of the above therefore the analysis troubled the category of the underachieving student as a homogenous category and the assumptions about the causes of underachievement (for example, simply as 'family' problem). An intersectional approach allowed us to see the issue not simply as a 'gender', ethnicity or class issue. It also made visible the 'emotional investments' that are made by the parents and caregivers of students who had been discursively constituted as underachieving.

CHAPTER SEVEN

“IT’S NOT A CHOICE THING WHERE YOU ARE YOU KNOW?”: THE DYNAMIC AND CONTRADICTIONARY WORKINGS OF POWER IN THE DISCURSIVE CONSTRUCTION OF ACADEMIC UNDERACHIEVEMENT.

Introduction

The previous chapter addressed the question of who has the power to determine the discursive norm of underachievement and how it is possible to uphold the positionings of students marked as underachieving. The concept of intersectionality was deployed as an analytic tool to examine how the students interviewed for the project had become discursively positioned by their parents and classroom teacher in relation to normative hegemonic discourses of underachievement through consideration of how the social categories of class, gender and ethnicity intersected in the lived experience of the research participants. The analysis revealed the complex and situational ways in which social categories play out in the constitution of the underachieving student. Chapter Seven will examine how the parents/caregivers and classroom teacher positioned themselves in relation to students constituted as underachieving. In particular, it will explore the dynamics and contradictory workings of power in relation to social categories and will consider how social categories worked together in particular ways in this particular context and how it invites us to consider the effects of the discursively constituted subject in a different way.

“I sort of wonder if the whole New Zealand system is a bit archaic”: Troubling the ‘Education System’.

It was noted in the previous chapter that the parents of students who had positioned themselves and had been positioned by others as underachieving were painfully aware of the

consequences of their children not ‘getting it right’ academically. It is particularly noteworthy however that several of the parents of students who were positioned as underachieving invoked the “education system” and the positioning of their children within it for being partly responsible for their children’s academic difficulties. In particular, some of the parents invoked a ‘mismatch’ between pedagogical approaches and their children’s learning needs. For example, Tina, Lance’s mother, indicated that:

Tina: Well I think that the educational system’s set up one way...but not everybody’s like Lance. He doesn’t learn in the typical way you know? And so for those kids that are sort of out there they’re not going to do well in this you know structured way. It’s just how you learn, since Lance’s had trouble with reading and writing things down ...you know the kids are lost they’re just...and then their mind wanders when they’re bored and they just don’t get it because they’re off in their own little world. I would like to see him in a system that believes in and celebrates difference, kids who are different and that it is OK to be different. I’m real strong on that because he is so different you know and I want him to see that’s OK for him and so that he can. I mean he’ll be in the arts somehow in some realm in his life. That’s what he is, he’s just a bundle of creativity.

Implicit in Tina’s comment that: “I think that the educational system’s set up one way” is the influence of the neoliberal knowledge base in education which privileges some students namely, middle class students and marginalises others, working class and indigenous students. As Connell (2013) noted, neoliberal policy reform has resulted in a view of education as ‘human capital formation’ in order to produce work-ready employees, which is reflected in the high stakes assessment practices of assessing literacy and numeracy only. As such, the neoliberal knowledge base has effectively marginalised other forms of knowledge such as the Arts or in Lance’s case, his creativity. It would seem that such a system is antithetical to a “system that believes in and celebrates difference”.

Maria’s mother, Sue also indicated that part of the responsibility for Maria’s academic difficulties was located in systemic issues which failed to take into account Maria’s learning needs. In particular, she had considered other schooling alternatives for Maria:

Sue: ...I sort of wonder if the whole New Zealand system is a bit archaic, the way it is all about the, you know those core subjects and yeah everybody is sort of really meant to be like

sheep and go with that and not everybody fits that category and that's why I even wonder about those alternative type educations, what are they called?

Matt: Steiner schools⁷.

Sue: Steiner's and that type of thing. I often look at her and think she probably would have fitted something like that a lot better.

Sue's comments echo those of Tina in terms of the privileging of the "core subjects" (read literacy and numeracy) in the New Zealand education system. While Sue's comments may be read as her attempt to apportion blame for Maria's difficulties on the hegemonic practices of the education system, they also may be read as reflecting her unease with Maria's academic positioning as is illustrated by her consideration of alternative forms of education that could provide a better 'fit' for Maria. She added that she felt that Maria's schooling would be more supported by:

Sue: Making the system a bit more balanced. I mean I think at the moment they do put a lot more time into those core subjects so perhaps balancing it a bit more so that it's not just that and I mean not maybe not spending as much time on that. For the brighter ones it won't be a problem and for people like Maria it might be more positive too because you can pick it up in sport or art or whatever and maybe that could be introduced more into those subjects.

Here, again Sue's comments mirror those of Tina's in terms of a narrow curriculum which focuses on literacy and numeracy and privileges some students ("the brighter ones") while marginalising others, including her daughter. She suggests that the integration of "sport or art" into the curriculum would result in an education system that is "a bit more balanced". Sue and Tina's narratives would suggest that they negotiate the positioning of their children within the education system with a desire for a system would provide a better 'fit' for their children. In Sue's case, she even considers an alternative education system. I would argue that their narratives make visible the hegemonic functions and effects of an education system that locks out alternative forms of

⁷ Rudolph Steiner schools provide education for students from kindergarten to secondary and have a pedagogical emphasis on the integration of the intellectual, practical and artistic development of students.

knowledge and illuminates the power of neoliberal discourse and policy in curriculum delivery and the role that this power plays in advantaging the middle class who continue to benefit from it.

In contrast to Sue and Tina's comments were those of Angela, the mother of Jennifer. Jennifer indicated that she was doing 'OK' academically, and according to school records was identified as Pākehā and working class:

Angela: I mean my hope is that school doesn't put her off learning you know as it probably did me. I was not into learning myself so my hope for her is that she will be inspired to learn and develop her own skills for learning, curiosity and know that it's good to ask questions and not just swallow it all whole.

Rather than blame school structures, Angela blames herself for her lack of interest in schooling. Angela's comments are redolent of the responsabilisation discourse whereby she has taken on responsibility for her lack of interest in school. Similarities may be drawn to Skeggs' (1997) study in which the white, working class women she had interviewed had 'blamed themselves for the lack of jobs and their lack of interest in schooling' (p.37) and moreover their painful awareness of their positioning compared with their middle class counterparts. Of interest here is how each of the mothers positioned themselves and their children's positioning in relation to the operation of power. While Tina and Sue identified structural explanations as being partly responsible for their children's academic difficulties, Angela articulated her fears that "school doesn't put (her daughter) off learning as it probably did me".

Tina's and Sue's comments are noteworthy in the context of the standardisation and subsequent 'narrowing of the curriculum' with a focus on literacy and numeracy within 'a culture of performativity' in New Zealand schools in which high stakes testing has resulted in the narrowing of curriculum in which schools try to enact assessment practices, that privilege 'Anglo upper-middle class practices of living' (Connell, 2013, p.32), and will allow their students to perform well against the educational Standards. In this context, the comments made by Lance's and Maria's teacher, Kylie about the New Zealand education system are particularly noteworthy. When asked about her thoughts about why some students perform better at school academically than others she replied:

Kylie: I think it comes down in many ways to what the school's curriculum offers. I mean it's the curriculum that's failing them as well um the people that we've got involved in schools. There are a lot of teachers out there that aren't teachers, there's fisherman and farmers and you know its academic stuff that we're putting on them and saying that's what it means to be successful but it's not. I couldn't go out and dig a drain or build a playhouse or um wire up a house and things like that

Matt: Mmm...Could tell me a little more about what you mean when you say that the curriculum is failing students?

Kylie: We're not teaching them, but we can't and that's the thing with the concept class⁸, I found it really frustrating. I've been given this label of the concept class but I still have to do everything that everyone else is doing. Unless you're somewhere like a Steiner school where you've got the whole school situated around that philosophy and you've got parent and community support and the whole environment supports it otherwise you've just got nothing. It's not a concept class, it's bullshit but hello I'm still having to do what I did last year um unless you go into an environment that is completely different you can't do otherwise and I don't know.

Kylie's comments regarding the narrowing of the curriculum and its failure to engage a pedagogy that addresses students learning needs parallel those of Tina and Sue's as well as her frustration of having to teach within competing discourses. That is, Kylie expresses her frustration regarding the expectation that she teaches the curriculum (and assesses the curriculum) according to normative practices in addition to the expectation that she teaches a concept class to explore alternative pedagogical approaches to teaching and learning in order to raise student achievement. As she indicates, she is still subject to the normative curriculum and high stakes assessment practices of her school. In Foucauldian terms, the operation of existing power relations constricts her ability to design and implement curricula that addresses her students learning needs. The 'failure' of the normative curriculum to meet students' needs leads Kylie to question normative conceptions of academic success ("you know its academic stuff that we're putting on them and saying that's what it

⁸ A 'concept class' was established at the school which was loosely based on the Rudolph Steiner philosophy.

means to be successful but it's not") which could be read as her attempt to trouble the neoliberal aspirational discourse which privileges academic success as the means 'to become someone'. In response I asked Kylie if she thought that normative conceptions of education could be changed.

Kylie: I don't know how you could change that because it is the values of society that sees other forms of education aren't valid unless you can mark against reading, writing and maths, it's not that important. I mean Arts is seen as a soft thing but there's a hell of a lot in Art and people are able to feed into their strengths and then develop it. You can broaden it throughout the curriculum and still do English, Maths, and Reading but still have an emphasis on Art. You don't want to pigeonhole kids into artists but it's just the marginalising of really important areas. Any core subject you could expand throughout the curriculum but we're jack of all trades and master of none and unable to do that.

Within the context of this thesis, Kylie's comment that she does not know how to change the existing normative conceptions of education is a powerful one as not only does it align with the comments made by Tina and Sue above regarding the narrow curriculum and the marginalisation of some content areas, such as the Arts, but her comment that "the values of society that sees other forms of education aren't valid unless you can mark against reading, writing, and maths" are redolent of a 'culture of performativity' and illustrates the power of normative neoliberal conceptions of education and the taken-for-grantedness and privileging of a normalised curriculum and assessment practices. Kylie's positioning vis-a-vis hegemonic educational discourse and discursive practices becomes more complicated however when considered in relation to neoliberal discourses of accountability which I address in the following section.

"She's alright but I haven't seen any extra than what's required": Troubling Teacher Accountability.

What each of the mothers share in common was not only the uneasy relationship that they have with formal schooling but also the emotional investments that they had made in their children's education. These working class, Pākehā women articulated their desire for their children to 'get it right' at school. As noted previously this uneasiness with education and schooling was notably absent in the narrative of the middle class parents. In citing Rothenberg (2000), Brah and Phoenix

(2004) noted that ‘people do not see the ways in which they are privileged, and so well intentioned, middle class, white liberals often strive to maintain privilege for their children, while denying that they are doing so. Yet, the dynamics of power and privilege shape the key experiences of their lives’. (p.81). For example, Linda indicated that: “...you know being on the board [of trustees]⁹ I’ve obviously had that inside knowledge as to how committed they (the teachers) all are”. Arguably, Linda was doing what is required to maintain privilege for her son through her membership on the schools board of trustees which allowed her access to ‘inside knowledge’. In response to being asked if she believed that her son could be ‘doing better’ Linda replied:

Linda: I’d have to say that I’ve had some reservations in terms of what Sean has achieved academically and I guess us parents sometimes can be seen to be a bit pushy [with respect to what is happening at school]. I mean I don’t want to be you know? That’s not what I’m trying to achieve. But you see your kids at primary school they sort of come along in leaps and bounds and to be honest I just feel academically this year we’ve sort of stagnated.

Of note here is the expectation of academic success and the role that schools and teachers play in this. As has been noted by Brah and Phoenix (2004), middle class mothers are more able than their working class peers by virtue of their knowledge, time and resources to mobilise their power ‘to confront teachers when they feel their children are not being pushed hard enough or taught well enough’ (p.82) and they are more likely to seek out ‘compensatory education’ for their children. It was interesting to note though that contrast to the accepted view that only middle class parents mobilise their power to confront their children’s teachers, that some of the working class mothers indicated in their narratives that they too would confront their children’s teacher if necessary. For example, according to Meghan “You know I’m not going to be one of those mothers that say you’ve got to put my kid in this class or whatever but I’m definitely going to speak to whoever I need to speak to see you know that he just doesn’t get left behind”. Similarly, Margaret indicated that “I’m sort of one of these people if I ever have any queries I’ve got no qualms about ringing up and enquiring and finding out”.

⁹ Boards of Trustees which were established following the ‘Tomorrow Schools’ reforms of 1989 are governance units of parents and oversee the administration of schools.

Within the context of the provision of feedback, Linda also referred to the competency of her son's teacher. In particular she indicated that she wasn't happy with the quality or frequency of the feedback that she received from the teacher about Sean's academic performance:

Linda: I guess you know it would be great to get that regular feedback. I guess as parents you always ...we probably received more feedback at primary school ...because you're in there a lot more you probably have that ready access to the teachers, you possibly attempt to liaise a little more than you do at intermediate I guess ...but you know I appreciate that teachers don't really have time, I mean they're there to teach our kids ...at the end of the day that's their main job. But yeah I mean really I guess the only feedback that we've had would be his report and so I guess ultimately it would be nice to um...I don't really know now how he's doing academically.

Again, the comments regarding an apparent lack of feedback from the teacher might be considered in the context of neoliberal discourses of accountability. Linda's criticism is transferred directly to the teacher where it is the teacher's responsibility to ensure that there is adequate feedback and communication between the home and the school. Tina was a little more pointed in her comments about the quality of teaching received by her son, Lance:

Tina: I wouldn't rate her very highly as a teacher quite frankly. I'm a little bit disappointed in the lack of communication but she's always been very open when I've gone and talked to her about things. And actually I suppose he (Lance) hasn't said anything negative about her. I don't see her as proactive. I think maybe that's what my reservation is. She's alright but I haven't seen any extra than what's required.

'Quality teaching' is ubiquitous and central to discourses of modern pedagogical practices and is underpinned by the normative assumption that the teacher is the most important factor in raising student achievement which as I have noted previously, tends to elide social factors such as location, socio-economic status, ethnicity and linguistic background (Cormack & Comber, 2013). Explicit in the discourse is the requirement that 'teachers know their students' and 'know how students learn'. Linda commented that teachers are "there to teach our kids ...at the end of the day that's their main job" although implied in her comments is that Kylie isn't fully competent in terms of her apparent failure to communicate effectively (as evidenced by a lack of feedback) with the home. These comments are echoed in Tina's narrative. According to Tina, notwithstanding that "She's alright", she still has reservations about Kylie's teaching as she hasn't "seen any extra than what's required". Tina's comments illuminate a shift in the operation of power relations. That is,

rather than pointing to the failings of the education system writ large as above, she turned her attention to Lance's teacher. Hence, responsibility for Lance's educational difficulties shifted from the state, the education system writ large, to the individual, the teacher.

Sue also discussed the quality of teaching in respect to teachers that Maria had had in the past:

Sue: That's the whole thing too um about your children's education you know like until they're five you have all this control over their life and then they go to school and then you don't have control over who their teacher is or how compatible that relationship is and it really is luck and you know I have to say out of the three children Maria has probably ended up with the I don't know, the short straw as far as teachers have gone you know? In my opinion she has had a lot of old women well into their fifties who are long burnt out and that's not great.

Walderdine (1997) noted that the 'female teacher is held responsible for the modern form of pedagogic government' (p.68). Not only must the teacher possess knowledge of modern pedagogic practices but she must also possess the capacity for nurturance, particularly as it applies to the teaching of young children which 'places a terrible burden on women' (Walkerline, 1997, p.68). Notwithstanding Sue's comments regarding teacher 'burnout' which Connell (2007) has previously noted 'is a real risk' for 'committed teachers' (p.270) it would appear that according to Sue's narrative that this 'burden' is even greater for older female teachers. Teacher gender was also invoked by Linda in terms of her son's academic performance:

Linda: He had a male teacher who was really fantastic because he was also into his sport and stuff. But he also had really high expectations of the kids in terms of homework and things like that and I tell you that whole class, it wasn't just Sean who is the type of kid who would anyway, but the whole class. And I saw it happen year in year out with the kids he took, unfortunately he has moved on from this school. But to me ideally if he could have a teacher like that every year it would be amazing.

Not only is the male teacher 'really fantastic' because 'he was also into his sport and stuff' (the implication being that female teachers aren't) but that he had "high expectations" in regards to homework completion and the like (again the implication being that female teachers don't have such expectations).

The issue of homework was also mentioned by Linda on several occasions in her narrative. In particular she indicated that the apparent absence of homework was problematic: "I went over his

report and they don't have that much homework ... that's the only way that you gauge what they're doing". Linda also referred to a teacher that Sean had previously had who "was fantastic because he had really high expectations of the kids in terms of homework and things like that". While Linda's narrative might be read that homework is a means of staying 'in touch' with what is happening at school (or as a technology of surveillance – "that's the only way you gauge what they're doing") implicit in her narrative is the assumption that homework confers positional advantage in terms of providing a gauge about her son's academic progress. However, as Rothenberg (2000) noted such privilege tends to go unrecognised even though the operation of such power and privilege plays a key role in the way in which their lives are experienced. It's interesting to note that Robert's mother also commented on the issue of homework:

Meghan: Robert's very good at flying under the radar like we had terrible problems at the beginning of the year over homework. I've always had issues with Robert with homework. He hates it with a passion, we can get tantrums and all sorts of upsets. And his method for dealing with it was to come home and say 'I don't know what it is' and then I'll say go back and find out. The next day he would say 'well I don't understand what she (the teacher) said' and it will take all week.

Matt: To find out?

Meghan: Yeah and by then the homework's supposed to be have been done. So in the end the teacher said don't worry about it if it's that big a deal don't make him do it. So which I ...

Matt: Hmm

Meghan: I would rather she helped me find a way. Like I mean I used to say to Robert on your way out the door at the end of the day and clarify it (homework) and make sure you understand what it is you have to do. But every time it was 'ah I forgot' or whatever because really he just didn't want to do it.

Matt: Right.

Meghan: I would never get the opportunity to break it down for him because it wouldn't come home, he'd look at it and think I can't do that I've got no idea what she's talking about and I have to admit

sometimes I have seen what they've got and thought you're kidding? I don't want to have to help you do that!

To compare Meghan's comments with those of Linda regarding homework, for Linda homework offered a source of positional advantage for her son and a means of gauging what her son was doing at school, while for Meghan homework was a source of frustration for both her son and herself. In this context, social class is lived in the practice of homework. Both Linda and Meghan were emotionally invested in homework on behalf of their children however the effects of their investments could not be more different. Again, this illustrates how middle class families mobilise their discursive power to ensure that their children's positional advantage is maintained and yet this privilege remains unrecognised.

“She had stuffed it up for me”: Accountability Under the Governments' Disciplinary Gaze.

I have noted above, Kylie's teaching was under the 'parental gaze' as a function of the 'quality' of her teaching which was adjudged according to the feedback and communication between home and school. In this section I address the comments that were made by Kylie regarding an exchange that she had had with a student following a visit to the school by the Education Review Office (ERO)¹⁰. Part of the review process involved interviews between a member of the review panel and a student who was 'randomly' selected from the class list. Kylie indicated that one of her students, Paula, had mentioned in her interview that there was an 'issue' with Kylie's teaching.

Kylie: When they come in they take a snapshot of your class and it's hard because they can only comment on what they see and hear and take that on board as well. I mean that it was

¹⁰ The Education Review Office is a government department that evaluates and reports on the education of children in early childhood services and schools.

Paula that was in the headlights when ERO came in and she came up to me a day or so later and said ‘It was me wasn’t it?’

Matt: Right?

Kylie: She knew.

Matt: What did she know?

Kylie: Oh well, she knew that she had stuffed it up for me and she was really sorry. She said “I’m really sorry”, you know? I mean that’s the thing, it’s letting kids make mistakes and I say to them ‘Look, I make mistakes all the time and we’re not here to say that’s one chance and you’re out and I’m going to judge you on that issue for evermore’. It’s about making a change and doing it differently.

Matt: But what was she apologising for?

Kylie: That she sort of spoke in this thing and said that I talk about things that aren’t relevant and that ‘we don’t want a bar of this’ and you know this isn’t where I’m at you know and that was fine, I mean it was the end of the lesson anyway I just kept going when I shouldn’t have and she was quite right. I said to her, I said ‘Look Paula, you’re fine’. It was just a combination of things.

Although, Kylie did not elaborate on what the lesson topic concerned, it was apparent that the classroom discussion had evoked a ‘heated’ debate amongst the students. Kylie indicated that she had engaged a critical approach to her pedagogy which she also encouraged in her students. She added:

Kylie: You just have to take a big breath and understand that people speak from there sometimes. But sometimes it can be really hard like when ERO came through and I was doing this kind of stuff and they were like ‘this isn’t relevant’. If I had a compliant class like Beth’s (one of Kylie’s colleagues) they would have not thought about it and not questioned it but um it makes it hard because you as a teacher get hauled over the coals by a critical class.

Here, Kylie articulates her frustration with trying to reconcile the tension that exists between encouraging ‘critical’ discussion amongst her class and her ‘accountability’ for not teaching the curriculum in accordance with what is considered to be ‘relevant’. Kylie’s encounter with ERO could be read as an effect of the ‘performative terror’ in which teachers

such as Kylie are forced to ‘burrow deeper into the disciplinary space of the classroom’ (Thompson & Cook, 2012, p.566) in order satisfy the neoliberal mandate of responsibility, accountability and standards.

Chapter Summary

In this chapter I have demonstrated the conflicting and at times contradictory ways in which underachievement is discursively produced and moreover considered the complexity in power relations as it pertains to who bears responsibility for academic underachievement. In particular, the analysis troubles the current tendency to mobilise normative neoliberal discourses to explain and understand underachievement. The effects of the standardisation of curriculum (and in particular its focus on literacy and numeracy) are evident in Tina’s and Sue’s narratives about school structure and the negative impact that this has had on their children’s education. Their desire was for their children to be educated in a system which addresses their educative needs however, as Tina indicated such schooling doesn’t work for children who ‘don’t learn in the typical way’. Moreover, for parents such as Tina, underachievement was not a ‘choice’ issue but neoliberal education policy would appear to suggest otherwise in terms of its emphasis on the responsibility of the individual to ‘maximise their educational opportunities’. As was noted in Chapter One, by the state transferring this responsibility to the individual, the individual becomes responsible for her/his ‘failure’. However, the analysis reveals tensions experienced by the parents of children who do not fit normative conceptions of academic success.

Contrary to the accepted view, both middle and working class parents indicated that they would do ‘what was necessary’ to advocate for their children. It would appear from the analysis however that the ‘emotional investments’ are considerably greater for working class parents of children who have been discursively constituted as underachieving. While the analysis would seem to suggest that middle class parents possess the discursive power to ‘get it right’ for their children,

the working class families appear to be struggling with a different ghost, particularly their uneasiness with education and schooling. This poses a double bind. On the one hand neoliberal discourses of responsibility hold families to account for their children's underachievement and consequently underachievement is constituted as a family problem. On the other hand, the 'emotional work' (fear and anxiety) that is produced by their children's positioning remains invisible.

The analysis is particularly interesting in the context of the neoliberal emphasis on 'fixing things' in education in terms of standardisation and increased accountability for schools and teachers. The analysis reveals the complex power relations that operate between the teacher, Kylie and the parents, as well as the relations between herself and the disciplinary power of institutional authorities. She was in a double bind. Both the state and the parents of her students adjudged the 'quality' of her teaching and held her accountable for the educative outcomes of her students. Notwithstanding Kylie's ambivalence towards normative curriculum and assessment requirements Kylie remained subject to the normative curriculum and high stakes assessment practices of her school.

The analysis highlights the complexity and multiplicity of the issues at play in thinking about underachievement. In particular, it troubles the category of the 'underachieving' student as a homogenous category and the assumptions about the causes of underachievement (for example, simply as a 'family' problem or a 'gender' issue). It allows us to see the complex discursive terrain that some parents must traverse in order to make sense of and negotiate their children's subject positions. An intersectional approach also allows us to see the issue not simply as a 'gender' issue and provides a cogent argument for the rejection of essentialising and deficit discourses regarding student underachievement and moreover the need to open spaces for the resistance and rejection of essentialist and deficit discourses attending underachievement and for the (re)construction of new discourses and metaphors for achievement.

CHAPTER EIGHT

DIFFERENCE UNFOLDED

Introduction

This thesis has destabilised taken-for-granted assumptions underpinning hegemonic discourses and practices relating to academic underachievement by illuminating how students' subjectivities are explicitly and implicitly constituted outside of normative educational discourses. I have endeavoured to convey the complexity of the processes in which students are discursively constituted as underachieving and the complex ways in which the categories of gender, ethnicity and social class play out in its production. While there are of course limits on the way in which the experiences of students may be represented I have attempted to trouble normative conceptions of underachievement by examining underachievement as a lived discursive construction by employing post-structuralist theorising in my interpretation of the data. In this chapter the key research questions are discussed and how these have been addressed in addition to the theoretical significance of the study.

The key questions examine how students become discursively constituted as underachieving and the role that discursive power plays in constituting students' academic identities in relation to the social categories ethnicity, social class and gender. The following key research questions outlined in Chapter One were examined:

1. How do students who indicate that they are 'not doing well' academically account for and negotiate their positioning and what are the discursive practices that make the underachieving student possible?
2. How are students underachieving subjectivities produced and sustained in relation to the operation of power and what are its effects?

3. How do operations of power intersect with ethnicity, social class and gender to produce the achieving/underachieving binary?
4. How do parents and the classroom teacher position themselves and students in relation to normative discourses of underachievement?

The questions were addressed from data drawn from in-depth interviews conducted with six intermediate school students aged eleven to twelve years, their parents/caregivers and classroom teacher. The questions focus on the discourses and discursive practices that were mobilised by the students, their parents/caregivers and classroom teacher to constitute the students' academic identities as underachieving.

Emergent Themes

Four themes emerged from the study. The first theme is how students accounted for and negotiated their discursive positioning. The effects of their discursive positioning are implicated in the normalising disciplinary techniques of testing, ranking, and description. The second theme to emerge from the study is the complex and situational ways in which neoliberal discourses are mobilised by the more powerful in relation to social categories to discursively construct the underachieving student. The third theme relates to the complex and contradictory way in which power relations work in relation to underachievement. A fourth theme is methodological in nature where the implicatedness of the researcher is troubled in the representation of research participants. Each of the themes is addressed in turn below.

Accounting for and Negotiating Discursive Positioning

The analysis suggests that students who were discursively positioned as underachieving accounted for their class ranking and placement in the lowest groups as a result of not being “brainy” or “smart”. In Foucauldian terms, the penalty for not being good

at school is to be placed in the lowest groups, which becomes ‘integrated into the cycle of knowledge of individuals’ (Foucault, 1977, p.181). Both Maria and Robert invoked an “I’m not smart” discourse. This knowledge had been derived from being marked as different. It was noted however, that despite her subjection as “not brainy”, that Maria expressed her desire to be “at the same level as everyone else” which might be read as a desire to be recognised as a legitimate student. As noted by Laws and Davies (2000) in order to enjoy recognition as a good student it is necessary not only to take up the behaviours associated with being a good student but it is also necessary to be recognised as taking them up in order to enjoy such legitimacy. Maria did not appear to enjoy such recognition.

In order to eclipse her subjection as someone who is underachieving, Maria indicated that she would “catch up one day”. Maria indicated that catching up was important as she knew that the normative discourse of the importance of education requires that educational success is necessary for securing employment. She knew that the potential consequences for not being academically successful were to not “get a job that you absolutely want” and to be “naughty”. Hence, Maria’s subjectivity was constituted by the discursive reality of the normative neoliberal discourse that if you don’t do well at school then unemployment and delinquency will result. Notwithstanding her subjection, Maria indicated her desire to be “at the same level as everyone else”. I suggest that a Foucauldian power/knowledge reading might view Maria’s response to her positioning as a form of resistance to the normalising practices to which she was subjected which opens up the possibilities of agency and other forms of resistance.

Similarly, Robert also mobilised his linguistic agency with alternative discursive possibilities. For example, while he spoke about his subjection as not being “very good at school work” he negotiated this understanding with his belief that one “might be really good at something else” such as sport (or in his case hockey). Not only might this be read as means

of achieving legitimacy, I also argue that Robert had disrupted his subjection to the discursive power of normative discourses of academic achievement by opening up discursive possibilities and opportunities for agency by focusing on who he wished to become.

The Effects of the Normalising Gaze

The analysis revealed that the normalising gaze of the teacher and the institution's discursive practices are implicated in the disciplinary techniques of testing, ranking, description and exclusion. The effects of such 'normalising judgements' manifested in the students narratives, for example, "I'm not very good at reading and spelling", and the need for 'correction' through being placed 'in the lowest group' and/or the requirement to attend Reading Recovery. While on the one hand students were 'passively objectified' through the processes of testing and ranking, they had become 'actively objectified', or marked as different, through their withdrawal from the classroom for 'treatment' in reading recovery. These discursive practices not only speak these students into existence as underachieving and distinguish them from their more academically 'able' peers but also 'prepares the ground for the exclusionary practices that derive from them' (Graham, 2007, p.15). As noted above however, although the effectiveness of reading recovery has been questioned since it does not necessarily address the underlying issues and conditions from which students' reading and spelling difficulties emerge (Tunmer et al., (2013), it continues to be implemented in New Zealand schools. The analysis illuminates the role that power plays in the discursive production of students who struggle with literacy and its effects, including the exclusion of students from the classroom to attend reading recovery and the invisible emotional effects upon the parents of children who are required to attend.

Power Relations and the Discursively Constituted Subject

The second theme relates to the complex and situational ways in which neoliberal discourses are mobilised by the more powerful in relation to social categories in order to discursively construct the underachieving student. The deployment of an intersectional analysis in Chapter Six revealed the complex and situational ways in which social categories play out in the discursive constitution of the underachieving student. For example, as an underachieving student from a working class background, Maria was positioned by members of her family as being destined to become “a check-out chick” as well as having the potential to “fall into an early pregnancy”. Hence, Maria’s positioning as ‘underachieving’ intersected with her gender and social class to place her at risk of limited employment opportunities and an early pregnancy. However, within the context of the neoliberal responsibilisation discourse Maria was held to be responsible by her teacher for not making the right choice and was positioned outside of hegemonic discourses of what it means to be a good student (‘to try’, ‘to work hard’, ‘to make good choices’). As noted by Davies (1997) however, the notion of choice is illusory as the subject has already been discursively constituted.

Social class played out in relation to the discursive production of who was to blame for underachievement in the narratives of parents/caregivers. For example, it was noted that while each of the parents spoke of the importance of education in regard to post-school career and educational opportunities for their children, the narratives of one of the middle class parents, Linda, and the classroom teacher, Kylie implicated student background (read social class membership) and family composition as requirements for academic success. That is, academic success was attributed to having parents who “take education fairly seriously”, who make “language available to their children at an early age”, who provide “support at home”, who interact with the classroom, and who “come on camps all the time”. By default, academic underachievement was seen as a family problem and in particular a working class

and/or single parent, family problem. Moreover, the narratives of the working class parents were imbued with a fearfulness for their children's prospects if they were not succeeding academically. This anxiety was absent in the narratives of the middle class parents for whom the possibility of their children not achieving academically was not entertained.

The analysis also demonstrated the complex ways in which ethnicity plays out in hegemonic discourses of underachievement. For example, although Hania was positioned as achieving well academically, her mother indicated her awareness of the overrepresentation of Māori in discourses of underachievement and that this had a significant impact upon ensuring that her children received “tons of support” to achieve academic success in “a white people's world”. It was noted that such an awareness was absent in the narratives of both working and middle class Pakeha parents who can take for granted their membership of the dominant ethnic group. It was also noted however, that although Hania positioned her herself and was positioned by her family as doing well at school that her teacher indicated that “she could do better”. Although, her comments weren't linked explicitly to Hania's ethnicity, similar comments were not made about Pakeha students who were positioned as doing well.

The use of psy-discourses to explain underachievement, including intelligence, self-esteem, confidence, and motivation, were evident in the current study. The analysis revealed that these taken-for-granted and homogenised discourses provided a ready-made explanation for the teacher and parents to pathologise (both individually and collectively) those children who do not fit normative accounts of underachievement. In particular, it was noted that while the psy-discourses of confidence, self esteem and intelligence were mobilised by the teacher and the working class parents to account for underachievement that these were conspicuous by their absence in the narratives of middle class parents.

Power Relations and Social Categories

The third theme to emerge relates to the complex and contradictory way in which power relations work in with regard to social categories and the discursively constituted subject. Chapter Seven illustrated that the narratives of the working class parents indicated that the education system was incompatible with their children's educational needs and abilities. While these parents articulated their uneasiness about the education system, teacher quality was also invoked by both working and middle class parents in their narratives. In particular, an apparent lack of communication between the teacher and home was seen as being problematic in terms of not being able to gauge what was happening in the classroom.

The issue of homework was also problematic. For Linda (middle class parent) a lack of homework was seen as an issue as this was a means of gauging her son's academic progress, while one of the working class parents indicated that the provision of too much homework was a source of frustration for both her and her son. It was noted that for Linda, homework may be read as a technology of surveillance. This surveillance was extended by Linda through her membership on the school's Board of Trustees which I suggest not only maintained privilege for her son but also gave her 'insider knowledge' which enabled her to "keep an eye on things".

The analysis demonstrated that while middle class families possess the discursive power to ensure that their children experience academic success this privilege goes unrecognised. For working class families and particularly for those families whose children had been discursively positioned as underachieving, the issue was much more complex. While neoliberal discourses of responsibility, meritocracy and psychological discourses hold the child and her/his family to account for their underachievement, these taken-for-granted discourses fail however to take into account the fear that is produced by their children's

positioning and the emotional work undertaken by families and their children to negotiate their discursive positioning.

Representation of Educational Subjects

The fourth theme to emerge is methodological and relates to the implicatedness of the researcher in the qualitative analysis and representation of research participants. As noted in Chapter Four, it was apparent from the initial draft of the analysis of an interview with one of the research participants, Maria, that despite my articulation of the poststructuralist underpinnings of the thesis that I defaulted to psychologising in my analysis. This included engaging in the production of Maria's biography as a singularly situated *real* story about her, through 'triangulating' her own, her teacher's and her mother's stories. As such, I had failed to address how Maria herself negotiated the discourses of academic underachievement in which she had been positioned. Moreover, despite my stated aim to foreground my epistemological assumptions and my own positionalities in terms of how I engaged with Maria, the power relations between me and her, and my motivation for conducting the interview remained invisible and unchallenged. In Chapter Four I therefore addressed the question of how we can know our research participants and mapped the journey of representing Maria and the pitfalls that were encountered along the way with particular consideration of my own implicatedness in what is produced. In particular, I recognised that the data were collected in a different time and place under a thinly veiled positivist stance and that I could no longer assume that the data were a reflection of reality. Moreover, I recognised that undertaking a self-reflexive analysis of the data did not require a 'confession' but rather acknowledgement of my implicatedness in terms of my multiple positionings and my subjection to the powerful influence of psychological discourses.

It should also be noted that despite my intended aim to critique underachievement as a complex and contradictory construct that I am mindful of the tension between the methodological approach of co-constructing the ‘multiple realities’ of the research participants experiences and my representation of them. In particular, I am mindful of the dilemma of authentically representing the voices of the research participants while at the same time exerting my authoritative voice. Therefore, while I acknowledge that the themes that ‘have emerged’ are the result of choices that I have made within the context of this qualitative, interpretative study, I might have more emphatically have drawn out the themes to “respect my own ‘analytic voice’ (Kearns, 2012, p.36)..

Contribution to the Field

This study asserts that essentialising and deficit theorising about the causes and solutions for underachievement are unhelpful and that a more nuanced and complexified approach for thinking about underachievement is required. The use of intersectionality in this study as an analytical tool invites us to think about the issue of academic underachievement in different ways within the New Zealand context. In particular, it provides a means of destabilising the assumptions about students who are not faring well academically by disrupting the homogenous category of the underachieving student. The analysis reveals that framing underachievement as a gender issue renders the academic problems experienced by working class girls or the middle class privilege of both genders invisible. The analysis also reveals the complex tensions that exist between ethnicity and hegemonic discourses of educational achievement. Particularly, it illuminates that the overrepresentation of Māori in discourses of underachievement is salient in the minds of the parents of Māori students yet is conspicuously absent in the narratives of Pākehā parents.

Intersectionality has also provided a theoretical means to examine the complexity and multiplicity in the power relations at work in the discursively produced subject. In particular it disrupts the neoliberal assumption that the cause of underachievement lies with the student and/or their family but rather is an imbalance of power whereby discourses of choice and responsibility are mobilised by the more powerful to apportion blame. In addition, the analysis illuminates the invisibility of the emotional investments that are made by the parents and caregivers that have been discursively constituted as underachieving.

It is important however to note the limits of intersectionality as a research tool. I recognise that my analysis has focused on the three categories of gender, ethnicity and social class and that the data were collected at a different time and place. As such, I am mindful that while these categories may have shaped the students' experiences in one particular time and location in a particular way it must be noted that other social categories may also have been relevant in theorising difference and how these differences intersect with a students' educational subjectivities. As Yuval-Davis (2006) noted: 'Rainbows include the whole spectrum of different colours, but how many colours we distinguish depends on our specific social and linguistic milieu' (p.203). For example, further work on the discursive production of underachievement could consider the inclusion of other categories such as ableness, urban/rural location, position in family or English as a second language as they intersect with students' academic subjectivities.

Implications for Understandings of Underachievement

This study disrupts the simplistic, essentialist and deficit explanations and solutions for underachievement and offers scope for policy makers and practitioners within the New Zealand context to consider reconceptualising the way in which academic underachievement is currently understood and to consider the effects on students who have been discursively

constituted as underachieving and their families. Rather than understanding underachievement as a discrete gender, ethnicity, or social class issue, the study illustrates the ways in which the social categories social class, ethnicity and gender intersect to inform the way in which underachievement is understood. Furthermore, it demonstrates that students' academic subjectivities are not fixed and inevitable but rather are a function of the multiplicity of understandings that attend social practice. It invites policy makers to develop more complex understandings of how the academic experiences of students from diverse backgrounds intersects with the curriculum within the socio-cultural context of the classroom. It also invites pre-service and in-service teachers to challenge the issue of power imbalances regarding their cultural and social assumptions underpinning their practice. As Bishop (2005) has previously argued, a pre-condition for improving Māori educational achievement is for teachers to challenge their positioning within hegemonic discourses that view Māori achievement in deficit terms and to develop practices that promote power sharing relationships in the classroom. I would add that a necessary pre-condition for improving the academic achievement of *all* students is for teachers to reframe their thinking about underachievement and to challenge discourses that privilege normative expectations for the behaviours needed to be 'successful' by addressing the power relations inherent in discourses of underachievement.

Conclusion

This thesis troubles the notion that underachieving students are pre-existing subjects. Rather, it suggests that 'underachieving students' are spoken into existence as recognisable 'objects of discourse' (Foucault, 1972, p.50) through the normalising gaze and normative schooling practices and discourses. In particular, the study illustrates that these practices exclude students who are discursively constituted as underachieving. As Connell (2013)

stated: 'Education is inherently socially inclusive; any failure of inclusion signals the presence of power. An exclusive education is a corrupted education' (p.105). The analysis troubles the tendency for neoliberal discourses to exclude those who are discursively constituted as underachieving and that constitute underachievement as a family problem and in particular a working class, single parent family problem. Moreover, it illuminates the emotional investments that are made by the parents and caregivers whose children have been discursively produced as underachieving and the invisibility of these investments in hegemonic discursive practices.

By troubling the taken-for-granted assumptions of hegemonic educational discourses regarding underachievement and by decentring (and making visible) the operation of power that works to maintain this dominance, the possibility for new dialogue for what it means to underachieve has been opened up. Hence, rather than treating underachievement as a problem to be solved, this study invites us to consider that the issue is a lot messier than neoliberal education policy makers would have us believe. Policy reform must abandon the neoliberal assumption of choice and responsibility in policy formation. A more sustainable approach to thinking about underachievement at policy and practitioner level should therefore take into account the complexities and the interrelationships between gender, class and ethnicity. Moreover, while I am mindful that while the intersectional analysis has been deployed primarily to focus on the vulnerabilities of those who have been discursively produced as underachieving (the analysis indicated the real effects of such positioning on those who have been constituted as underachieving as well as the effects upon their families) I would suggest that scope exists for the possibility of eclipsing subjection to normative discourses of underachievement and the opening up of discursive spaces for agency and intervention.

Finally, I have come to recognise that my encounter with post-structuralism has not only provided a theoretical framework from which I am able to critically examine the tools

which might be used to explore social reality but it has had a profound impact on my epistemological beliefs as a beginning researcher. As I have reflected upon my own location within the research process and the assumptions underpinning my own epistemological beliefs I have come to better understand that ‘Wherever and whoever we are is always implicated in relations of knowing’ (Skeggs, 1997, p.18). In the spirit of post-structuralist enquiry therefore my desire to write this thesis has not only been to trouble the taken-for-grantedness of underachievement discourses and to highlight the instability of meaning and the productive possibilities of language, but also to highlight the instability in the production of personhood. To this end while my self-reflexive analysis does not attempt to provide the ‘final word’ on the matter, it has, I hope, illuminated the ‘possibilities of sense making’ within the available discourses of each of the research participants.

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Appendix A

05/171



Dr K Naim
Faculty of Education
Division of Humanities

20 October 2005

Dear Dr Naim

I am writing to let you know that, at its recent meeting, the Ethics Committee considered your proposal entitled "An examination of the discursive construction of academic 'underachievement'".

As a result of that consideration, the current status of your proposal is:- **Approved**

For your future reference, the Ethics Committee's reference code for this project is:- **05/171**.

The comments and views expressed by the Ethics Committee concerning your proposal are as follows:-

While approving the project, the Committee asks that the Information Sheet include a statement acknowledging that participation will in no way affect the student's Schooling.

Yours sincerely,

Mr G K (Gary) Witte
Manager, Academic Committees
Tel: 479-8256
Email: gary.witte@stonebow.otago.ac.nz

c.c. Assoc. Prof. K W Lai Faculty of Education

Appendix B

NGAI TAHU RESEARCH CONSULTATION COMMITTEE *TE KOMITI RAKAHAU KI KAI TAHU*

24 November 2005

Dr Karen Naim
Faculty of Education
University of Otago
DUNEDIN

Tena koe Dr Naim,

Title: An examination of how children perceive and understand academic achievement and underachievement.

The Ngai Tahu Research Consultation Committee met on 22nd November 2005 to discuss your research proposition.

The research aims to examine 'underachievement' from the perspective of girls and boys in the education system. The research project aims to illuminate the factors that make achievement and school work desirable for girls and boys who are 'doing well.'

The Ngai Tahu Research Consultation Committee acknowledges the potential contribution to Maori education and that is important. You have outlined in this research project the issues with regards to ethnicity and the importance of encouraging Maori participation in the study. The Committee also considers the importance of consulting with Maori teachers in education and Maori representatives on the School Board of Trustees.

The Committee would recommend that a copy of your published findings be offered to the participants, Maori education providers, Maori Board of Trustees Association and Maori community.

The Committee would also value receiving a copy of your published research findings.

Nakunoa, na

/ &..... &..... &.....

Christine Rimene
Administrator

Ngai Tahu Research Consultation Committee

The Ngai Tahu Research Consultation Committee has membership from:

Te Riinanga o Otakou Incorporated
Kati Huirapa Riinaka ki Puketeraki
Te Riinanga o Moeraki

Appendix C

An examination of the discursive construction of achievement

INFORMATION SHEET FOR TEACHERS

Thank you for showing an interest in this project. Please read this information sheet carefully before deciding whether or not to participate. If you decide to participate I thank you. If you decide not to take part there will be no disadvantage to you of any kind and I thank you for considering my request.

What is the Aim of the Project?

The project aims to find out how children perceive and understand their academic performance. I am also interested to find out your views and understandings about your student's educational experiences generally and academic 'underachievement' in particular. For example, how do you distinguish between high and low achieving students? What do you think are the barriers to achievement for those boys and girls deemed to be achieving at lower than expected levels?

What will Participants be Asked to Do?

Should you agree to take part in this project, you will be asked to have a conversation with me about your understandings of student achievement. We will be talking for about an hour or so. In addition you may be asked to participate in a second interview at a later date. You will be given a book voucher as a thank you for taking part in the research.

Can Participants Change their Mind and Withdraw from the Project?

You may withdraw from participation in the project at any time and without any disadvantage to yourself of any kind.

What Data or Information will be Collected and What Use will be Made of it?

This project involves an open-questioning technique where the precise nature of the questions which will be asked have not been determined in advance, but will depend on the way in which the interview develops. Consequently, although the University of Otago Human Ethics Committee is aware of the general areas to be explored in the interview, the Committee has not been able to review the precise questions to be used.

In the event that the line of questioning does develop in such a way that you feel hesitant or uncomfortable you are reminded of your right to decline to answer any particular question(s) and also that you may withdraw from the project at any stage without any disadvantage to yourself of any kind. What is said during the interview will typed up and made available for you to check and comment on before it is analysed and written up. You will be offered a copy of the interview and the opportunity to discuss anything else that may wish to add. The results of the project may be published and will be available in the library but every attempt will be made to preserve your anonymity.

You are most welcome to request a copy of the results of the project should you wish.

The data collected will be securely stored in such a way that only those mentioned above will be able to gain access to it. At the end of the project any personal information will be destroyed immediately except that, as required by the University's research policy, any raw data on which the results of the project depend will be retained in secure storage for five years, after which it will be destroyed.

What if Participants have any Questions?

If you have any questions about our project, either now or in the future, please feel free to contact either:-

Matt Wilson-Wheeler

or

Dr Karen Nairn

Faculty of Education

Faculty of Education

University of Otago

University of Otago

Telephone: (03) 479 8808

Telephone: (03) 479 8619

This project has been reviewed and approved by the University of Otago Human Ethics Committee

Appendix D

An examination of the discursive construction of achievement

CONSENT FORM FOR PARTICIPATING TEACHER

I have read the Information Sheet concerning this project and understand what it is about. All my questions have been answered to my satisfaction. I understand that I am free to request further information at any stage.

I know that:-

1. my participation in the project is entirely voluntary;
2. I am free to withdraw from the project at any time without any disadvantage;
3. Interview transcripts will be retained in secure storage for five years, after which it will be destroyed;
4. the interview will be more like a conversation than set questions and if I don't want to answer any particular questions, I don't have;
5. I will receive a retail voucher as a 'thank you' for taking part in the research;
6. the results of the project may be published and will be available in the library but every attempt will be made to make sure that I am not individually identified.

I agree to take part in this project.

.....

(Signature of participant)

.....

(Date)

This project has been reviewed and approved by the University of Otago Human Ethics Committee

Appendix E

How do students think they are performing at school and how do they know?

INFORMATION SHEET FOR STUDENTS

Thank you (*insert students name*) for thinking about participating in this research project. Please read this information and feel free to ask me questions.

What is the project about?

I am interested in talking to you about how you are going at school. In particular I would like to talk to you about how you think your school work is going.

Who will be in the project?

Only your teacher and others members of your class will be invited to take part.

What will I be asked to do?

If you are interested in taking part in this project I would like to talk to you about what school is like. For example, I will be asking you to think about how well do you think you are doing and how do you know when you are doing well. We will be talking for about twenty minutes or so. You may also be asked to participate in a longer interview at a later date. You will be given a movie voucher as a thank you for taking part in the project.

What Information will be Collected?

I will be recording our conversation on a tape recorder and then typing it up. You can choose a code name to be used in any written work from the project so no one will know who you are.

If you don't want to answer any particular questions, you don't have to. The researchers are the only people who will have access to your interview, which will be locked up in a special filing cabinet.

Can I change my mind and withdraw from the project?

Yes. You can change your mind at any time and decide not to participate in the research project.

What if I have any Questions?

If you have any questions about our project, either now or in the future, please feel free to contact either:-

Matt Wilson-Wheeler

OR

Dr Karen Nairn, Senior Lecturer

Faculty of Education

University of Otago

Telephone: (03) 479 8808

Faculty of Education

University of Otago

Telephone: (03) 479 8619

Appendix F

How do students think they are performing at school and how do they know?

INFORMATION SHEET FOR PARENTS / GUARDIANS

Thank you for showing an interest in this project. Please read this information sheet carefully before deciding whether or not to participate. If you decide to participate I thank you. If you decide not to take part there will be no disadvantage to you of any kind and I thank you for considering my request.

What is the Aim of the Project?

The project aims to find out how children think they are performing at school and how they know this. I am also interested to find out parent(s)/guardian(s) views and understandings about their child's educational experiences generally and academic achievement in particular.

What will Participants be Asked to Do?

Should you agree to take part in this project, you will be asked to participate in an interview about your perceptions of your son's/daughter's experiences at school and academic performance in particular. We will be talking for about an hour or so at a mutually agreed location (i.e., you may elect for the take place either at your home or school). You will be given a book voucher as a thank you for taking part in the research.

Can Participants Change their Mind and Withdraw from the Project?

You may withdraw from participation in the project at any time and without any disadvantage to yourself of any kind.

What Data or Information will be Collected and What Use will be Made of it?

This project involves an open-questioning technique where the precise nature of the questions which will be asked have not been determined in advance, but will depend on the way in which the interview develops. Consequently, although the University of Otago Human Ethics Committee is aware of the general areas to be explored in the interview, the Committee has not been able to review the precise questions to be used.

In the event that the line of questioning does develop in such a way that you feel hesitant or uncomfortable you are reminded of your right to decline to answer any particular question(s) and also that you may withdraw from the project at any stage without any disadvantage to yourself of any kind.

What is said during an interview will be typed up and made available for you to check and comment on before it is analysed and written up. You will be offered a copy of the interview and the opportunity to discuss anything else that you may wish to add. The results of the project may be published and will be available in the library but every attempt will be made to preserve your anonymity.

You are most welcome to request a copy of the results of the project should you wish.

The data collected will be securely stored in such a way that only those mentioned above will be able to gain access to it. At the end of the project any personal information will be destroyed immediately except that, as required by the University's research policy, any raw data on which the results of the project depend will be retained in secure storage for five years, after which it will be destroyed.

What if Participants have any Questions?

If you have any questions about our project, either now or in the future, please feel free to contact either:-

Matt Wilson-Wheeler

or

Dr Karen Nairn

Faculty of Education

Faculty of Education

University of Otago

University of Otago

Telephone: (03) 479 8808

Telephone: (03) 479 8619

This project has been reviewed and approved by the University of Otago Human Ethics Committee

Appendix G

How do students think they are performing at school and how do they know?

CONSENT FORM FOR PARTICIPATING STUDENTS

I have read the information about this project. I have had chances to ask questions. I am happy with the answers to my questions. I understand that I can ask more questions at any time.

I know that:-

1. My participation in the project is voluntary;
2. I am free to withdraw from the project at any time;
3. Tape recordings of the interview will be kept in secure storage;
4. If I don't want to answer any particular questions, I don't have to;
5. I will receive a movie voucher as a 'thank you' for taking part in the research;
6. The results of the project may be made public but every attempt will be made to make sure that I am not individually identified. I will be able to choose a code name so that no one will know who I am.

I agree to take part in this project.

.....

(Signature of participant)

.....

(Date)

This project has been reviewed and approved by the University of Otago Human Ethics Committee

Appendix H

How do students' think they are performing at school and how do they know?

INFORMATION SHEET FOR STUDENTS (for second interview)

Thank you (*insert students name*) for thinking about participating in the second part of this research project. Please read this information and feel free to ask me questions.

What is the project about?

For this part of the project I am interested in talking to you in more detail about how you are going at school.

Who will be in this part of the project?

Only your teacher and five of your class mates will be invited to take part.

What will I be asked to do?

For this part of the project I am interested in talking to you in more detail about how you are going at school. For example, I would like to talk to you about what you think of school and why you think some children seem to do better at school than others. We will be talking for about 45 minutes or so. You will be given a Warehouse voucher as a thank you for taking part in the project.

What Information will be Collected?

I will be recording our conversation again on a tape recorder and then typing it up. You can use the same code name as last time (or you can change this if you like) to be used in any written work from the project so no one will know who you are.

If you don't want to answer any particular questions, you don't have to.

The researchers are the only people who will have access to your interview, which will be locked up in a filing cabinet.

Can I change my mind and withdraw from the project?

Yes. You can change your mind at any time and decide not to participate in this part of the research project.

What if I have any Questions?

If you have any questions about our project, either now or in the future, please feel free to contact either:-

Matt Wilson-Wheeler

OR my supervisor

Dr Karen Nairn,

Lecturer & Researcher

Senior Lecturer & Researcher

Faculty of Education

Faculty of Education

University of Otago

University of Otago

Telephone: (03) 479 8808

Telephone: (03) 479 8619

This project has been reviewed and approved by the University of Otago Human Ethics Committee

Appendix I

How do students' think they are performing at school and how do they know?

INFORMATION SHEET FOR PARTICIPATING PARENTS / GUARDIANS (for second interview)

Thank you once again for showing an interest in this project.

What is the Aim of the Project?

The project aims to find out how children think they are performing at school and how do they know this.

What will Participants be Asked to Do?

Should you agree to take part in this project, you will be asked to participate in an interview about your opinions of your son's experiences at school and his academic performance in particular. We will be talking for about an hour or so at a mutually agreed location (i.e., you may elect for the interview to take place either at your home or school or university). You will be given a Warehouse voucher as a thank you for taking part in the research.

Can Participants Change their Mind and Withdraw from the Project?

You may withdraw from participation in the project at any time and without any disadvantage to yourself of any kind.

What Data or Information will be Collected and What Use will be Made of it?

What is said during an interview will typed up and made available for you to check and comment on before it is analysed and written up. You will be offered a copy of the interview and the opportunity to discuss anything else that you may wish to add. The results of the project may be published and will be available in the library but every attempt will be made to preserve your anonymity.

You are most welcome to request a copy of the results of the project.

The data collected will be securely stored in such a way that only those mentioned above will be able to gain access to it. At the end of the project any personal information will be destroyed immediately except that, as required by the University's research policy, any raw data on which the results of the

project depend will be retained in secure storage for five years, after which it will be disposed of.

What if Participants have any Questions?

If you have any questions about our project, either now or in the future, please feel free to contact either:-

Matt Wilson-Wheeler	OR	my supervisor	Dr Karen Nairn
Faculty of Education			Faculty of Education
University of Otago			University of Otago
Telephone: (03) 479 8808			Telephone: (03) 479 8619

This project has been reviewed and approved by the University of Otago Human Ethics Committee

Appendix J

How do students' think they are performing at school and how do they know?

CONSENT FORM FOR PARTICIPATING STUDENTS (for second interview)

I have read the information about this project. I have had chances to ask questions. I am happy with the answers to my questions. I understand that I can ask more questions at any time.

I know that:-

1. My participation in the project is voluntary;
2. My participation in the project will not affect my schooling in any way;
3. I am free to withdraw from the project at any time;
4. Tape recordings of the interview will be kept in secure storage;
5. If I don't want to answer any particular questions, I don't have to;
6. I will receive a Warehouse voucher as a 'thank you' for taking part in the research;
7. The results of the project may be made public but every attempt will be made to make sure that I am not individually identified. I will be able to choose a new code name so that no one will know who I am.

I agree to take part in this project.

.....

(Signature of participant)

.....

(Date)

This project has been reviewed and approved by the University of Otago Human Ethics Committee

Appendix K

How do students' think they are performing at school and how do they know?

CONSENT FORM FOR PARTICIPATING PARENT(S)/GUARDIANS

I have read the Information Sheet concerning this project and understand what it is about. All my questions have been answered to my satisfaction. I understand that I am free to request further information at any stage.

I know that:-

1. my participation in the project is entirely voluntary;
2. I am free to withdraw from the project at any time without any disadvantage;
3. Interview transcripts will be retained in secure storage for five years, after which they will be disposed of;
4. the interview will be more like a conversation than set questions and if I don't want to answer any particular questions, I don't have to;
5. I will receive a retail voucher as a 'thank you' for taking part in the research;
6. the results of the project may be published and will be available in the library but every attempt will be made to make sure that myself or my school is not identifiable.

I agree to take part in this project.

.....

(Signature of participant)

.....

(Date)

Phone: (Day)

..... (Evening)

This project has been reviewed and approved by the University of Otago Human Ethics
Committee

Appendix L

Students

Whole Class Interviews

What do you think about school?

How do you think that you are doing at school? (Good, OK, Poorly/Badly)

How do you know when you are doing well in your school work?

Would you like to do better? Why?

In-depth(Individual)Interviews

Do you think it is important to do well at school? Why?

Do you think that your teacher (friends and parents) think that you are doing well? (Do they think that you're a 'good student'?, How do you know?, How do you feel about this?)

Why do you think that some children do better at school than others?

Do you have any problems with your school work? (If so, what sort of problems?)

If you do have problems with your school work do you talk to your teacher about this?

How do you think that you could improve your school work?

How do you think the school/teacher/parents could help?

Teacher

What is the ideal student? What type of student do you think teachers prefer to teach?

How do you distinguish between high/low achieving students?

(Insert name of student) indicated that s/he is a (good, OK, poor – insert as appropriate) student. Is this consistent with your observations?

What are the barriers to achievement for those boys and girls deemed to be achieving at lower

than expected levels?

Why do you think some children perform better at school than others?

How confident do you think you are in your ability to make a difference in the learning of children who are struggling with their learning?

Parents/Guardians

Do you think that your son's/daughter's (insert name) education is important? Why?

How is your son/daughter (insert name) going at school? Do you discuss this with him/her?

Your (son/daughter – insert name as appropriate) indicated that s/he is performing (Well, OK, Poorly) at school. Is this consistent with your observations?

Do you think that s/he could do better? How do you think this could happen?

Why do you think that some children do better at school than others?

What would you find helpful from the school or the teacher in relation your son/daughters academic performance?

How would you like to see your son's/daughter's education to progress?