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Contemporary pressures on school-based research: A cautionary tale for school leaders

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Contemporary pressures on school-based research: A cautionary tale for school leaders

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Abstract

School-based research has historically played an important role within the education system contributing to our understanding of the organisation and practice of formal education. Supported by relevant literature, this article reports on current challenges in conducting school-based research in Aotearoa New Zealand as experienced by one researcher. It suggests that conducting school-based research is becoming increasingly difficult, with possible explanations for this being the divergent workflows of researcher and school-based participant(s), the volume of demands on teachers and schools, and restricted roles for teachers and parents, which increase the risk of research fatigue. The article argues that although school-based research is rarely an immediate priority for school leaders, it is imperative that they support it if they want to be informed by its insights for policy and practice.

Keywords: *School-based research; research fatigue; field-based research; Aotearoa New Zealand*

Introduction

School-based studies are critical to educational research where the goal is to gain new insights based on the examination of education within real-world school environments. Gaining access to schools, however, presents challenges to both the schools and to researchers, given the different imperatives driving each. It is incumbent on external researchers *and* principals and other school leaders—as participants, researchers or gate-keepers—to have an understanding of the current status of school-based research. Signs are emerging that it is becoming harder to conduct research in New Zealand schools (Read, 2016); this article offers further account of those research challenges while considering the school context and school-based research activity in greater detail. The main questions it addresses are: what are the contemporary challenges in conducting research in New Zealand schools, and how do they affect the capacity for educational research to take place?

The article focuses mainly on identifying practical challenges in carrying out school-based research in New Zealand today, and on providing insight into the practice of research in schools. It draws on review and analysis of researcher observation notes, participant emails, and semi-structured interviews, supplemented with a review of scholarship and other relevant reports. The analysis concludes that the conditions for school-based research are undergoing a

sea change, whereby the ability and willingness to participate is swamped by new or heightened realities, resulting in a situation where, increasingly, school-based research is less feasible. The article also argues that although school-based research is rarely an immediate priority for school leaders, it is imperative that they support it if they want to be informed by its insights for policy and practice.

Background

Principals act as gate-keepers (Wanat, 2008) in various ways. Their role requires them to evaluate and balance demands originating from inside and outside of the school—they are on the threshold between the two (Kelchtermans, Piot, & Ballet, 2011). Some of the demands relate to research, as principals are integral in fostering what Elliott (2009) describes as *research on education* (typically external researcher driven and from outside the school) and *educational research* (practitioner based from inside the school) (as cited in Wilson, 2017, p. 101). Understanding the purpose, nature and realities of school-based research greatly assists the evaluation and facilitation of research enquiries and activities. Participation in external research also helps locate the school within the broader context of the sector and society, emphasising that responsibility for education extends beyond the walls of a particular classroom or school gate—it is a responsibility shared.

School-based research fits within wider educational research by bringing research into the context of practice, and there are potential benefits for any school and individual who chooses to participate in research. At a collective level, participating in research allows staff, board members and parents to contribute to the ongoing development of policy and practice in education, a motivation Clark (2010, p. 413) categorises as “informing change”. This type of research contributes to the sector at large, for example, through local schools-based research the New Zealand education community is offered cases situated in more relevant socio-cultural environments than the US or UK. There may also be more specific reasons relevant to the school and the nature of the research being undertaken. For teachers, participating in research can present opportunities to reflect on their practice and connect to personal or school-wide critical inquiry (this also connects with the “Practising teacher criteria”: Education Council of Aotearoa New Zealand, 2016). The Board of Trustees (BOT) or principal may be interested in what the research outcomes reveal about their school, and what implications there are for future decision-making. Parents and staff may also be motivated to participate for a range of individual reasons including: “subjective interest, enjoyment, curiosity, introspective interest, social comparison, therapeutic interest, material interest and economic interest” (Clark, 2010, p. 404). Without reducing research to a purely transactional frame, researchers typically wish to ensure participants are acknowledged for the commitment they make in participating. Here they are guided by the notion of reciprocity. Reciprocity is “giving back” and may be expressed in

different ways as relevant to the situation but regularly includes sharing of the outcomes of the research through means such as reports and presentations (Ary, Jacobs, Razavieh, & Sorensen, 2006).

Yet there are typically many more immediate benefits to be gained for the researcher than the participant. This initial “imbalance” colours motivations around research in schools from the outset. Schools are sites of much activity; in addition to the day-to-day business of teaching and learning, they are community hubs, enactors of policy, facilitators to numerous clubs and extracurricular activities, and responders to a wide range of social issues. Consideration to be involved in research must be made in light of these existing obligations—there simply may be too much going on for teachers, principals and the school community to take on being a research partner (Thomson & Hall, 2017). Perhaps it is also that research-related opportunities, particularly teacher-led, appear to be increasing in number, leading to reduced interest and capacity to participate in external research. Nevertheless, it seems to be getting harder to find room within the school “space” for research activities. Another New Zealand researcher, Read (2016), experienced challenges in conducting school-based research, identifying timing conflicts, and gaining access and buy-in from staff, among the issues she encountered.

It is widely recognised that gaining access and carrying out research in a school is more easily described in a research proposal than undertaken in the field. Despite the existing literature to guide qualitative researchers (for example, Thomson & Hall, 2017; Tolich & Davidson, 1999), the realities of undertaking fieldwork in schools is not often written-up or visible. What tends to be presented is a limited account of the school-based research experience leading to unrealistic expectations for researchers new to fieldwork in this environment. The process of writing up a research proposal is, by its nature, focussed on what the researcher seeks to achieve and is ideally grounded in the theoretical and methodological considerations required for a robust and worthwhile research project. It is difficult at this point to anticipate the challenges that may be experienced and, with the scarcity of personal accounts to refer to, there is little awareness or understanding of the potential “traps, delays, and frustrations which inevitably accompany fieldwork” (Lareau, 1989, p. 187).

This article draws on the first author’s doctoral research (throughout the article where the first person is used, it refers to the first author) into how policy goals of parental engagement in compulsory education in New Zealand are enacted and experienced, with a particular interest in the contextual dimensions of schools as sites of enactment. The following overarching questions guided the research: How, and to what extent, do schools and parents engage? How does policy define parents and “parental engagement” in the New Zealand compulsory education sector? How do contextual factors affect the way policies of parental engagement get enacted by schools and experienced by parents? The research focus on policy enactment facilitates capturing a rich description of how parental engagement policy is expressed, enacted and experienced by various

actors in a primary school. A single bounded case in the English-medium (state: not integrated) part of the primary sector provided the context, and a range of methods were used to gather data on parental engagement, including discourse and artefact analysis, semi-structured interviews, a focus group, and cognitive mapping. Nothing described here is out of the ordinary in terms of educational research design. A school is a critical element of our education system—and for research purposes it is also a collection of discourses, artefacts, structures and people which provide a context through which to examine phenomena important to that system.

A case school: Finding time and space for research

Converging workflows: One researcher's experience in a case school

My challenges concerning school-based research began immediately and centred on the time of year the research began. In the southern hemisphere, the end of the school and university academic year converges with warmer weather, the end of the calendar year and the traditional Christmas and New Year holidays. This seasonal convergence means schools are frequently so encumbered with activities and other demands on their time that communicating with, and gaining access to, staff and parents is difficult. Timing for my research meant I was seeking to end the academic year with a case school in place in order to begin fieldwork from the start of the following school year. At the time, I felt this was critical but looking back it was probably more “the ideal”. Nevertheless, this meant my first approach to the principal occurred in November—unfortunately adding to the seasonal “tsunami” of demands. Having been involved in schools as a parent, teacher and board of trustee member, I was aware of the unfortunate timing and took time to discuss with others in the sector the best way to make an approach. After some debate, I determined to send an initial email and follow-up with a phone call to make an appointment to visit. After a number of emails and phone calls but no meeting, the principal agreed in principle to the research and we arranged to meet in the New Year to make further arrangements (in the end we didn't meet in person until the new school year had started). Having become interested in the “doing” of school-based research over the course of my fieldwork I took the opportunity towards the end to ask the principal about the various approaches he received; he responded:

...you look around and your Inbox has suddenly got 50 emails in there. ... And you know, the research one's just one of them. ...So don't do it through email. Go and see people. ... Emails are more than likely just going to get... “Pfft — I don't have to respond to that one right now, I'll leave it.”

Fortunately, in this instance, the research I was proposing aligned with a current internal interest on how they reported to parents for the school. Nevertheless, it ultimately it took until March for the arrangements to come together and fieldwork to begin.

That time leading up to fieldwork was one of the most frustrating for me as a researcher, as the pressure for progress at my end didn't stop and I felt between a rock and a hard place, not wanting to pressure the principal but very much feeling the need to "get started". I had endless debates with myself and others about appropriate forms of engagement—how long should I leave a communication before making contact again, where was the line between persistence and annoyance? This tension between school and university workflows was a persistent element of my fieldwork, the two never seemed to align. When I wanted to move fast for university, there were delays at the school end; when I wanted to move fast for the school or participants, I had university demands. This tension was difficult to reconcile.

In addition to the tensions created by the more regular and everyday type of demands of the two contexts I was working within, the overall timeframes differ significantly between a major research project like a doctorate and those typical of a school. Where I was working on a three to four-year project timeline, for the school, things are moving and changing much more rapidly. The principal agreed that this was one of the challenges of a research partnership. It was particularly relevant in the case of my study as I was intent on revealing the complexities of schools as a site of policy enactment. The depth of understanding I sought required rich data gained from a slow year-long process of observation and data gathering, the analysis of which would also take time. One of the more challenging ways in which this timeframe tension manifests, is through the opportunities for sharing the research—that is, enacting reciprocity or "giving back" to the school.

How reciprocity is expressed can depend on the research approach, or the individual researcher, and depends to an extent on how the research relationship develops. Along with offers to speak about the research to staff and BOT (which weren't taken up), I indicated I was keen to "make" the research relevant in whatever way I could for the school. Perhaps I didn't go far enough to explain the potential ways my research might be made relevant to them, but beyond the principal's comment that they were interested in my research topic, I wasn't connected in any way to their inquiry on reporting to parents (which was already arranged with a consultant). Indeed, I only initiated attendance at a focus group when I saw the invitation to parents in the school newsletter and I made my own connections with the consultant. Reciprocity is frequently expressed through the simple sharing of outcomes and this may ultimately be sufficient and most appropriate for the school. However, I feel the gap between fieldwork and the outcomes for the school is less than ideal given the difference between their timeframes and those of the research project.

It is evident time is a factor of influence in conducting school-based research, but it extends beyond the differing timeframes explored above. The activities making up the school year bring their own pressures to participants and the research relationship, and while this is to be expected, the nature and priority of these has shifted.

Workload / workplace

Staff participant recruitment ultimately took twice as long as planned for, after allowing one term, it took me a bit more than two. Much of the delay came from the lack of opportunity to connect with staff in person and introduce them to the aims of the research project. Being unable to secure an opportunity to speak at a staff meeting, the main participant recruitment attempts were via “cold-contact” email—which would have been low priority in a crowded inbox—or following a chance meeting at a school event. While the required sample of staff participants was largely secured, the deputy principal directly facilitated acquiring half of these participants after the previous approaches failed. Seeking agreement to participate was only the first step; finding time to meet was challenging. Emails could pass to-and-fro for weeks, seeking a window of time that was not already committed to meeting other demands.

There is little detailed data available on the nature of the workload for primary school teachers, but what there is shows there have been increasing demands on staff time (Bonne & Wylie, 2017). My case study examining parental engagement indicates both tasks and workplace expectations contribute to the demands teachers experience. There are tensions between what aspects of the teaching role are prioritised or valued, and by whom. One of my teacher participants commented on the increasing expectation she felt to be available:

I've found that parents want you accessible 24/7 ...I have just really been so stressed around that where I'm getting emails 9, 10 o'clock at night, and I've actually just taken to switching them off, and ...they've said "oh you didn't reply to me last night" ...I guess it's just today's day and age, isn't it? Everything's now and it's instant, everything's "I need this now", very demanding...

It is clear there are multiple genuine demands on teachers, but at the same time, another staff member commented on the impact of the “busy culture” in the interaction between teachers and parents:

...if we let ourselves get into that, "I'm so busy I don't have time for this. I've got to rush, and rush to the next thing. I have reports to write". Yeah you do have reports to write because that's your job, but you also have parents to communicate with because that's your job.

A consistent theme in media reports and teacher surveys is that workload demands are affecting teacher retention within the sector, including those just entering the profession. A survey of beginning educators found 43 per cent of those planning to leave teaching found the workload too high, with 30 per cent indicating they would be more likely to stay if there was less paperwork and administration (NZEI, 2018a). One media report revealed an emerging trend for teachers to choose relief teaching over permanent positions in an effort to avoid the most time-sapping of tasks (Dooney, 2017). Aside from the obvious impact on quality of education, many forms

of educational research just wouldn't be viable without permanent staff. My research required teaching participants to know or have a parent community "attached to them" for a period of time in the capacity of classroom teacher. They had to be the main teacher connected to a class of students, because that is the foremost school / parent relationship and one of the main influencers of parental engagement.

As critical influencers of the relationship between school and parents, my research participants included school leaders. There is more workload data on the principal and the senior leadership team, who are the focus of annual surveys conducted by the education union representing many primary school teachers and principals (NZEI) and Australian Catholic University (ACU). The 2017 survey showed in just one year school leaders had an average weekly increase in hours worked of three hours, amounting to a working week of between 53 and 58 hours, with the "sheer quantity of work" their "greatest source of stress" (NZEI & Australian Catholic University, 2018, pp. 6, 13). According to the NZEI, the experience of school leaders in the primary education sector is a concern as they "...suffer 1.7 times the rate of burnout, 1.8 times the rate of stress and have trouble sleeping at rates 2.4 times higher that of the general population" (NZEI, 2018b, para. 7).

New Zealand primary school teachers are reported as working 922 hours of actual teaching per year (data from 2013-15) against an OECD average of 794 (OECD, 2017). Couple these workload demands with survey results indicating high workload stress and it is clear activities, such as research participation, that are not "must do" are more likely to be brushed aside.

The "must do": Compliance and accountability

As identified above, principals and school leadership staff find the "sheer quantity of work" they are tasked with their most significant stressor. Listed along with this stressor are two of its potential sources, "government initiatives" and "resourcing needs" (NZEI & Australian Catholic University, 2018, p. 11). Together with a "lack of time to focus on teaching and learning", the report identifies these stressors as part of an increasing "accountability environment" occurring throughout the western world and becoming more pronounced in New Zealand with the introduction of National Standards which took effect in 2010 (NZEI & Australian Catholic University, 2018, p. 11) (as of 2018 the National Standards programme has been scrapped and schools are no longer required to report on them to parents). The principal of my case school raised the time-consuming nature of national standards. Reflecting on the government policy change whereby schools are no longer required to report on national standards, he said "...just think of the huge amount of work and expense... The most annoying thing about that is the cost, and the time, and the effort".

The accountability environment is further evident in compliance tasks that have been generated through the increased formalising and documenting of existing activities such as "teaching as inquiry". Some have found activities like these have moved from a process of reflection designed to improve practice, to being accountable to school leadership, the Education Council and

so on. Other areas have also become more regulated, with the 2016 Health and Safety changes being a good example. The teachers at my case school are now all first aid qualified in order to be able to take students for trips outside the school grounds. The Vulnerable Children’s Act 2014 requires “children’s workers” to be police vetted, which many schools have additionally taken on for parent volunteers on school camps and the like, increasing the volume of administration around certain activities.

Several of my teacher participants juggled demands relating to New Zealand’s inclusive education system. Inclusion is one of the eight principles of the New Zealand Curriculum, and states the need for a non-discriminatory curriculum that “...ensures that students’ identities, languages, abilities, and talents are recognised and affirmed and that their learning needs are addressed” ([MoE] Ministry of Education, 2007, p. 9). In enacting this principle, staff can be faced with a wide variety of demands including, funding applications (e.g. ORS—Ongoing Resourcing Scheme), planning individual-level programmes (e.g. IEP—individual education plan), seeking training and information about relevant conditions (e.g. nut allergies, epilepsy), specialised behaviour management, sourcing appropriate resources (e.g. ESOL material for English speakers of other languages), and greater liaison with parents and other health or education experts connected to the student. Within my case study, all of the examples given above were evident in teacher workload. My opportunity to meet with one teacher participant was considerably limited by the volume of meetings she had to have concerning IEP, ORS and ESOL matters for students within her class. This is becoming an increasingly demanding and stressful part of teaching (Conchie & Yeoman, 2018).

Overall, research has found increasing accountability and expectations have contributed to the “considerable demands on teachers’ formally allocated noncontact time”; this allocated time is very limited, if not declining (Bonne & Wylie, 2017, p. 40). The associated paperwork is a well-established burden for teachers. “Reduce administration / paperwork” has been the top ranked item (at 71 per cent in 2016) teachers would most like to change about their jobs for the past three national surveys of primary and intermediate schools (Bonne & Wylie, 2017, p. 44). As one teacher noted, “I’ve got spreadsheets for Africa on my computer! But it’s a complex issue—some paperwork relates to Ministry of Education requirements; some is for ERO and some is classroom and school-based” (Wastney, 2018, “Interrupting good teaching”).

Many “must do” demands on teachers contribute to a sense of overwhelming paperwork and excessive workload. Despite this, many other demands are presented to schools and teachers—these are the “could do” and are examined next.

The “could do”: Implicit and “other” demands

Educational research is something which may hold a degree of value to school-based participants as an activity that can contribute directly to the sector, and therefore be approached with a sense

of “professional duty”, however, it is also “just another request” which competes with the many other demands in the school. The principal of my case school outlined his experience of the issue:

I probably get five emails a week from someone wanting to do something. So it [research] competes with... You know, like that Richie McCaw thing [a corporate responsibility / marketing activity for Fonterra]. ... and some people want to use schools as fundraisers. You know, can you save the children in such-and-such? Or can you raise money for this? And all those sorts of things that pile through your inbox, and you try and make sense of it. So it competes with all the... things that pile through. ...it's just another thing. I've just said no to the NMSSA [National Monitoring Study of Student Achievement] coming in and doing some [work]... “Cause it's just another thing that we have to organise kids [for]...”

In the instance of research involving students or parents, schools are mindful of the potential it has to overload. There was an awareness expressed by both the principal and board chairperson of my case school of “engagement fatigue” with parents in particular. The school recognises how often parents are asked to contribute time and effort, and are consequently protective of the individual and educational priorities of parent and school.

All the teacher and school leader participants of my case school were meeting “could do” demands that varied from the truly discretionary, to those more implicit—as opposed to the aforementioned more explicit, “must do”. They may form, for example, part of professional obligations although not be explicit in job specifications. These activities come with varying degrees of pressure for involvement and reasons for taking part, both direct and indirect to the life and purpose of the school. One such example is the Communities of Learning | Kāhui Ako (CoLs). Introduced by the National-led government in 2014, CoLs have provided funding to improve educational achievement through collaborative inquiry and knowledge sharing (MoE, 2018). While not compulsory, many principals feared missing out on professional learning, or access to funds, or felt pressure (from the MoE and colleagues) to support the initiative (Wylie, 2016). The Wylie (2016) report also found a level of concern expressed about the workload and resources belonging to one would take. This is also evident in the case school, where the principal summed up the problems he perceived of the CoLs: “The structure of them. The rigidity of them. The workload. My workload went down by leaving [the CoL].”

Demands that are more broadly connected to being a professional include the commitment to the support and development of the “next generation” of teachers. Taking on the role of tutor teacher to a beginning teacher, or associate teacher is an optional undertaking attracting a small allowance. This allowance is considered inadequate for time spent on the task. One teacher participant noted the time demand for being a tutor teacher varied, but was highest at the start of the school year, a time traditionally busy for all teachers. This theme was also found to be a factor in research on

associate teachers and their practice, “They felt that lack of time to concentrate precluded them from doing all that they felt needed to be done as good associate teachers” (Trevethan, 2013, p. 89). The tutor and associate teacher roles both contribute to the education sector and sit alongside other “could do” opportunities from within the sector, such as the National Monitoring Study of Student Achievement—NMSSA. These activities are more directly linked to educational outcomes and the work undertaken in schools by teachers.

In contrast to the opportunities described above, the majority of opportunities coming into the school are from “external to the sector” sources. The external opportunities vary immensely; they may have links to the school curriculum aims (Weet-Bix Tryathlon), or the activity may be connected to social issues such as nutrition (Fonterra Milk for Schools), or mental health & well-being (Pink Shirt Day—bullying), or to services like banking (school banking). Even where opportunities are specifically for children, the involvement of the teacher is required for planning and sometimes adapting or integrating the activity into their programme. In addition, there are the extra opportunities for students facilitated through lunch-time and after-school clubs (such as waiata, team sports etc.) and these are frequently the responsibility of teaching staff. The latest national survey revealed 63 per cent of teachers had more than one role in their school (Bonne & Wylie, 2017). That finding was echoed in my case school, with teachers taking on extra duties, including: Lego club, school website administrator, hockey co-ordinator, PTA representative, soccer co-ordinator and so on.

Schools are busy places and that, in itself, is not new. Yet it is not often recognised that schools—from the principal trying to weigh up the relative worth and demands brought by each new activity, to the teacher trying to manage the work they “must do”—have restricted capacity to choose to engage in research.

Defining teacher and parent roles

As is the case for many school-based research projects, teachers were not the only participants I sought. The purpose of my case study was to examine the nature of parental engagement, so to this end I recruited both teacher and parent participants. The ways they, and others, perceive their respective roles was at times reflected in their participation in my research, and may have been influential in their choice to participate. How teaching is understood as an endeavour, its purpose and organisation, goes beyond the demands addressed so far, and is impactful on the capacity to engage in research and its value to teachers. This was expressed in my case school in the way teachers and teaching are constructed as professionals, and in the way teacher and parent roles find expression.

The roles parents and teachers play in education are reconstructed within the neoliberal context. The changes in the labour market and welfare system during the neoliberal reforms of the 1980s altered the availability of parent labour in classrooms and schools, which has long been

a feature of primary schooling. This increases the demands on teachers, adding to workload and jeopardising capacity for activities such as research participation. Further, the neoliberal reframing of parents as consumers can be seen to be expressed through notions of choice and accountability (Locke, Vulliamy, Webb, & Hill, 2005). One teacher participant revealed she believed parents were positioned quite clearly as consumers, saying:

We've expressly ...heard that "I think of the school as a business, and our business is to educate children in reading, writing and maths" ...and that "it is our job to ensure that our customers, or our clients, are happy, and that they get what they're coming here for".

The teacher went on to articulate the tension she saw with the "parent as consumer" and the development of parent voice—potentially representing more of a "parents as partners" type role:

I think the pretence is that it's not the consumer, I think the pretence is that it's for the betterment and ...progressive state that education is working towards, but I feel like it can go down that consumer track and ... without realising it becomes a [demand]. Those two [parent roles] are not always distinct ... separating them is, I think, quite hard.

Advances in communication technology have facilitated the "holding of teachers to account" by the parent consumer. The ability for communication to occur directly between teachers and parents has developed through various modern communication tools, and this adds to the demands placed on teachers as described in the workload / workplace section.

Being "held to account" is an extrinsic motivator for teachers under the concept of "managerial professionalism"; there is an understanding there will be "checking up", by the Education Review Office (ERO), students, parents, community, school leadership and so on (Locke et al., 2005). According to Locke et al. (2005) the reconstituting of teachers under neoliberalism shifted from the reflective practitioner (activist professionalism) to the efficient and effective professional (managerial professionalism) meeting the assessment and accountability demands made of them. A level of resignation for those demands was expressed by one teacher participant thus

There's just so much these days on the Health and Safety that it's just kind of — what?! Like just trust, trust, I feel like [trust has] kind of gone down ...teachers... being checked up on all the time, it's just trust. I do have a degree! ...but, I guess we've got to do what we've got to do.

The space for, and inclination to see value in, research participation is much easier to recognise within the "activist" version of teacher professional, than that of the managerial professional. This "low-trust" requirement (Codd, 2008) of being held to account on many fronts contributes

to a wariness of being criticised. This has the potential for some teachers to view research as exposing them to that risk; some individuals “...do not care about the findings [of research] except so far as these findings might provide evidence for someone to criticize them” (Neuman, 2011, p. 430). It is inevitable a low trust environment will have implications for the type of research schools and teachers see as viable; exposing oneself to critical research, for example, is likely to be a greater challenge in the current context of being “held to account”. The greater focus on accountability reduces the space and inclination to be involved in research.

The participation of parents in school-based research is likely impacted by the same demands influencing parental engagement in the classroom and at school, including the reduced availability of parents through changing labour demands. Only a third of the parent participants I originally sought were secured, and subsequently almost half of those withdrew due to other demands on their time. The challenges faced in accessing parents were significant. A notice in the school newsletter (disseminated via email as well as through Facebook and the school website) was the initial form of recruitment. Through a series of technology and formatting compromises, the notice in the newsletter was difficult to read and required immediate supplementation with posters in the school grounds. Clearer digital copies were also sent to teacher participants to distribute via their classroom lists. Parents could make contact via QR (quick response) code, text and email. Other parents were sought via emailing members of existing parent groups (e.g. Parent Teacher Association, PTA), and by face-to-face recruitment at school events.

Under neoliberalism, parenting is individualised and decontextualised (Geinger, Vandebroek, & Roets, 2014), with parents bearing the responsibility of making the “right” decisions and being actively involved in the education of their children thereby impacting their child’s ultimate educational success or failure (Brown, 1990; Furedi, 2008). Within the case study, some parents expressed an uncertainty about their role and in what they have to offer, both as a parent in the class and school community, and as a participant in the research. One parent articulated a fear of being judged (as she had experienced elsewhere) and several were unsure of what value they offered. Parents see themselves as not conforming to prevailing norms and “confess” their failures, the confessions being, “...illustrations of governmentality and therefore constitute ways in which parents concur with the dominant ideals, norms and standards” (Geinger et al., 2014, p. 496). This scrutiny of the parent and the increased responsibility for successful educational outcomes can threaten research participation motivators, such as individual empowerment or social comparison (Clark, 2010).

Research fatigue

Evaluating the challenges I faced conducting school-based research, I needed to consider whether they were case specific or were indicative of a broader issue, that of research fatigue. Key precursors to research fatigue include a “...lack of perceptible change attributable to engagement,

increasing apathy and indifference toward engagement, and practical barriers such as cost, time, and organization” (Clark, 2008, p. 967). Briefly considering these precursors within both the New Zealand education environment, and the case school, it is clear conditions supporting research fatigue exist. Identifying the opportunity for change coming from research is limited and most likely to be concerned with impact on policy and practice (Lingard, 2013). Not all educational research explicitly sets out to this end, nor is it always possible to identify the direct pathway from research to policy or practice. Educational research can instead be focussed on enhancing understanding, critical reflexivity, opening up dialogue, revealing complexities, and examining issues of justice and power (for example, Flyvbjerg, 2001; Lather, 2006; Ramaekers, 2014). This may mean individual researchers need to better identify where their research sits in a wider educational context and what its purpose is, but if researchers are not even getting in the school gate to make proposals, then it also requires the sector to better educate on the value and purpose of the variety of research undertaken.

An increasing apathy and indifference toward engagement can be driven by increased exposure to, and participation in, research, effectively removing the “novelty” motivator (Clark, 2008). Research occurring in schools is not limited to educational research, it is an environment providing ready access to a range of potential participants particularly for other social science disciplines, and for example, health, linguistics and psychology. Certain schools (and their communities) are in demand for reasons of proximity to research institutions, size and demographic make-up of the school (ethnic and/or socio-economic profile), or experience of particular problems or topics of research interest (such as the Canterbury earthquakes). Developing a more nuanced picture of the New Zealand education research environment is an area warranting further attention, however, there is a current focus on the use of evidence to improve educational outcomes (Alton-Lee, 2014; Hattie, Rogers, & Swaminathan, 2014), and growing use of methods such as participatory action research. Combined with a wide range of teacher-led “inquiries” (including school-based, professional practice driven, and MoE-funded), there is increased exposure to research activities involving active participation from schools and teachers. The principal of the case school, for example, described the scale and nature of the CoL Achievement Challenges as “dreadful”, noting some were taking two to three years of commitment to complete. This may be a similar length of time to external research programmes, including some doctoral studies.

The practical barriers to research participation, such as cost, time, and organisation, may result in variations in how research fatigue is expressed. Previous sections have discussed workload pressures and overwhelming demands made on the time and resources of schools and teachers, generally identifying research as “could do”. How research fatigue is expressed may vary from outright refusal to participate, to limited or constrained participation. For example, approval may be given to engage in research within a school, but may be constrained by time, organisation, and motivation. As explored by Wanat (2008), there is a difference between

access and cooperation in school-based research; the first does not guarantee the second. The role of the principal as mediator has been acknowledged in respect to policy and accountability measures (Locke et al., 2005), and this mediating role is also adopted during education research. In practice, this can mean the principal takes on a gatekeeping role managing aspects of the research process, such as initiating contact with potential participants rather than allowing the researcher to approach them directly. This happened with some of my participants, illustrating tensions between respecting the role of the principal and several aspects of my research process, namely, my intent to minimise research-related workload demands on the principal, the need for participants to be voluntary and not feel pressured to participate, and progressing the research in a timely manner. Principals are wary of contributing to the demands made on staff (and parent) time and energy in an already crowded space. Thomson and Hall (2017, p. 53) remind researchers of the complexity of schools and point out “it may simply be that making your research happen is not the first priority”. This echoes the point made locally by an educator to a researcher bemoaning challenges of school-based research, “you’re not top of their list”.

As already discussed, policies in this era of neoliberalism “...have eroded the fundamental democratic values of collective responsibility, cooperation, social justice and trust” within education (Codd, 2008, p. 22). Previous sections have outlined the demands made on teachers and parents and the increasing workload faced by school staff, effectively reducing the time available for research. The current education environment has also increased levels of research-related activities, particularly teacher-led. Combined, it is clear these factors have created an environment in schools “...where the mechanisms that challenge research engagement... have increased [and] ...the supporting mechanisms decreased” (Clark, 2008, p. 966). This can result in a lack of interest or ability to readily engage in research and can be described as research fatigue.

Discussion and conclusion

This article reveals some of the challenges experienced in conducting empirically-grounded research in the modern school environment. It is proposed conditions for school-based research are undergoing a sea-change, where the desire to participate in research is swamped by new or heightened realities creating an environment where school-based research is no longer as feasible. We have proposed the reason for the sea-change lies in the socio-political context of education and the priorities and demands it brings to the school space. The preliminary analysis suggests in New Zealand school-based research is negatively impacted by: the divergent workflows of researcher and school-based participant(s), the volume of demands on teachers and schools, the restricted roles for teachers and parents, and the volume of research-related opportunities, which create conditions conducive to research fatigue. Discussion on how these barriers might be overcome is initiated below.

The divergent workflows of researcher and school-based participants are not easily resolved, particularly where they concern the necessary scale of a doctoral study (which has criteria around the scale of the research undertaken and a lengthy minimum timeframe). Having greater understanding of the impact of school-based research at an institutional level might reveal opportunities within research governance processes that can minimise workflow tensions and potentially ease the risk of research fatigue on participants. Similarly, having a clearer understanding within all parts of the sector of what school-based research and the various research approaches contribute, could reduce apathy or indifference and motivate participation. The need for a strategic overview for educational research providing clear priorities and purpose for the range of research undertaken appears strong. There is considerable scope for further research in this area.

The New Zealand of today is not the same as the one of two or three decades ago, but the influence of neoliberal ideology is still very prominent with the structure of education, and society itself, shaped by it. The reconstituted roles for teachers and parents, as technicians under a notion of managerial professionalism and consumers within a quasi-market of education respectively, continue to operate in an environment of heightened demand and “holding to account”. Are these roles changing? Recently published work on the highly contested New Zealand national standards provided an illustration of some of the ways in which teachers have found their voice, contesting that which they perceive as contrary to the purpose of education (Thrupp, 2018). This suggests that even within the, at times overwhelming, demands of workload and accountability the “activist professional” remains. Likewise, for parents, discussion on the contextualised roles parents *could have* in education can challenge the decontextualised norms that constructed what parents *should be* under neoliberalism (Geinger et al., 2014) opening up the variety of roles they might perform depending on their circumstances.

The sheer volume of “must do” accountability and assessment related activities teachers and schools are required to undertake has been captured in surveys (Bonne & Wylie, 2017; NZEI & Australian Catholic University, 2018) and diminishes the space available for “could do” activities, including research participation. There is scope to extend the work referenced above to examine the finer detail and purpose of these activities and how they relate to what we want from education. Do they form “administrivia” and, if so, are they actually necessary? Nevertheless, the currently high workloads of teacher and principal create practical barriers to research participation, particularly through available time and ability to organise necessary aspects of research.

Addressing research fatigue and the precursor of research being perceived to have no impact (Clark, 2008), suggests the response of more collaborative research (e.g. participatory action research) to gain better buy-in and understanding of the research process. Taking time to build trust through a participatory process can be successful and was effectively demonstrated in

the project undertaken by Mutch, Yates, and Hu (2015) following the Canterbury earthquakes. Despite the participants experiencing many of the precursors linked to research fatigue, the participatory process ultimately facilitated engagement by several schools and their communities. It is also possible for this approach to create a tension between the respective institutional timeframes of teachers and researchers—a reminder that the “culturally and socially situated, subjective, messy contingent reality of the educational context” (Ramaekers, 2014, p. 54) frames our research and, as such, no single approach suits all.

There are opportunities for the various professional organisations that exist within the education sector to engage with these issues and advocate the value of school-based research. The sector is well-represented at all levels by a variety of organisations, including the New Zealand Educational Administration and Leadership Society (NZEALS), the New Zealand Principals’ Federation (NZPF), the Secondary Principals’ Association of New Zealand (SPANZ), the already mentioned NZEI—representing 50,000 teachers, principals and support staff, and the Post Primary Teachers’ Association (PPTA)—representing a further 17,000 secondary education teachers and principals. Along with encouraging members to support such research, they are also able to promote or campaign for conditions that better enable it. If we recognise that learning is contextually based (Alcorn, 2008), we must then recognise the need for research grounded in the diversity of school contexts that exist. The Ministry also needs to actively recognise and promote the value of school-based research from a diversity of sources, and address workplace conditions that impact on the ability for school leaders and teachers to participate in research.

Ultimately, there are many more questions than answers raised here about the potential impact of research fatigue on school-based research in New Zealand. There is substantial scope for future research to investigate more closely the volume and nature of school-based research being undertaken, to investigate the phenomenon of research fatigue and its influence on the educational research environment. The sector might initiate a conversation about what role MoE, New Zealand Council for Educational Research (NZCER), New Zealand Association for Research in Education (NZARE), and the various research institutions each have to play in producing and using educational research. Part of this conversation should be about how we improve our understanding of what is currently happening and how it can be best shared among interested parties for the benefit of the sector at large. We must examine the status of the educational research environment and consider what implication it has on the New Zealand research-policy-practice nexus. As this article proposes, the very feasibility of school-based research is at risk.

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