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An activity theory based investigation of communication and connection between family, students, and school

A thesis

submitted in fulfilment

of the requirements for the degree

of

Doctor of Philosophy

at

The University of Waikato

by

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THE UNIVERSITY OF
WAIKATO
Te Whare Wānanga o Waikato

2014

ABSTRACT

Communication and connection between families, students, and school is a topic that receives wide attention in the research literature. This is justified because close alignment between home and school can have numerous benefits for students, such as providing them with support for their academic progress, motivation for learning, behaviour, and readiness for school. Although the extent and quality of research on this topic has helped improve attitudes and approaches towards initiatives that aim to enhance opportunities for communication and connection between home and school, issues continue to limit the effectiveness of many programmes. Examples of issues reported in the literature include that resource capacities impacted on the sustainability of a programme; a school organised event attracted only a small number of families; or that family members felt disempowered during their interactions with teachers.

It is of concern that research aimed at addressing these issues often isolates elements of context and at times places blame on groups of stakeholders, usually either family members or teachers. Rather, family-school programmes should be researched from the perspective that they are holistic activities involving a multitude of elements that include not only family members and teachers, but also students, rules, divisions of labour, and tools of mediation. Studies must aim to take account of the diversity that exists within and between each of these elements; particularly in the experiences, cultural beliefs, and aspirations of the stakeholders involved.

Fundamentally, all stakeholders want to see students gain the emotional, social, and academic skills that will inspire them towards success in later years. Family members have strengths that can contribute towards inspiring student success. Research investigating how to incorporate these strengths into school based programmes must attend to both specific detail and wider contextual factors in order to take account of diversity in the elements involved. These requirements underpin the choice of activity theory as the theoretical foundation of this thesis.

Activity systems analysis is used to illuminate where tensions and alignments exist in the family-school programmes being implemented at three low socio-economic primary schools in New Zealand. Particular attention is given to the

affordances and limitations of the tools chosen to mediate acts of communication and connection at each school. Analysis draws attention to the benefits of a carefully chosen tool that is aligned with a shared purpose designed to guide the thoughts and actions of stakeholders towards the understanding that the contributions they make to their family-school programme are respected and valued.

One of the medium investigated for guiding the thoughts and actions of stakeholders is the culture of a school. It is discussed that a school culture embedded with certain symbolic tools can act as both a tool and a context for communication. Other tools of communication investigated include mobile phones and student portfolios. The affordances and limitations of these tools are considered where it is highlighted that mobile phones offer many possibilities for meaningful communication, while student portfolios can be the source of a multitude of concerns. These findings contribute to the implications for educational practice and theory that form the conclusion to this thesis.

DEDICATION

To Dad,
We shared this promise.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This work would not have been possible without the co-operation of the three schools involved in the research. I thank the principals, teachers, support staff, students, and family members from each of those schools.

The wealth of wonderful and supportive staff at the University of Waikato have played a significant role in completion of this thesis. I particularly note the sensitivity of Associate Professor Deborah Fraser and the guidance of Professor Kay Weaver.

I am thankful for the empathy and esteemed knowledge of my supervisors Professor John Williams and Emeritus Professor Ted Glynn. I also acknowledge the input of Doctor Margaret Franken and Associate Professor Garry Falloon. I am grateful to Beverley Bell for her timely support and Alistair Lamb for his judicious advice.

To my colleagues including Jane Furness, Renée Gilgen, Carrie Swanson Christina Gera and Lynley Westerbeke - thanks for sharing thoughts, stresses, laughter, and encouragement.

To my family who have been of exceptional support, sometimes openly but often by knowing when not to say much at all, I have appreciated your compassion. I especially acknowledge the support of my husband Michael for whom words cannot express my gratitude.

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CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

1.1 Background to communication and connection between families, students, and school

The topic of communication and connection between families, students, and school has received wide attention in the literature over recent years, both here in New Zealand and internationally. According to Cox (2005), interest in the topic began to show a noticeable increase during the 1970s. Epstein (1992) believes the rise in interest came about because researchers were becoming increasingly aware of the benefits students were gaining from preschool activities that involved their parents. She claims researchers were keen to investigate how parental involvement could be integrated into school programmes.

As family-school initiatives started to gain in popularity, research began increasingly reporting on the benefits collaborative programmes could offer stakeholders. Over the years, there have been reports of family-school programmes positively impacting on students' academic achievement (Fan & Chen, 2001; Jeynes, 2005; Seginer & Vermulst, 2002; Sheridan, Clarke, Knoche, & Edwards, 2006), behaviour (Minke & Anderson, 2005; Petchell & Glynn, 2009), school dropout rates (Furlong & Christenson, 2008), and motivation for learning (Elias, Bryan, Patrikakou, & Weissberg, 2003; Hughes & Kwok, 2007). Christenson and Reschly (2010), editors of the *Handbook of School-Family Partnerships* agree that there can be many benefits for students when home and school work collaboratively as they claim "there is an inextricable link between home and school for enhancing optimal child competence" (p. 502).

As the amount of research on this topic grew, so did the range of possible approaches schools could take to developing practices that involved communication and connection with their school community. These approaches have been underpinned by the work of many researchers who have become well respected for their contributions to this field. Joyce Epstein who developed the Typology of Parent Involvement (1995, p. 704) is an example. Her Typology has been used by many schools to guide their development of communication and connection initiatives. The work of Sandra Christenson, especially her contribution to the Check and Connect Programme (1999) is another example. Both her programme and the Incredible Years programme (1984) developed by

Carolyn Webster-Stratton are internationally recognised family-school initiatives.¹ While both programmes operate in schools internationally, the Incredible Years Programme has recently been introduced in New Zealand and it has been well received here (Sturrock & Gray, 2013).

The work of researchers in this field and the many benefits reported from communication and connection initiatives have prompted policy makers to build provision for family involvement into national policy documents. For example, in the United States of America, the No Child Left Behind Legislation (United States Department of Education, 2001) includes the statement that schools should be involving “parents in an organized, ongoing, and timely way” (Section 1118c (3)). Similarly in New Zealand, policy and curriculum statements recognise that parents can and should play an important role in the education of their children. The New Zealand Curriculum (New Zealand Ministry of Education, 2007) recommends “all students experience a curriculum that makes connections with their lives and engages the support of their families and communities” (p. 9). The New Zealand Education National Administration Guidelines (NAG 2A) were recently amended to require schools with students enrolled in Years 1-8 to report to students and their parents on students’ progress and achievement in relation to National Standards at least twice a year (New Zealand Ministry of Education, 2013d). Schools are advised to develop an approach to reporting the standards that enables “all parents, family, and whānau to understand how their children’s learning is progressing [sic] to become active, involved supporters of their child’s learning and the school programme” (New Zealand Ministry of Education, 2013a, p. para 2).

Efforts to develop programmes that involve family members are referred to in this thesis as either acts of communication and connection or family-school programmes. Communication and connection is a term adopted to describe an act that was developed with the deliberate intention of involving family members, students, and school personnel in an initiative aimed at enhancing the social, emotional, and academic well being of students. Often researchers working in this field refer to acts of communication and connection as ‘home-school

¹ Whatworks Clearinghouse (United States Department of Education, 2006) reported the Check and Connect Programme had positive effects on students staying in school, potentially positive effects on students progressing at school and no discernible effects on school completion (p. 4)

Sturrock and Gray (2013) following a review of the Incredible Years Programme operating in New Zealand reported there was clear evidence of improvements in child behaviour and positive parental changes following involvement in the programme (p. 1).

partnerships' (Brooking & Roberts, 2007; Bull, Brooking, & Campbell, 2008; Glynn, Berryman, & Glynn, 2000) or "school-family partnerships" (Christenson & Reschly, 2010, p. xv). As these are regularly used terms, there are many references to them throughout this thesis although the term family-school programme is the option used most frequently. It is important to note that students are understood to be integral to effective family-school activities and that the shortened term family-school programme includes students. The use of the word 'family' rather than 'parents' is in recognition that the home context can include contributions from extended family members. At times, family are referred to as whānau, a Māori term meaning extended family.

In this thesis, family members, students, and school personnel are all considered stakeholders in a family-school partnership. A stakeholder is "any group or individual who can affect or is affected by the achievement of an organization's purpose" (Freeman, 2010, p. 54). Given the important role family members, students, and school personnel all play in trying to bring about improved outcomes for students, it is important that all these groups are considered stakeholders in family-school programmes. Achieving the aim of involving all these groups in a collaborative manner is, however, challenging as this thesis will explain in much greater detail. More specifically, this thesis aims to examine the issues that impact on the formation of family-school programmes at three low decile New Zealand primary schools. The following research questions form the foundation for the study:

1. What tensions and alignments are identified by stakeholders when undertaking acts of communication and connection between families, students, and school within three low decile New Zealand primary schools?
2. What affordances and limitations are identified by stakeholders relating to tools used when undertaking acts of communication and connection between families, students, and school within three low decile New Zealand primary schools?

Attention to these questions is intended to lead to new insights into how to address issues that impact on the effectiveness of family-school programmes.

The research approach used to investigate the tensions and alignments at the three case study schools, and discuss the affordances and limitations of the tools in use has some distinguishing features. The first is having tools of

communication and connection as a focus of the research. Tools are an often overlooked focus of family-school studies and yet a most important feature (Grant, 2009). The second distinguishing feature of the study is the use of an activity theory framework. Review of family-school studies in the literature reveals activity theory is a framework that has seldom been used in this context. Both these features and some of the terms associated with their use will be explained following further clarification of the rationale for this research.

1.2 Rationale for this research

Many scholars working in this field have acknowledged the need for continuing research to address issues that repeatedly present during the undertaking of family-school programmes. Following extensive review of both New Zealand and international literature, Biddulph, Biddulph and Biddulph (2003), for example, support the need for further research and advocate for studies that focus on detail rather than generalisations. They reported “many of the explanations commonly advanced regarding significant community and family factors that influence children’s social, emotional and intellectual achievement are too simplistic to be useful, and need to be expanded to indicate the complex circumstances under which they hold” (p. 179). Following review of the research in their *Handbook of School-Family Partnerships*, Christenson and Reschly (2010, p. 502) claimed initiatives aimed at building collaborative partnerships were still regarded as “disparate movements or add-ons to practice” rather than as “integrated, cohesive reform”. They called for a concerted effort to “raise the bar” and develop programmes that integrate collaborative partnerships into the regular programmes of schools. Furthermore, and most significantly, the relevance of this research was highlighted by a New Zealand Review Office (ERO) National Report *Partners in Learning: Schools’ Engagement with Parents, Whānau, and Communities* (2008c) where it was revealed that nearly three-quarters of the 233 schools reviewed in the first half of 2007 received comments in their ERO reports recommending that they strengthen their engagement with their school community (p.3).

There is, however, an abundance of research that suggests many schools are struggling to implement collaborative initiatives, particularly schools in low socio-economic areas (Benz, Kwok, Bowman-Perrott, Hsu, & Dalun, 2011; Green, Walker, Hoover-Dempsey, & Sandler, 2007; Horvat, Weininger, & Lareau, 2003; Reese & Gallimore, 2000). The reasons for their struggles include a lack of the

resources (both monetary and personnel) required to sustain activities in the long term (Clinton, Hattie, & Dixon, 2007; Phillips, McNaughton, & MacDonald, 2002; Timperley & Robinson, 2002) and that schools struggle to involve more than a few families, especially hard-to-reach families in their family-school programmes (Christenson, 2003; Drummond & Stipek, 2004; Harris & Goodall, 2008; Parkinson, Doyle, Cowie, Otrrel-Cass, & Glynn, 2011; Reese & Gallimore, 2000). The Incredible Years Programme, for example, requires extensive resources, one of those being the willing participation of parents. However, according to Webster-Stratton and Reid (2010, p. 213) there are many parents who cannot or will not participate in parent training programmes due to work conflicts, life stress, language barriers or a lack of motivation. These are the types of barriers that can impact on the involvement of family members with school but this thesis will stress that while these barriers exist, certain approaches and tools of mediation can go some way towards addressing their impact on the capacity and willingness for families to become involved with school related activities.

Before continuing, it is important to note that in New Zealand, schools in low socio-economic school communities are referred to as 'low decile' schools. The term decile is used in the context of New Zealand education when making reference to differences in school communities based on the socio-economic circumstances of that community. A school's decile rating locates the school on a band ranging from 1 to 10, a rating system established by the New Zealand Ministry of Education to allocate funding to schools according to the needs of their community. Information such as: household income, occupation, number of people living in the house, educational qualifications, and the number of people in the household receiving income support is collated and used to distribute funds more equitably to schools (New Zealand Ministry of Education, 2013b). Decile 1 schools are located in the lowest band and are found in predominately lower socio-economic areas.

I have taught for over 30 years in the lowest decile schools in New Zealand, predominately in decile 1A schools.² My time in schools involved many roles, such as: Associate Principal, classroom teacher, special needs teacher, reading recovery teacher, curriculum leader and assessment leader. I have developed student portfolios, been involved in teacher appraisals and have had

² Decile 1 includes categories 1A, 1B and 1C. Decile 1A is the lowest decile ranking.

considerable experience communicating with parents from within the school communities in which I have worked.

My experiences strongly support the relevance of this research. During my time teaching in decile 1A schools, and particularly during my years in school leadership roles, I became increasingly concerned about the limited flow of communication between the school, students and their family members and vice versa. My experience led me to the understanding that the majority of families do care about their children and want to help them with their learning but either encounter barriers that restrict them from becoming involved, or feel unsure about how they can best assist. I spent a lot of time visiting the homes of students in order to connect with family members which was usually well received but schools only have limited capacity to adopt this approach. It takes time and resources - and often leadership personnel are representing classroom teachers, a situation that is not ideal as relationship building between classroom teachers and family members is vital.

Although home visiting is an approach used by many schools (Sweet & Appelbaum, 2004), it is an approach that addresses only a small number of the issues associated with involving families from low decile communities. Home visiting is usually actioned at times when the school is concerned about a student. It does not allow opportunities for family members to be proactive and to let the school know there may be an issue arising, or just as importantly, for school or home to share positive information with each other. Positive information may include reports such as an improvement in a child's attitude, behaviour or academic progress. This is often information family members do not have the opportunity to receive and respond to in a timely manner. The capacity for schools to be able to share information such as this with family members requires a proactive approach by schools, possibly incorporating the use of innovative tools, but definitely underpinned by the attitude that enhancing opportunities for communication with family members is a worthwhile undertaking. It is with these thoughts in mind that this thesis includes as one of its main foci, an investigation of how tools of communication may be used more effectively in the context of family-school programmes. While there are a growing number of tools that may be used for family-school communication purposes as advances in technology open new possibilities, research into the use of innovative tools is presently limited.

One of the essential features of a family-school programme is the mediating tool used to connect and communicate between families and school. Surprisingly, however, it is a feature often overlooked by research. As an example, Grant (2009) explored literature focusing on technology that could be used as a tool for family-school communication purposes. She found “there is still limited evidence available on the use of technologies to support home-school relationships” (p. 17). Her review pointed to the need for further research focused on the benefits and limitations of technology as a tool for family-school communication and connection. While findings from the current study support Grant’s findings in principle, this study adds that any investigation of tools of communication must be inclusive of the context in which the tool is being used.

1.3 Research description

This thesis adopts a socio-cultural theoretical stance based on the understanding that the actions and thoughts of an individual cannot be studied or understood in isolation, but rather as part of the society, culture, and life experiences of that individual (Cole, 2001; Daniels, Cole, & Wertsch, 2007; Kaptelinin & Nardi, 2006; Kozulin, 1998; Lantolf & Thorne, 2006; Rogoff, 1995; Wertsch, 1995). Socio-cultural theory forms the foundation of activity theory, the theoretical framework of this thesis. Activity theory frameworks have been employed to structure the analysis of three case studies involving deliberate acts of communication and connection between families, students, and school.

A basic tenet of activity theory is that the activity to be investigated is clearly defined. That is because object oriented activity is the prime unit of analysis in an activity theory-based study (Engeström, 2001). The object is the motive that drives the activity and gives it direction (Kaptelinin, 2005). Schools that had programmes that were developed with the deliberate intention of improving opportunities for communication and connection with their families and students were chosen for this research. Each communication and connection programme is the object oriented activity or the unit of analysis. The investigation involves analysis of interrelationships between elements in each activity, including participants’ perceptions of the object or purpose of their programme and how other elements of the programme are supporting them (or not supporting them) to achieve their purpose.

Analysis of interrelationships is expected to illuminate where tensions and alignments exist in each activity. Tensions may present because barriers limit the

capacity of stakeholders to achieve their purpose. Barriers may be of a contextual nature (time, transportation, child care) or a psychological nature (previous experiences, self-efficacy, role construction). Attention to barriers is a focus of this thesis because an understanding of barriers is an essential prerequisite to the clarification of issues that impact on the effectiveness of family-school programmes achieving their purpose.

The identification of tensions can stimulate growth in an activity as stakeholders are alerted to areas that would benefit from intervention in their organisation and they try to find ways of addressing the concerns raised. An activity theory based-study may also illuminate alignments between elements. Alignments can reinforce stakeholders' commitment to their organisation and can become the foundations for recommendations to practice.

Another important feature of this research that requires clarification is that its focus is on the effectiveness of the activities being investigated to communicate and connect with stakeholders and it does not directly focus on student learning. Often activity theory based-research incorporates a focus on learning, such as student learning (Roth & Lee, 2007) e-learning (Kaptelinin & Nardi, 2006; Westberry, 2009) or teacher professional learning (Bourke, Mentis, & O'Neill, 2013; Yamagata-Lynch, 2010). The research questions of this study require a focus on tensions and alignments in each activity, and the affordances and limitations of the tools adopted. It is intended this will lead to insights that can support student learning, however, while learning, or more specifically student engagement is discussed, it is not directly evaluated. There is extensive research linking improvements in family involvement with improvements in student learning (Benz et al., 2011; Christenson & Reschly, 2010; Hughes & Kwok, 2007). This implies that student learning is a focus but it is important to clarify that it is an indirect rather than a direct focus. One feature of educational contexts that is directly focused on is the context of low decile schools. The following section reviews this context and the differences between high and low decile schools.

1.4 Low decile context

The reason for the focus on low decile schools is in part due to my experience in these schools but more importantly, because the differences between high and low decile contexts mean that programmes developed to improve communication and connection require a different focus in each context. Many researchers have

noted that there are families from low decile or low socio-economic communities and minority cultures that avoid family-school initiatives (Lareau, 1989, 2003, 2011; McNamara Horvat, Weininger, & Lareau, 2003). Findings from extensive longitudinal research undertaken by Lareau (1989, 2003, 2011) drew attention to the concern that in general families from lower socio-economic areas participate less frequently in school-related activities, attend fewer school meetings, and are less likely to ask questions about their child's progress than families from higher socio-economic communities. Researchers claim the involvement of families from low decile communities is influenced by two main factors: contextual and psychological (Christenson, 2003; Green et al., 2007; Grolnick & Slowiaczek, 1994; Harris & Goodall, 2008; Hoover-Dempsey et al., 2005). Contextual factors that influence the capacity of many low decile families to support their children's educational opportunities include limitations of time, transport, monetary resources and family members' knowledge of ways to support their children (Bempechat & Shernoff, 2013; Christenson, Rounds, & Gorney, 1992; Hill, 2010; Petchell & Glynn, 2009). Psychological factors include attitudes family members have towards involvement; attitudes that have been influenced over time by previous experiences with education, the views of other people, and self-perceptions of abilities. Any one of these factors or a combination of all of them can have dramatic impact on the effectiveness of family-school programmes in low decile school communities. Research that attends to these factors as potential barriers to the establishment of programmes continues to be required.

Establishing that the involvement of low decile families with schools is influenced by a number of factors does not suggest that higher decile communities are not also impacted by factors that challenge the efforts of school personnel to establish effective family-school activities. The point is that the circumstances of the contexts differ, and therefore require different foci. As an example, higher decile schools can experience high levels of parental presence at school and some of those parents put pressure onto teachers because they are concerned about their child's progress (Hoover-Dempsey, Whitaker, & Ice, 2010; Somers & Settle, 2010). This can lead to levels of stress that limits the capacity of school personnel to provide equal opportunities to all students.

The focus of this thesis on tools of communication also requires clarity to be given to another factor that differentiates low from high decile communities. That factor is that access to technology is more limited in lower decile communities. Statistics New Zealand (2012) reported that in 2012 an average of 64 percent of

households with a combined income of \$30,000 per annum or less had internet access in their homes. This compares with 96 percent of homes where the annual household income was \$100,000 or more. This situation suggests that options for tools of communication may be limited in low decile schools due to the limitations on their accessibility. However, although not part of the 2012 Report, a previous New Zealand Statistics Report (2010) showed that 85 percent of individuals over 15 years of age had access to a mobile phone in the year 2009. The relevance of this fact for rethinking the means used to mediate communication and connection will be discussed in this thesis.

1.5 Thesis structure

Chapter One has introduced the research topic, established the rationale for the research, and briefly introduced activity theory as the theoretical framework. The structure of the remaining chapters is outlined below.

Chapter Two provides a description activity theory. The reason for introducing activity theory at this early stage is because the principles of activity theory weave throughout the thesis. Many of those principles are considered complex and in need of careful explanation (Kaptelinin & Nardi, 2006; Yamagata-Lynch, 2010). It is therefore important that they are introduced and detailed at the earliest opportunity. Chapter Two provides an outline of the historical development of activity theory, explains the underlying principles that form the foundations of activity theory, and clarifies its value to this research.

Chapter Three addresses the topic of tools in use in family-school programmes. A tool is defined as the medium that facilitates communication. This chapter is important to the thesis for three main reasons. First, because the use of tools is a topic not often focused on in the context of family-school research. Second, because the variety of tools available is expanding (and existing tools may not be being used to their full potential). Finally, because there is a need for a study that thoroughly investigates the affordances and limitations of tools from a contextual perspective.

Chapter Four provides a critical review of research related to one of the most significant variables determining the effectiveness of family-school programmes, namely, that these programmes must be underpinned by “healthy relationships” (Clarke, Sheridan, & Woods, 2010, p. 64). The chapter defines the term healthy relationships and explains the elements that support the development of healthy

relationships; but also contends that the development of healthy relationships in low decile communities has many challenges. Many of those challenges are detailed in this chapter.

Chapter Four suggests that narrow conceptualisations of the parameters of family-school programmes may be limiting the involvement of stakeholders. Often the focus of programmes is on encouraging overt involvement, such as family attendance at school events, while opportunities for the provision of psychological support, such as encouragement and praise, may be being overlooked. A broadening of the conceptualisation of family-school programmes could support opportunities for psychological contributions into programme design. This chapter also discusses how outcomes from family-school programmes can be evaluated.

Chapter Five is the final chapter of the Literature Review and it focuses on barriers to family-school programmes. It is explained that an understanding of the types of barriers that limit the involvement of all stakeholders is seminal to efforts that aim to improve family-school programmes. The chapter contends school personnel play a pivotal role in establishing programmes that can reduce barriers to family, student, and school communication and connection and therefore their approach and attitude greatly influences the effectiveness of programmes.

Chapter Six describes the research methodology and methods. It establishes that the research is a qualitative study involving interpretation undertaken with the support of activity systems analysis. Interpretive processes are influenced by the focus of the research questions, and the personal beliefs of the researcher; therefore efforts to maintain the quality required of a qualitative study is a feature of this chapter.

The chapter describes the methods used in the research as a case study approach involving mainly one-on-one interviews with a range of stakeholders from each of the three case study sites. The chapter concludes by establishing the ethical considerations given to the research.

Chapter Seven details the findings from each of the three case studies. The findings are structured according to a framework based on the activity theory elements of: Tool, Object, Rules, Community, Division of Labour and Outcomes.

Within each of the element sections, themes emerged and they are described from within what was determined as their 'best fit' with an activity theory element.

Chapter Eight analyses the findings. Activity systems analysis is employed as the framework for analysis. The activity systems analysis diagrams provide visual illustrations that support discussions of the findings. The frameworks are used to highlight tensions and alignments in each activity.

Chapter Nine summarises key findings and the implications of this thesis for practice and further research. The chapter involves attention to the benefits or limitations of using activity theory as a theoretical framework and also details the limitations of this research and makes suggestions for future research.

CHAPTER 2: THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

2.1 Introduction

Activity theory provides the theoretical framework for this thesis. Principles of socio-cultural theory form the foundations of activity theory. Those principles and some of the history of the development of activity theory are outlined in Section 2.2 of this chapter; then continued in Section 2.3 where expansions to activity theory are described. In Section 2.4, the value of activity theory to an investigation of complex educational settings is explained. This section concludes by explicating the value of activity theory to this research.

2.2 Socio-cultural theory

This thesis is founded on a socio-cultural perspective. Socio-cultural theory is based on the principle that the actions and thoughts of an individual cannot be studied or understood in isolation, but rather as part of the society, culture, and experiences of the individual (Cole, 2001; Daniels et al., 2007; Kaptelinin & Nardi, 2006; Kozulin, 1998; Lantolf & Thorne, 2006; Rogoff, 1995; Wertsch, 1995). Socio-cultural studies strive to incorporate breadth and depth. They cast a wide lens over both the participants involved in an activity and the context within which that activity is situated. From a socio-cultural perspective, “the individual and the social world are mutual and not separable” (Rogoff, 1990, p. viii).

The term socio-cultural incorporates two dimensions: social and cultural. The social world is constituted more in the “flesh-and-blood” (Cole, 1998, p. xiv) acts of interacting while the cultural world involves unseen social practices that have been built up through generations. As it is difficult to isolate social and cultural dimensions of human activities from their historical roots, often socio-cultural theory is referred to as cultural historical theory or socio-historical theory; terms used in the era of Vygotsky (Wertsch, Del Rio, & Alvarez, 1995). Anning, Cullen and Fleer (2009) advocate for the continued use of the term sociocultural-historical theory arguing it better reflects the work of Vygotsky and the historical dimension of contexts. Cole (2001), however, claims it is not necessary to add the term historical as culture is understood to include a historical dimension. He posits adding historical to the term socio-cultural just makes it an “awkwardly long label” (p. 168). This thesis uses the term socio-cultural but notes the importance

of understanding that when referring to socio-cultural theory, a historical dimension is incorporated. This thesis also acknowledges and agrees with Wertsch, Del Rio and Alvarez (1995) that despite differences in terminology, the principles underpinning socio-cultural theory can be attributed to the work of Vygotsky and his extensive research in the field of human cognition.

2.2.1 Vygotsky and socio-cultural theory

Vygotsky's interest in a socio-cultural approach to human cognition grew from his concern that at the time of his research (the 1920s), mainstream psychology was focusing on separating the organism from its environment. He aimed to reformulate psychology towards an integrated approach to human cognition that recognised the relationship between the individual and their environment, and accounted for this relationship in theories of learning and development (Yamagata-Lynch & Smaldino, 2007).

Wertsch (1985) describes two of the concepts central to the understandings of human cognition proposed by Vygotsky. They are that “higher mental processes in the individual have their origins in social processes” (p. 14) and that “mental processes can be understood only if we understand the tools and signs that mediate them” (p. 15). From the perspective of socio-cultural theory, these themes cannot be understood separately. Socio-cultural theory contends that human consciousness develops through interactions between humans, artefacts, tools and social others. It is through these interactions, Vygotsky contended, that humans develop meanings of their world (Wertsch, 1985).

Vygotsky introduced mediated action as a concept that further explained the development of human consciousness. He claimed that humans do not act directly on the world. Rather, their actions are mediated by both psychological tools (language, attitudes, perceptions) and material artefacts (tools, books, computers).³ The concept of mediated action is considered central to the work of Vygotsky and socio-cultural theory (Wertsch, 1995). The principles of mediation proposed by Vygotsky were developed further by his colleague Leontiev (1978) who developed them into a model of human activity referred to as activity theory.

³ A more detailed explanation of psychological and material tools is part of Section 3.2.

2.3 Activity theory

Activity theory is a holistic approach to research adopted in order to study interactions between human activity and human consciousness within their relevant environmental contexts (Jonassen & Rohrer-Murphy, 1999). In keeping with the principles of socio-cultural theory, an activity is constituted by the inner thoughts of an individual or group and their external context. Therefore, when using activity theory as a theoretical framework, the researcher investigates “not only the kinds of activities that people engage in but also who is engaging in that activity, what their goals and intentions are, and what objects or products result from the activity” (Jonassen & Rohrer-Murphy, 1999, p. 62). This description of activity theory draws attention to the notion that activity theory research is both broad and specific. It can encompass analysis of an organisation, such as a school or a workplace, but within that wider investigation, the lens of analysis also focuses on elements within the organisation, such as subjects and the mediating tools they are using.

One of the criticisms levelled at an investigation based on the principles of activity theory is that it is specific to a given context and not generalisable across contexts (Roschelle, 1998). This is a valid claim but, rather than a criticism, this can also be considered a clarifying feature of activity theory. An activity theory-based investigation is not undertaken with the intention of making generalisable claims. Rather, activity theory research, much like case study research, aims to provide what Stake (1995) calls “petite generalizations” (p. 7). That is, generalisations focused on particularisation rather than grand claims. The aim of activity theory research is to establish thorough analysis of a particular case or cases and how each case fits or does not fit “established generalized claims related to the phenomena being investigated” (Yamagata-Lynch, 2010, p. 32). Thus, the investigator’s goal for engaging in an activity theory-based study “is to gain and share their understandings of complex human activities through particularization” (Yamagata-Lynch, 2010, p. 32).

In activity theory research, as stated in the previous chapter, it is important to be clear about what the activity is that is being investigated. This emphasises that the aim of an activity theory-based study is to develop understandings of the actions and thoughts of individuals acting in an activity deliberately developed to fulfil a certain purpose (Kaptelinin & Nardi, 2006, p. 31). In this research, the activities being investigated are three family-school programmes established with

the deliberate intention of enhancing opportunities for communication and connection between families, students, and school. The deliberate intention that underpinned the establishment of each programme is the object-orientated activity that defines and binds each case study as the unit of analysis. The analysis process is undertaken through the lens of activity systems frameworks.

2.3.1 Activity systems analysis

In order to make use of the theoretical principles of activity theory in a practical manner, a triangular theoretical model for use in research analysis was developed by Leontiev (1978) a colleague of Vygotsky's. His model is referred to as first generation activity theory or the "classical triadic model" (Engeström, 1999, p. 30). Second and third generation activity theory models have since been developed and are described in Section 2.3.2.

Leontiev's first generation model is shown in Figure 1. It included three main elements, each positioned on a vertex of the triangle: Subjects, Tools and the Object of the activity. As each element is a term also used in colloquial language, when referring to them as activity theory elements they are distinguishable from here on through the use of a capital letter.

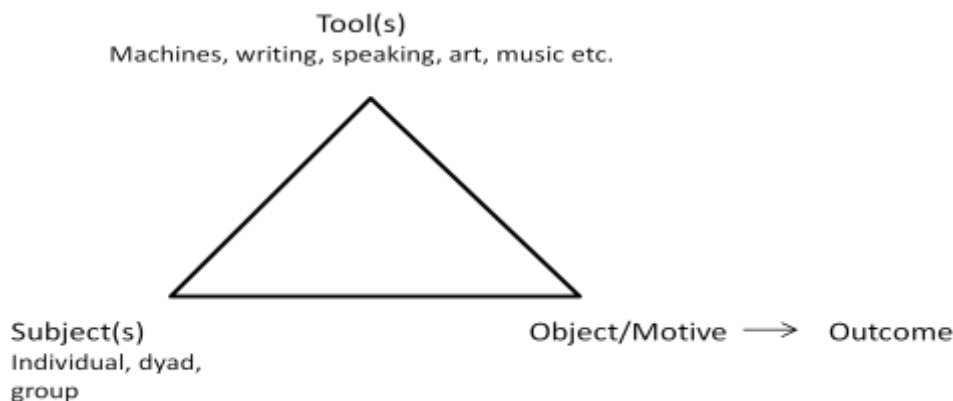


Figure 1: Original activity systems triangle (Engeström, 2001, p. 134)

2.3.1.1 Subjects

Subjects are the participants in the activity. In this research, Subjects are family members, students, school leaders, teachers, and support staff. Each Subject brings a diversity of experiences to the activity system. Those experiences

influence the way they act and the meanings they associate with the Object of their activity. Their experiences also influence their motivations to become involved in the activity and the barriers they perceive limit their involvement. Through participation with others, the perspectives of Subjects change as they negotiate new ways of acting together. This means the interrelationships between elements in their activity system also change which highlights that activity theory leads itself to ongoing research as groups of people and individuals continually find new ways of working together.

2.3.1.2 Tools

Tools shape the manner by which Subjects interact with their context and with other Subjects. The Tool's use is determined by the experiences of the person using the Tool and the experiences of the people who created and modified the Tool before them (Kaptelinin & Nardi, 2006). These experiences are accumulated in both the structural properties of the Tool and the knowledge about how the Tool should be used. Therefore, the use of a Tool is an accrual of both personal and social knowledge; which together influences an individual's external behaviour and mental functioning as well as their perceived Object for engaging in the activity (Engeström, 1999).

2.3.1.3 Object

Defining the Object of an activity as its motive or purpose seems simple but masks the complexities that surround the term. Object is defined as the motive of the activity by Leontiev (1978), Kaptelinin and Nardi (2006) and Yamagata-Lynch (2010). Engeström and Kerosuo (2007) support the notion of Object being the motive or purpose when they write that the Object "embodies the meaning, the motive and the purpose of a collective activity" (p. 337). However, Miettinen (2005) contends that the term Object has many more complexities than a description such as motive would imply:

As a rule, the members of an activity are not fully conscious of the motive of their joint activity, the social significance and consequences of their activity, or its various economic or political conditions. This is because a single individual cannot have access to them alone, and any attempt to characterize the object is necessarily limited (p. 57).

Much has been written about the definition of Object from an activity theory perspective (Engeström, 1995; González, Nardi, & Mark, 2009; Hyysalo, 2005;

Kaptelinin, 2005; Nardi, 2005; Stetsenko, 2005). Each of those authors agrees that Object is a term that is difficult to define but it is necessary to acknowledge its complexities and find a term that enables the reader an opportunity to understand the meaning of it in the context of the research being undertaken. This thesis generally refers to Object as the purpose of the activity and investigates participants' perspectives of the perceived purpose of the family-school activity with which they are involved.

Each of the schools taking part in this research was asked to identify a programme they had developed with the deliberate purpose of providing opportunities to promote connection and communication with their family members. This is the underlying Object of the activities being investigated. It is possible that each school had other goals in mind during the development of their activity. They may, for example, have wanted to include information about children's levels of progress into their family-school programme. Such a purpose would probably be driven by societal demands, which reinforces the complexities associated with understandings related the term Object. The Object is influenced by multiple sources. They are constituted from interrelationships between individuals, groups, and societal factors but rather than focusing on these factors separately, an activity theory-based study aims to take a holistic approach whereby the actions of individuals are viewed as part of an activity driven by an overarching purpose identified through the research analysis process. Analysis in an activity theory-based study is oriented by the understandings "that all actions have a societal meaning, that individual acts are always organised in relation to the societal practices and that action is always oriented in relation to objects" (Chaiklin, 2012, p. 215). This activity theory-based study focuses on interpreting the effectiveness of each activity at driving Subjects towards attainment of the overarching purpose of promoting opportunities for communication and connection.

The concept of an activity being *object-oriented* is fundamental to understanding activity theory but a further difficulty in understanding the term Object is that it can be challenging to distinguish between longer term purposes and shorter term goals. Leontiev (1978) recognised this was a feature of activity theory that required clarification and developed a hierarchal structure to try to simplify the distinction between purposes or what he termed motives and goals. He also included operations as another level of activity in his hierarchy.

Leontiev's (1978) hierarchy is based on the principle that the perceived needs of individuals or of an organisation direct them towards taking actions that are intended to lead towards the Object of the activity. The object-oriented focus is the activity being investigated and sits at the top level of the hierarchy. Actions are distinguishable from activities because actions are underpinned by conscious, shorter term goals and directed at the step leading towards the Object. Actions are directed at goals. Humans are generally aware of their goals while not always immediately aware of their Object (Kaptelinin & Nardi, 2012). Operations are at the level below actions. They are actions that were once conscious but have become so familiar to Subjects that they are undertaken without thought. Driving a car is an example often used in literature to describe the difference between actions and operations (Kuutti, 1996). When learning to drive, the action of changing gears, for example, is carried out consciously to begin with then after a period of time, it becomes an action so familiar that it is done unconsciously, at which stage it becomes an operation.

There are criticisms of Leontiev's activity hierarchy. Axel (1997) suggests the framework is too simplistic to account for the numerous individual, social, and cultural factors that may influence the actions of individuals or groups. He argues Leontiev's framework appears better suited to the development of lower order needs in humans rather than the complexities associated with higher order consciousness. This argument is supported by Engeström (2001) who recognised that activity theory should be expanded to account for higher order consciousness as well as a wider community perspective. With this idea in mind, Engeström developed an expanded version of the original activity theory framework.

2.3.2 Activity theory expansion

Activity theory has gone through three phases of expansion since its original conception. The first phase, as described above, had its focus mainly on individuals and their mediational means for interacting with the world. The second phase expanded the unit of analysis to include a wider community perspective, and the third phase expanded the unit of analysis further to incorporate multiple activity systems.

Expansions also came about, according to Cole and Engeström (2007), because early interpretations of the original triangle led to misunderstandings of some of the basic principles of Vygotskian theory. They were concerned, for example,

that some interpretations implied that in an activity theory framework, Tools could be viewed as basic items such as hoes and axes. This is despite Vygotsky and his colleagues placing emphasis on language as a tool of mediation; an emphasis that portrayed the notion that the use of a tool was embedded in higher order psychological processes.

Engeström (2001) developed an expanded activity system that built from the original mediated action triangle depicted in Figure 1. His intention was to develop a framework where Subjects were part of a wider community and furthermore, where relationships between Subjects and communities were mediated by more than just Tools (Engeström, 2001). His second generation activity system framework incorporated the additional elements of Rules, Community and Division of Labour. The expanded triangle is displayed in Figure 2.

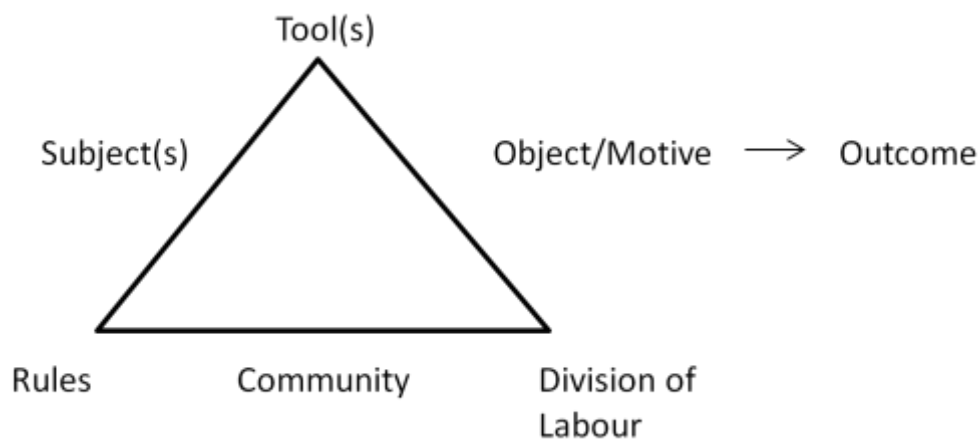


Figure 2: Expanded activity theory triangle (Engeström, 2001, p. 135)

2.3.2.1 Rules, Community, and Division of Labour

According to Engeström (2001), Rules can be either written or unwritten but are conventions set in place in order to create boundaries around an activity. Community is the wider group that influences the Subject(s) either in overt or more discrete ways. A Community may be an institution or an informal group; connected by tasks, history, social circumstances, personal circumstances or professional responsibilities. Division of Labour is the element that accounts for divisions of tasks and divisions of power and status. Engeström (2001) describes Division of Labour as an element that incorporates both horizontal and vertical

levels. Its horizontal level is more transparent, such as the role of a teacher or a parent, but its vertical level more obscure, such as perceptions of power. Power is described Daniels and Warmington (2007) as being attributed to the positioning of an individual or group within an activity. They emphasise the importance of considering perceptions of power when investigating an activity arguing that due to the focus of an activity-theory based study on interrelationships between Subjects and other elements, perceptions of power play a significant role in determining the positioning of individuals within those relationships. They explain “distribution of power and principles of control open up the possibility of grounding the analysis of social positioning and mental dispositions in relation to the distribution of labour in an activity” (Daniels & Warmington, 2007, p. 388). In other words, power is a factor that impacts on the organisational, social, and emotional positioning of Subjects and as such plays a compelling part in the capacities Subjects have to attain the Object of their activity. Daniels (2012) agrees that organisational distributions of power “give rise to specific modalities of discourse which constitute psychological tools which mediate the actions of persons” (p. 206). This argument reinforces the need to incorporate perceptions of power into an analysis of the effectiveness of an activity at reaching its desired outcomes.

The inclusion of the elements represented in the expansion to the original activity theory diagram enables the researcher to situate the study in a context that incorporates wider social and contextual factors. These factors align with the socio-cultural foundation of this work which posits that human actions and thoughts are influenced by both internal and external factors. The external factors in second generation activity theory include other participants, rules, and perceptions of roles in the activity. All of these components together or separately can mediate change in the system - not only in the Object but within each of the individual elements.

Researchers have since considered the need to expand the first and second generation models further to allow for some crossing between activity systems. Third generation activity theory expands the unit of analysis from one activity system to at least two interacting systems (Engeström, 2001). An example of third generation activity theory is displayed in Figure 3. This example depicts two activity systems that share an Outcome. An example of third generation activity theory where the two activity systems have different Outcomes is presented in research undertaken by Meyers (2006) in Section 2.4.

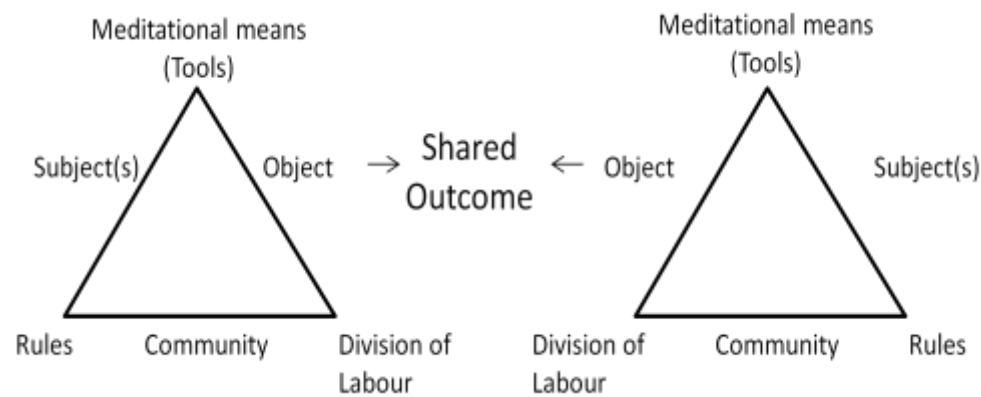


Figure 3: Third generation activity theory (Engeström, 2001, p. 136)

In third generation activity theory, the unit of analysis expands from incorporating one activity system to “two or more collaborating activity systems that are embedded in social, cultural and historical processes” (Tuomi-Gröhn, Engeström, & Young, 2003, p. 10). Third generation activity theory has been applied in many areas of research such as in distance learning (Murphy & Rodríguez Manzanares, 2008), business (Spinuzzi, 2012) and educational research (Meyers, 2006).

Thus, third generation activity theory expands the field of vision from the original individual perspective; to one that incorporates the community; to one that responds to the relationships between two or more activity systems. Each phase has extended the value of activity theory as a theoretical research framework.

2.3.3 Activity system tensions

One of the distinguishing features of activity systems analysis is that it aims to focus on tensions in an activity. Within an activity system, it is anticipated tensions will exist due to the existence of “mutually exclusive elements” (Roth & Lee, 2007, p. 202). Each element has an identified role in the activity but when combined with other elements, it can create disturbances or tensions in the system. An example was provided above in the description of the impact of power on Subjects’ social and emotional positioning. Power can be an element that disrupts Subjects’ capacity to reach their Object because of the tensions it creates. Tensions are, however, not necessarily a negative factor in an activity. If identified and there is a willingness to make change, tensions can be a driving force behind improvements to an organisation. Barab, Barnett, Yamagata-Lynch

and Keating (2002) explain “as tensions enter the system they become the moving force behind disturbances and innovations and eventually drive the system to change and develop” (p. 80). In paying attention to tensions, the reasons behind their existence can be better understood. Activity systems analysis requires the researcher to pay attention to tensions (possibly together with the Subjects) because during analysis, the researcher makes interpretations regarding how elements of the activity system are interrelating. Meyers (2006) adds that when analysing an activity system, a researcher must also take into account that there may be hidden tensions impacting on the system. In the course of everyday activities, tensions or breakdowns in activities regularly occur and many, but not all, are repaired or negotiated. However, not all tensions are obvious to Subjects and these tensions can be more difficult to repair. Hidden tensions take longer to address because it takes time to establish firstly that they exist, and secondly how to overcome them. One of the advantages of using activity theory together with research participants is that the visual representation of the activity theory triangle can facilitate discussions regarding the source of hidden tensions. When used as a theoretical tool, as in this research, activity systems analysis may reveal hidden tensions. The following section provides examples of how activity theory has been used in a range of studies to uncover tensions in activities.

2.4 Activity theory as a research tool

Activity theory has been adopted as a research tool in fields such as human computer interaction (Kuutti, 1996; Mwanza, 2002b; Nardi, 1996), workplace activity (Engeström, 2001; Miettinen & Virkkunen, 2005), product design (Hyysalo, 2005), communication (Roth, 2009), collaborative activity (Nardi, 2005), and teacher professional development (Bourke et al., 2013; Karasavvidis, 2009; Yamagata-Lynch, 2010). Although there is limited evidence of the use of activity theory in the context of family-school programme research, a study undertaken by Fleer and Quiñones (2009) is based on what they term a “cultural-historical approach” (p. 483). Fleer and Quiñones sought to document and understand children’s concepts of the technology available to them within their school, home, and community environments. Moreover, their study sought to examine how teachers’ improved knowledge of how their students’ understanding of technology and the use of it in their homes could help them more closely align “school with the children’s home and community” (p. 488). Study participants were two classes of junior primary aged students from a school in southern

Australia. The study also included the students' teachers and the school principal. Students were provided with disposable cameras and asked to either photograph or video examples of what they perceived to be technology or technological activities. The study aimed to improve teachers' understandings of the broader context from which their students' concepts of technology draw, such as how they were using technology in their homes.

The study was a carefully planned undertaking with participants being assigned clear roles in the research process from the outset. Furthermore, students and family members were well informed of the research intention through a letter presented to the families of participating students. The principles of activity theory can be applied to indicate that the careful planning of the research and the use of an appropriately chosen mediating tool (the cameras) may have supported Subjects to attain their Object of improving their knowledge of the technological understandings of the students involved. It was intended this would help inform classroom practice.

The outcomes from the study showed that although the activity went some way towards informing classroom practice and potentially drawing closer links between home and school, the two teachers involved differed in their interpretations of how the students had responded to their technological tool. For one of the teachers, the information gathered had value but for the other, students' examples of technology were viewed as "problematic" (Fleer & Quiñones, 2009, p. 486). This suggests the gains for home-school collaboration may have been more limited in that classroom. Information was described as problematic because the teacher questioned the extent of the students' understanding of the tasks they were asked to complete and how much input had come from the home. This finding suggests there were tensions between one of the Subjects and the Object of using the information gained to inform further learning opportunities for students in her class.

A further activity theory-based study, although not in the field of family-school research but in the field of education, was undertaken by Meyers (2006). His study provides a more explicit example of how an activity theory framework can support a researcher to uncover tensions. Meyers' study was conducted at six school library sites in the region of Washington, United States of America. Participants using the libraries represented a "diverse sample of students and community demographics" (p. 5). Through the use of activity theory analysis,

Meyers was able to illustrate that major differences existed in the perceptions librarians and classroom teachers had about the ways their school libraries should be used by students. He reported librarians considered the library should be a place where students searched for information. Teachers, however, believed searching for information was merely a time consuming task. Teachers wanted students to focus on information analysis during their library visits. They provided students with “focus folders” (p. 9) to take into the library. The folders included pre-prepared information for students to check and critique during their library visits. Meyers’ research led him to claim that as teachers held power over librarians, their approach was upheld and this left the school libraries in his study very underutilised places. The activity systems of the librarians and the teachers are compared in Figure 4.

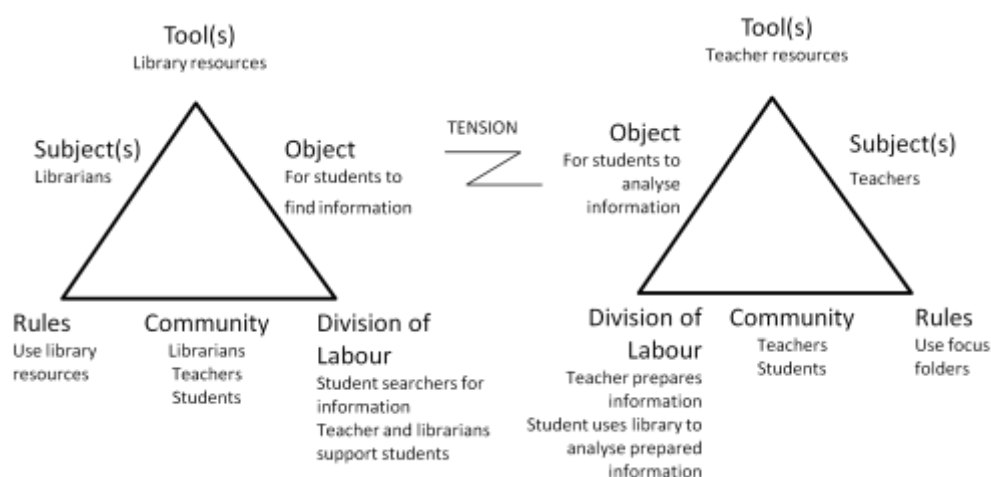


Figure 4: Competing activity systems (adapted from Meyers, 2006, p. 10)

A third generation activity systems diagram has been used to illustrate that a difference between the librarians’ and the teachers’ perception of the Object of this activity led to tensions. Furthermore, the diagram highlights that different Objects require different Tools, Rules, Divisions of Labour, and Community involvement. This reinforces Kaptelinin and Nardi’s (2006) claim that an activity system is a “system of processes orientated toward the motive, where the meaning of any individual component of the system is determined by its role in attaining the motive” (p. 60). In order to attain their desired motives, the teachers developed Tools, Rules, and Divisions of Labour that differed from those the librarians believed were required.

Meyers' (2006) study demonstrates that activity theory analysis can provide an effective tool for uncovering the perspectives (both implicit and explicit) of a range of participants. It also reinforces the Object as the “sense-maker” (Kaptelinin, 2005, p. 5) of the activity or the element that motivates and directs the choice of other elements in the activity.

A penultimate example of the use of activity theory in an educational context, and one that also uncovered tension related to the Object, was a study conducted by Karasavvidis (2009). This study aimed to examine teachers' uptake of a new software tool following their participation in an in-service training programme at the University of Crete. Karasavvidis analysed the on-line postings of 51 teachers who had attended the programme. He focused his investigation on determining whether the teachers' postings indicated they were making use of the new software tool. Postings, however, drew attention to an already full curriculum limiting the capacity teachers had to introduce the new software tool into their classroom programmes.

In Karasavvidis's (2009) analysis of the activity, he suggested the teachers involved were more focused on “covering the prescribed curriculum” than finding ways to improve “student learning” (p. 441). He identified this as a tension between the Tool and the Object of the activity because he believed that had teachers given student learning a greater priority, they would have made a more concerted effort to integrate the Tool into their classroom programmes. This tension is shown in the second generation activity theory diagram in Figure 5.

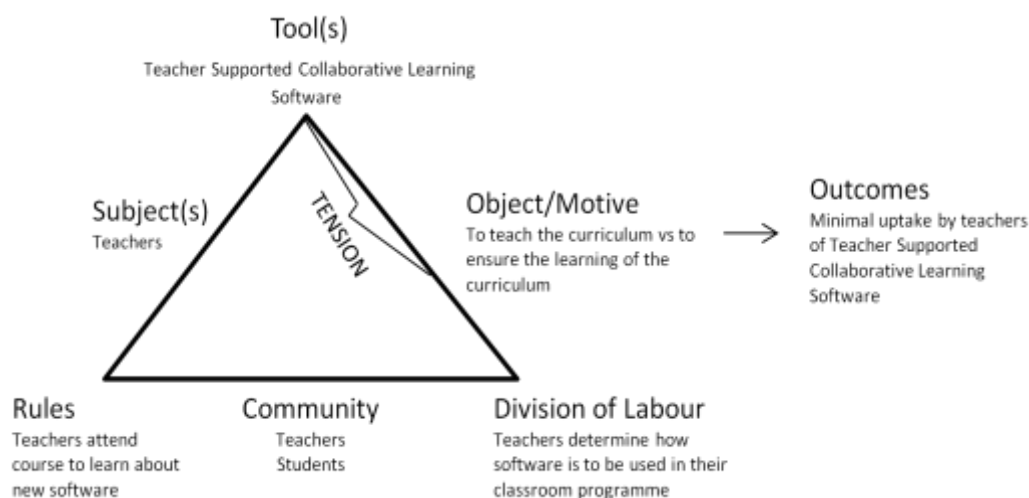


Figure 5: Tensions in a Computer Assisted Collaborative Learning Programme (Karasavvidis, 2009)

According to Karasavvidis (2009), the Object of teaching the curriculum differs from the Object of ensuring learning of the curriculum. The teachers were responsible for determining their own classroom programme and therefore could make choices about the resources they or their students used during class time. Although the teachers had been introduced to the new software, Karasavvidis claimed their perception of Object led to minimal uptake of the new programme.

In a report of a study that investigated the motives of school aged children for realizing learning, Fleer (2011) also emphasised the importance of understanding Subjects' perceptions of Object in order to understand the Outcomes of an activity. Fleer drew upon concepts of activity theory to research how children responded to practices in the school context. Her 2011 article detailing the research she undertook with colleagues from Denmark and Australia describes the actions of just one of the study participants (Fleer, 2011). Researchers found the participant, Andrew, had developed practices that fitted with his perceptions of what was expected in the school context but they were practices that differed from those educators expected of children attending school. Rather than focusing attention on developing competencies such as learning to read and write, Andrew focused on practising "school-like behaviour" (p. 81). His attention was drawn to learning how to comply with rules and routines in the school setting rather than the completion of learning tasks. The researchers claimed his focus came about due to the dissonance he was experiencing between how he behaved at home compared with at school. He learnt to not draw attention to himself so he could practice behaviours he enjoyed more than doing academic tasks. His chosen activities included making a pencil gun and using his head to move his pencil tin across his desk. On the surface, Andrew's behaviours were not creating tensions in the overall context of the classroom environment because he went about his activities in subtle ways. However, tension began to build as Andrew started falling behind with his school work and his teacher began expressing concerns about his progress with his family. This tension reinforces that differences in Object require attention in order to move Subjects towards attaining an Outcome that meets with shared expectations for the activity.

The Meyers (2006), Karasavvidis (2009), and Fleer (2011) studies all offer examples of how activity theory has been used in real world educational research to identify where tensions exist in activities. The studies illuminate that Subjects

often view elements of their activity differently and in so doing, lead to Outcomes that do not align with a shared Object. The capacity for an activity theory framework to clearly identify and illustrate systemic tensions is something that Kaptelinin and Nardi (2012) claim sets activity theory apart from other research tools and further reinforces the value of an activity-theory based study.

While activity theory supports researchers to identify tensions in an activity, how the researcher goes about following-up on the tensions identified depends on the purpose of the research. The research questions may require the researcher to undertake an interpretive study with the aim of making recommendations for practice and theory (as was the case in this research). Alternatively, the research questions may require the researcher to involve participants in their study with the intention that participant involvement may lead to changes in practice. Action research is an example of a research methodology adopted with the intention of investigating change during the research process. Action research is described in the following section along with ethnography as alternative methodological approaches that can complement an activity theory-based study. While both action research and ethnography have many advantages as research methodologies, the following section clarifies that the research questions in this study lent themselves to an approach where activity theory was used as a theoretical framework. In this instance, it was combined with case study methods.

2.4.1 Activity theory as a framework for this research

Activity theory was used as a theoretical framework in this study with the purpose of illuminating tensions and alignments in three case studies. Activity theory provided a thorough and systematic framework for analysis of a large amount of data from Subject groups including: family members, students, and school personnel (school leaders, teachers, and support staff). Investigating the interrelationships between Subject groups and other elements of their activity such as Rules, Tools and Divisions of Labour was expected to illuminate many tensions and possibly some alignments. How those tensions and alignments may have come about, and the effectiveness of efforts to address them was the focus of the interpretive analysis process.

The analysis process in this research uses both second and third generation activity theory frameworks. Second generation activity theory frameworks depict tensions and alignments within an individual Subject group, such as teachers.

Third generation activity theory depicts tensions and alignments between Subject groups, such as between teachers and family members.

One of the most important focuses of the analysis will be on the Object of each activity. This is because, as explained previously, the Object is the element that binds the activity and provides direction. Often the focus of research is on the actions of Subjects rather than trying to investigate the issues that drive their actions. Epstein's Home-School Framework (2002), for example, identifies six types of involvement practice: parenting, communicating, volunteering, learning at home, decision making, and collaborating with the community. The focus of her Framework is on the actions that constitute each type of practice. An activity theory-based study, in contrast, is on analysis of the purposes that drive those actions and the capacities of Subjects to attain their purpose.

Another feature of activity theory that makes it a framework that fits well with the aim of this research is that the units of analysis remain constant. This research aims to investigate the affordance and limitations of the Tools used by three schools to communicate and connect with their communities. The use of Tools can be compared across case studies and discussed in a manner that maintains consistency in terms of the elements included in each investigation.

While using activity theory as a theoretical framework that did not involve participants in the analysis process fitted with the context of this research, activity theory is also widely used in research that involves participants in the actual research process. Much of the research work of Engeström, such as his work in primary health care (Engeström 2007), has been undertaken together with research participants. He argues that improvements to organisations are best achieved through the use of research methods that involve researchers working alongside research participants. He advocates for activity theory-based research to be undertaken this way because he believes activity theory is suited to environments where "researchers enter actual activity systems" (Engeström, 1999, p. 35). He terms these studies as "interventions that aim at the construction of new models of activity jointly with the local participants"(Engeström, 1999, p. 35).

Although there are different approaches to an activity theory-based study, there is general consensus that the aim of an activity theory-based study is to highlight areas of potential improvement that may lead to positive transformation for that organisation (Daniels, Edwards, Engeström, Gallagher, & Ludvigsen, 2010;

Engeström 2007; Lantolf & Thorne, 2006; Sannino, 2011; Sannino, Daniels, & Gutiérrez, 2009). Transformation is defined by Tuomi-Gröhn and Engeström (2003) as occurring when “the interrelated processes and systems of artefacts weave together changing persons and social organizations such that the person experiences becoming someone or something new” (p. 27). Lantolf and Thorne (2006) agree the aim of activity theory-based research should be to provide an analysis that leads to “the development of material and symbolic-conceptual tools necessary to enact positive interventions” (p. 210). They assert the essence of activity theory research “is to take a situation or condition and transform it in an effort to create something qualitatively new” (p. 210). Sannino, Daniels and Gutiérrez (2009) agree “transformations of real practices are promoted while research within activity theory is performed” (p. 7).

The methods used to try to bring about transformation will, according to Barab, Evans and Baek (2004), be determined by the research questions and the research context. The research questions in this thesis required analysis of tensions and alignments in order to discuss the affordances and limitations of the tools of communication used. The research context in each case study was a school. The principals of each school were approached prior to the research getting underway and in all three schools, the principal requested that I interview participants and provide the school with a report that analysed and interpreted the findings of the study. The reports (Appendices A, B, and C) made recommendations for practice and affirmed aspects of good practice. Further follow-up from the reports was not possible due to the busy nature of each school context. Blacker (2009) acknowledges it is necessary that research meets the needs of the researcher while accommodating the purpose of the research community. He explains “the terms under which any research project is commissioned are likely to limit what is possible, and one does what one can, given the opportunities that can be arranged” (p. 36).

As stated earlier, activity theory can also be used in conjunction with other research methods such as ethnographic research (Lin, Chaboyer, Wallis, & Miller, 2013; Rogers, 2008; Roth & Lee, 2007) or action research (Kaptelinin & Nardi, 2006; Sannino, 2011). Both these options would require extended researcher time in the study context. A brief review of these two approaches suggests they can add value to an activity theory-based study although Engeström (2007), an eminent scholar in this field, suggests that given the

opportunity to spend time in the research context, his preference would be to combine activity theory with action research.

Ethnographic research is defined by Berg (2007) as a practice that “places researchers in the midst of whatever it is they study” (p. 172). It is research undertaken predominately with the purpose of learning more about the “insider’s view” of their activity (Berg, 2007, p. 173). Engeström’s (2001) concern with combining activity theory with ethnographic research is that it should be the aim of an activity theory-based study to bring about improvements to practice (Engeström, 2001). He argues, however, that ethnographic researchers are inclined to avoid the “developmental theorising” (Engeström, 2000, p. 151) required to underpin recommendations for change. He asserts that “in the face of the persuasive and often dramatic changes going on in workplaces, such avoidance amounts to hiding one’s head in the sand” (p. 151). He contends a combination of action research and activity theory provides a more sound foundation for transformative focused research.

Action research is usually undertaken with the purpose of supporting organisational change from within an organisation. Engeström (2000) supports the use of action research in activity theory-based studies as he professes, “change and development imported from outside and implemented from above do not work” (p. 152). Action research is defined by Roberts and Dick (2003) as “an intervention methodology using action and research to increase understanding of the research situation and at the same time to pursue change” (p. 486). Engeström (1999) believes activity theory provides a framework well positioned to guide action research. He contends activity theory provides a theoretical framework that rather than being based on “spontaneous ideas and efforts coming from practitioners” (Engeström, 1999, p. 35) involves participants in critical analysis of their organisation. Activity theory according to Engeström puts ideas to the “acid test of practical validity and relevance in interventions that aim at the construction of new models of activity jointly with the local participants” (Engeström, 1999, p. 35). This means key findings and outcomes can “provide a two-way bridge between general theory and specific practice” (Engeström, 1999, p. 36).

While, according to Engestrom, an action research/activity theory combination has many advantages, activity theory can itself provide a researcher with a valuable framework that illuminates tensions and alignments in an organisation

without combining it with action research. As explained above, this research was structured with the aim of making recommendations for practice through analysis of participants' perceptions of the tensions and alignments in their organisation. To achieve this research aim, and to respect the request of the participants' involved, activity theory was used as a theoretical framework from which analysis was made. Analysis was presented to each school in the form of a written report (Appendices A, B and C).

2.5 Chapter summary

This chapter has described activity theory as a theoretical framework that can support thorough and systematic analysis of complex research contexts. Activity theory analysis expands the focus of investigation from one centred on individual elements of an activity such as the perspectives of teachers, to one that encompasses a range of social and contextual factors such as the tools in use and issues of power. It is a framework from which a researcher can focus on interrelationships between elements in order to illuminate tensions and alignments in an organisation.

The following chapter discusses one of the elements that must be considered when analysing reasons for tensions and alignments. That is, the Tool in use as the medium for Subjects to attain their Object. The chapter focuses on the affordances and limitations of tools currently in use in family-school programmes. The chapter argues that there is a need to investigate how tools can better be used to bring about improvements in communication and connection between families, students, and school.

CHAPTER 3: LITERATURE REVIEW

TOOLS OF COMMUNICATION USED IN FAMILY-SCHOOL PROGRAMMES

3.1 Introduction

Research that incorporates a focus on tools in use in family-school programmes is timely for two main reasons. First, because advances in technology have increased the range of tools available to schools and second, because research often overlooks tools as a factor that can impact on the effectiveness of family-school programmes (Grant, 2009).

The Tool in activity theory is understood to be the medium that affords opportunities for two functions to be fulfilled. The first is to provide Subjects opportunities to achieve a goal, for example, to inform parents of their children's learning progress. The second is the "transmission of social knowledge" (Kaptelinin, Nardi, & Macaulay, 1999, p. 32); that is, information transmitted through the Tool can be both physical (words) and mental (underlying messages). Underlying messages are a form of social knowledge. From a socio-cultural perspective, research investigating the use of tools in family-school programmes cannot be undertaken without incorporating elements of context into the research framework. That is because hidden within physical messages are underlying messages that reflect the attitudes and approaches of the personnel involved in delivering or receiving the message. Social messages impact on the understandings and behaviours people associate with the physical message.

This chapter examines different types of tools in use in family-school programmes with a focus on their perceived affordances and limitations. It also aims to take into consideration the context of the tool's use. The chapter begins in Section 3.2 by clarifying the distinction between two different types of tools: psychological and technical. Section 3.3 explains that both psychological and technical tools can offer stakeholders affordances. Section 3.4 examines various tools currently in use in family-school programmes. First, the affordances of paper based tools such as newsletters, portfolios, and student portfolios are

discussed, followed by the affordances of face-to-face forms of communication. The section then considers the affordances of technological tools such as computers and telephones.

In Section 3.5 school cultural practice is introduced as a tool that has the potential to provide opportunities for communication and connection. Establishing how a tool with mainly psychological features such as cultural practice can facilitate opportunities for communication and connection is a precursor to one of the case studies in this research.

3.2 Activity theory and Tools

From a socio-cultural perspective, the development of all tools and the manner by which tools are used is a reflection of a person's social and cultural experience. As Kaptelinin and Nardi (2006) explain "by appropriating a tool, and integrating it into activities, human beings also appropriate the experience accumulated in the culture" (p.56). As activity theory is founded on the principles of socio-cultural theory, the Tool in an activity theory study is understood to both influence and be influenced by many features of the social context in which it is used (Barab et al., 2004; Kaptelinin, 2003; Kaptelinin & Nardi, 2006; Roth & Lee, 2007; Yamagata-Lynch, 2010)

In his research, Vygotsky distinguished between two types of tools: psychological and physical, although he used the terms "psychological" and "technical" tools (Vygotsky, 1997, p. 87). Vygotsky (1997) explained how he understood psychological tools should be distinguished from technical tools:

The most essential feature distinguishing the psychological tool from the technical one is that it is meant to act upon mind and behaviour, whereas the technical tool, which is also inserted as a middle term between the activity of man and the external object, is meant to cause changes in the object itself. The psychological tool changes nothing in the object. It is a means of influencing the object. Therefore, in the instrumental act we see activity toward oneself and not toward the object (p. 87).

Whether they are psychological or physical (technical), tools change the structure of human behaviour and human mental processes (Kaptelinin & Nardi, 2006). Physical tools are developed to influence things and seem easy to recognise, for example, a book or a computer; while psychological tools, being tools that help

people to influence themselves or others, require further clarification as they are not easily recognisable.

3.2.1 Psychological tools

Literature related to Vygotsky's research highlights he took a particular interest in the notion of psychological tools (Cole & Engeström, 1997; Daniels et al., 2007; Wertsch, 1998). He identified maps, signs, symbols, and language as examples of psychological tools. Although all these tools have physical properties, they remain symbols that have no value to an individual unless the individual is able to draw from their experience, culture, and knowledge in order to bring meaning to them. Much of Vygotsky's (1978) research focused on how meaning is added to psychological tools so it can lead to improvements in an individual's performance. Adding meaning, according to socio-cultural theory requires both social input and internal effort. Internal effort was termed internalisation by Vygotsky (1978) who described it as a process whereby subjects develop psychological tools in their head to help them attribute meaning to symbolic tools such as maps, signs, symbols, and language. Meaning continues to be mediated during internalisation, but mediated in the head rather than externally (Kaptelinin & Nardi, 2006).

Kaptelinin and Nardi (2006) explain that Vygotsky referred to internalisation as "growing inside"⁴ (p. 284) because once internalised, a symbol is "capable of organising individual, cognitive and learning functions in different contexts and in application to different tasks" (Kozulin, 2003, p. 26). From a socio-cultural perspective, the meanings associated with symbols are determined by the culture of the people or organisation in which they are appropriated. They have no meaning "outside the cultural conventions that infuse them with meaning and purpose" (Kozulin, 2003, p. 26).

Vygotsky's (1978) belief that psychological tools are assimilated through social activity and later internalised into individual consciousness underpins his stance that each psychological function appears twice in development; once in the form of actual interaction between people, and the second time as an inner internalised form of the function. This stance is a widely recognised cornerstone of Vygotskian theory (Kaptelinin & Nardi, 2006). It supposes that activities begin as social acts and then become internalised as normalised ways of behaving. As

⁴ Vygotsky used the Russian term *vrashchivanie* which has been translated to mean growing inside (Kaptelinin & Nardi, 2006)

an example, patterns of behaviour in an organisation are often repeated and through repetition, what starts out as uncertainty for members of that organisation becomes “accepted norms” (Ghosh, 2004, p. 307).

One of the three case studies in this research identifies cultural practice as a psychological tool. It is a psychological tool that may differ from the psychological tools described by Vygotsky because culture can develop through internalisation of conceptual messages rather than physical symbols. Subjects may not be aware of the existence of the cultural practice in which they are immersed and yet it can be mediating their thoughts and actions. This suggests that research identifying cultural practice as a tool of communication and connection may add significant value not only to family-school research but to activity theory-based research in general.

According to Wertsch (1985), Vygotsky’s concept of psychological tools was of tools with symbolic properties. The psychological component came about because symbolic tools required psychological mediation in order to give them meaning. Wertsch (1985) provided an extensive list of examples of the psychological tools that were referred to by Vygotsky. The list includes: language, mnemonic techniques, algebraic symbol systems, works of art, writing, schemes, diagrams, maps, mechanical drawings and all sorts of signs (p. 79). Kozulin (1998), an eminent scholar in the field of psychological tools, also refers to psychological tools as symbolic artefacts like “signs, symbols, texts, formulae, graphic-symbolic devices” (p. 1). Although cultural practice does not appear specifically in either list, it is a tool that can guide people’s thoughts and actions. It is a tool that offers affordances to the people who identify with the organisation or social group where the culture is being supported.

3.2.2 Tool affordance

In order to understand how cultural practice can be thought of as a tool that offers stakeholders affordances, the term requires further clarification. The notion of ‘affordance’ can be attributed to the work of James J. Gibson (1979). Gibson coined the term to explain that humans (along with other species) orient towards items in their environment in terms of their affordances, that is, the possibilities they offer for action. As an ecological psychologist, Gibson focused on the affordances of natural items, describing affordances of the environment as being “what it *offers* the animal, what it *provides* or *furnishes*, either for good or ill” (Gibson, 1979, p. 127, italics in original). A tree, for example, offers an elephant

shade and a bird a place to nest. Gibson's focus on the environment established that affordances have physical dimensions but further work in this area highlights that affordances can extend beyond physical attributes. Bang (2008) emphasises the need to include attention to the affordances of *things*, *social others* and *self* as such attention enriches our understandings of human behaviours. This section develops these notions further and also considers that affordances have different dimensions.

Kaptelinin and Nardi (2006, 2012) have written extensively about tool affordance in the field of Human Computer Interaction (HCI). They emphasise that when discussing the affordance of tools, it is important to clarify that tools can offer users both physical and psychological opportunities. Rather than physical and psychological, Kaptelinin and Nardi (2012, p. 6) refer to the "handling" and "effector" affordances of tools. Handling affordances they define as the possibilities for interacting "with" the physical tool (p. 6) while effector affordances are the possibilities for using tools to make an effect "on" an Object (p. 6). To limit a study to describing just the physical properties of the tool (such as the features that enable subjects to transmit information) would be akin to focusing on just the handling affordances of the tool. This research aims to look beyond this level and to incorporate an investigation of effector affordances. Effector affordances can only be examined by taking into account wider elements of the context within which the tool is being used. This is the benefit of an activity theory-based study where elements of context such as community involvement and the perceptions of participants are elements incorporated into the study.

Daniels (2008) applauds the use of activity theory as a theoretical framework to support researchers to understand that factors of context, particularly human factors, influence the affordances of the tools. Daniels (2008) explains "because of its focus on irreducible tensions between subjects and cultural tools, activity theory stands in contrast to other theories that focus just on instruments or subjects in isolation" (p. 71). Activity theory's focus on tools in context has been reported to have brought many positive benefits to workplace research, such as helping users to overcome fragmentation in their workplace (Balakrishnan, Fussell, Kiesler, & Kittur, 2010), supporting workers to focus on the content of their work rather than technological issues (Bardram, 2009) and to improving their computer related experiences at work (Vaida, Mynatt, & Edwards, 2008). As an example, an activity theory-based study undertaken by Yamagata-Lynch (2010) illuminated the benefits and issues associated with a professional

development programme developed by the Teacher Institute for Curriculum Knowledge (TICKIT) at the University of Indiana School of Education.

Two schools were involved in the Yamagata-Lynch (2010) study. One school had four teachers and the other three teachers involved in a yearlong TICKIT programme that was aimed at supporting teachers to integrate technology into their school curricula. Yamagata-Lynch reported the teachers found the programme afforded them many benefits such as introducing them to new ways of working collaboratively, and improving their confidence in their use of technology tools. However, the busy lives of teachers limited the affordances the tools could offer them. Teachers reported that their regular school responsibilities limited the time they could spend attaining their technology integration goals. Yamagata-Lynch concluded it was not always possible to eliminate or reduce the contextual tensions that influence the affordances of tools as often these issues are outside the realm of influence of the researcher or the participants. However, she encouraged the continuing use of activity theory to illuminate tensions in anticipation that attention to issues such as workload may eventually bring about systemic change.

A study reporting similar outcomes in terms of the tensions created during the introduction of a new professional development initiative for teachers was described by Bourke, Mentis and O'Neill (2013). The authors researched and analysed a New Zealand professional learning and development (PLD) initiative that aimed to use narrative assessment to improve learning opportunities for students with high or very high learning needs. Bourke, Mentis and O'Neill also reported that the affordances of the narrative assessment learning tool were greatly impacted by features of context. They used activity systems analysis to identify that tensions existed between the Tool, Subjects, Community, Rules, and Division of Labour. These tensions impacted on the capacity for Subjects to attain the Object of completing a narrative assessment programme. A tension between the Tool and Division of Labour developed, for example, because teachers grappled with understanding whether assessment should be their role or the role of their teacher aide. Other tensions arose between Subjects and Division of Labour; and Rules and Tool as teachers struggled to allocate the time required to administer the programme, and tried to connect the relevance of the assessment tool to their own understandings of their teaching practice. Overall, tensions limited the affordances initial survey results suggested the assessment tool could offer teachers, students, and family members. An initial survey had

indicated teachers would be willing to adopt the tool into their programme as they understood it could afford stakeholders opportunities to share in ongoing, meaningful student learning information. However, resources, perceptions of role and perceptions of the purpose of the activity created tensions that limited the affordance the tool seemed theoretically to be able to offer. This highlights that the affordances of a tool can only be fully understood from within the socio-cultural context in which the tool is used. Similarly, the affordances of tools used in schools are influenced by many different contextual factors.

3.3 Tools of communication used in schools

Tools of communication used by organisations have seen many advances in recent years. However, “schooling largely remains one of the exceptions” (M. Lee & Finger, 2010, p. 3). Lee and Finger explain that “the vast majority of the world’s schools continue in their traditional form, still heavily reliant on paper based technologies” (p. 3). This situation prevails according to Cunningham and Chase (2003) because schools are inclined to wait for technology to become more cost-effective. However, it is also the case because not all families, especially families in lower socio-economic areas, can access information from sources that require technology. As explained in the Introduction, Statistics New Zealand (2012) reported that in 2012 only an average of 64 percent of households with a combined income of \$30,000 per annum or less had internet access in their homes. If schools are purchasing technology with the specific purpose of communicating and connecting with their community, they may be forced to avoid the purchase of some technology items if they are intending to reach all families.

This section reviews a range of research that describes examples of tools of communication and connection currently in use by schools. It highlights issues that limit the effectiveness of many tools and reinforces the need for further research that addresses some of the issues raised. Issues are discussed with reference to the handling and effecter affordances of each tool.

The limited access low socio-economic communities have to tools that require technology reinforces the need for research to consider tools for use in family-school communication and connection that are readily available to stakeholders. This is an issue considered in the final section where school culture is discussed.

3.3.1 Paper format tools

Most schools rely heavily on paper format tools for communicating with their school community (M. Lee & Finger, 2010). Common reasons for using paper format tools include: to provide general school information, share samples of student work, and present student achievement information.

General school information has been provided to families in the form of a paper school newsletter for many years (Graham-Clay, 2005). Newsletters can include information about school events, children's special achievements, and topics of general interest. Many schools are moving to an electronic form of newsletter because it can be accessed more readily and because the paper format version is often left in children's bags and not passed on to family members (Grant, 2009). However, the electronic form is not accessible to all families. Nevertheless, school newsletters have the potential to provide many families with helpful, one way information of a general rather than a personal nature (Grant, 2009).

Student portfolios are used in many schools as a means of collecting individual student's work samples into a personal book or folder. They are used for a variety of purposes ranging from being a place to store students' work to being part of an integrated classroom programme (Juniewicz, 2003). They are also often used for the purpose of allowing students to take their work home to show family members. A portfolio provides a medium for sharing information of a more personal nature than a newsletter, although the capacity of portfolios to provide information that is helpful to students and/or their family members is regularly questioned (Juniewicz, 2003).

One of the common concerns with the use of portfolios is that stakeholders can have different perceptions of their purpose. Not only may the perceptions of the purpose of a portfolio differ between family members and teachers, for example, but teachers themselves are at times unclear about why they are preparing portfolios (Juniewicz, 2003). One way of improving this situation, according to Juniewicz (2003), is to incorporate portfolios into the student-led conference programme. He proposed that would promote opportunities for using them in ways that were meaningful to teachers, students, and their families, and would also help clarify their purpose. In his research which was undertaken at a school in the United States with students in Grades six to eight, he found, however, that teachers were hesitant to use portfolios during student-led conferences due to

the time required to prepare the portfolios prior to the conference taking place and the substantial staff development needed to implement the idea effectively. Given that his findings suggested the purpose of using portfolios required clarification for them to become useful as a tool for “authentic assessment” (Juniewicz, 2003, p. 74), the reluctance of teachers to incorporate them into conferences seemed to limit their value as a tool for meaningful communication and connection.

Fu, Lamme, Hubbard and Power (2002) also found it was important to find ways for stakeholders to understand the purpose of their portfolio programme if portfolios were to be of benefit to stakeholders. Fu et al. conducted interviews with two third grade students, their mothers, and their teacher following their viewing of writing samples from the students’ portfolios. The focus of both the mothers interviewed was on the mechanics of their children’s writing. They expressed concerns about the neatness of the handwriting, the spelling, capitalisation, and punctuation. The teacher had a very different focus. She commented on each child’s strengths and the progress each student had made. Although the students were only at third grade level, they made comments about their own work that demonstrated their ability to critique and monitor their own progress. One child acknowledged her difficulty with spelling and punctuation but said her goal was to try to improve those aspects of her writing.

Fu et al. (2002) concluded that portfolios could be a tool of communication that had benefits, including that they had the potential to involve students in home-school communication, but that their usefulness was dependent on a shared understanding of their purpose. This finding is in line with that of the Juniewicz (2003) study discussed above and reinforces the importance of research that investigates how opportunities for communication and connection can be improved so the purpose of an activity can be clarified between stakeholders.

The other common reason for using paper format tools is to report information related to student progress to stakeholders (Ward & Thomas, 2013). The information contained in student reports is information that New Zealand schools are mandated to provide to parents (New Zealand Ministry of Education, 2013c). It is therefore understandable that a pen and paper format is adopted given it is a medium that can provide all families with access to the information. However, the value of the reports depends on the understandings the stakeholders involved bring to the information they are provided with. Since 2010, Ward and Thomas

(2013) have been reporting to the New Zealand Ministry of Education on progress with the implementation of National Standards in New Zealand schools.⁵ National standards were introduced to New Zealand schools in 2010 with the intention of providing families with student reporting information that keeps them “well informed about their children’s learning and, therefore, more able to support this in the home” (Ward & Thomas, 2013, p. 2). The *National Standards: School Sample Monitoring and Evaluation Project* (Ward & Thomas, 2013) includes information gathered from end-of-year reports as well as online surveys of principals, Board of Trustees Chairpersons, and teachers. In the critical area of whether parents were finding the information they were receiving on National Standards easy to understand,⁶ Ward and Thomas reported that in 2010 just 40 percent of school end-of-year reports were clearly understood by parents (p. 57). In 2011, that figure rose to 50 percent (p. 57) but it dropped again in 2012 to 43 percent (p. 56). In other words, according to Ward and Thomas (2013), over half the written reports going home require an additional form of communication and connection if the information included in them is able to be clearly understood by parents. This figure reiterates the need for research that provides further insights into effective ways to build relationships between families and school so parents can feel comfortable about asking questions and discussing reports with school personnel.

The reports and studies cited above have described the handling affordances of paper format tools as being that they are tools readily available to the large majority of schools (M. Lee & Finger, 2010), and that they are tools that provide a medium for the transmission of information to most homes, albeit usually one way communication (Graham-Clay, 2005; Grant, 2009).

The capacity for paper format tools to involve stakeholders in meaningful acts of communication and connection are limited by issues such as that not all families receive the written information (sometimes it is left in students’ bags) and that information is often one-way (Grant, 2009). Furthermore, stakeholders may be unclear of the purpose of the information they receive and just as alarmingly, there is a good chance they do not fully understand the information they receive

⁵ All primary and intermediate schools in New Zealand are required by the New Zealand Ministry of Education to report to parents at least twice a year on the progress and achievement of their children in relation to National Standards.

⁶ Ward and Thomas (2013) provide illustrations to clarify their criteria for ‘clear to understand’ on pages 57-60.

in their children's school reports (Fu et al., 2002; Juniewicz, 2003; Thomas & Ward, 2011).

Face-to-face communication has the potential to mitigate some of these issues as it offers family members and students opportunities to ask questions and develop clearer understandings. Whether this typically happens during face-to-face communication, however, is an issue addressed in the following section.

3.3.2 Face-to-face

Face-to-face communication mainly takes the form of parent-teacher conferences, home visiting, and informal discussions. In a review of 754 surveys from the parents of primary school aged children, Schagen and Wylie (2009) found parent-teacher conferences were the most regularly used way for parents to find out information about their children's education (used by 86 percent of parents responding to the survey). Another way parents source information was reported to be through informal discussions about their children's work (63 percent).⁷ These outcomes were similar to those reported by Minke and Anderson (2003) who also found parent-teacher conferences were a widely used method for parents to receive information about their children. However, Minke and Anderson noted some concern with parent-teacher conferences as a form of parents engaging in meaningful communication. Data drawn from the 283 parents of elementary school aged children surveyed in the Minke and Anderson study showed that issues parents believed should have been confronted during conferences were often smoothed over, leaving room for only a limited amount of honest dialogue (p. 50). Minke and Anderson reported parents believed conferences often followed a standard procedure like "ritualized occasions" (p. 50). They found parents anticipated they would be given an opportunity to discuss their children but often the meetings were dominated by teachers while parents' concerns or suggestions were left unheard.

Another study example that depicted similar concerns but at high school level was the outcome of research undertaken by Power and Clarke (2000). They interviewed 68 parents from a diverse range of SES backgrounds, all of whom had children attending one of four high schools in England. Most of the parents interviewed said they believed the parent-teacher conference process was important because it enabled them to put a face to the name of their child's

⁷ Some parents use both forms therefore the figure does not equal 100 percent

teacher and vice versa, their attendance enabled the teacher to identify them as the parent of their child. However, apart from that advantage, Power and Clark reported parents were almost universally critical about parent-teacher conferences “as a means of finding out what they needed to know [about their children], let alone acting as a forum for working together to improve their children’s educational progress” (p. 40). Parents indicated feelings of frustration around the conference structure, they felt unsatisfied with the language used, the examples of work shown to them, and the one-way discussion that always seemed to prevail (Power & Clark, 2000). These comments indicate a desire for parents to have greater opportunities for reciprocal (two-way) communication. The comments show similarities with those reported by Minke and Anderson (2003) in the study cited earlier whereby parents felt the parent-teacher interview process left them unsatisfied and believing their voices had not been heard.

A study from an early childhood centre involving a much smaller number of participants also reported that parents wanted to be able to share some of their experiences with teachers and to have opportunities to ask about social issues that involve their children. Cheatham and Ostrosky (2011) conducted interviews with eight parents whose children were attending an early childhood centre in mid-western United States of America. All children in the study qualified for free or reduced price lunch indicating the study context was a lower socio-economic community. The researchers reported parents found the conference process to be somewhat frustrating because teachers gave most of the advice while their own skills and expertise were largely ignored. This resulted in the parents expressing a lack of willingness to become involved in further interactions with educators.

Both the Power and Clark (2000) and the Cheatham and Ostrosky (2011) studies refer to teachers being in a position of power during a parent-teacher conference. Power and Clark contend it is the teacher who holds “the power props and acts as a powerful gatekeeper to privileged information” (p. 44). Cheatham and Ostrosky reported that in their study “teachers acted as advice providers, while parents largely were advice recipients” (p. 40). The professional responsibility of teachers to inform parents of their children’s progress means it is understandable for them to assume a position different from that of parents, but the research studies cited indicate there is a need to explore ways in which parents can take a role where they feel their needs are being met, and they feel empowered to provide support to their children to enhance their educational progress.

Understanding there are concerns with the parent-teacher conference format led Taylor-Patel (2009) to research the benefits of the student-led conference model. She defined a student-led conference as “a conference between 30 and 60 minutes long, run by students for their parents about their learning” (p. 103). Taylor-Patel conducted her research in two schools in Auckland, New Zealand. Her data came from interviews with Year three to six students, their parents, and their teachers.

Taylor-Patel (2009) reported that parents participating in student-led conferences found them to be a very different experience from traditional parent-teacher conferences. She claimed the overall response of the parents interviewed to the concept of student-led conferences was very positive. Following a student-led conference, parents “understood aspects of their child’s learning more clearly and [understood] how they could support their child’s learning at home” (p. 113). However, she also found there were many concerns with the student-led conference approach. These included that the time required to conduct them meant they could be held just once a year. Therefore, parents were not receiving up to date information. Moreover, the success of the conference was dependent on the ability of the teacher to have effectively engaged their students in conversations about their learning prior to the conference taking place. Teachers required professional development to support them to develop classroom programmes that built on a student-centred philosophy and to develop skills that enabled them to share information with their parents (Taylor-Patel, 2009).

Interestingly, Taylor-Patel (2009) found the purpose that parents had for attending the conferences differed from the purpose the students and teachers had prepared for. Students and teachers prepared for a learning focus but Taylor-Patel found many parents were just as interested in finding out “information about student behaviour and social engagement at school” (p. 109). In one school, this led teachers to follow-up on the student portion of the conference by making a time for parents to meet just with teachers so they could ask further question about their children. In the other school, teachers telephoned parents to discuss their children’s progress in social and emotional areas prior to the conference taking place so that the conference itself could retain a focus on student learning. Taylor-Patel suggested these additional ‘meetings’ provided opportunities for parents to be heard. However, it also meant that rather than parents feeling disempowered during the conference (as was reported in the Power and Clark (2000) and the Cheatham and Ostrosky (2011)

studies above) it was students who felt disempowered because they knew their parents were having their own private conversations separately from the conference they were involved in.

The other concern was that although Taylor-Patel (2009) found student-led conferences (rather than parent-teacher interviews) improved the attendance levels of parents, there remained hard-to-reach parents who did not attend. This was a concern of parent teacher interviews also discussed by Power and Clark (2000) who specified that it was the parents of children with behavioural problems who were underrepresented at interviews as were lower socio-economic parents. Many of these parents were the ones teachers would especially have liked the opportunity to share information with about their children.

The issues with parent-teacher or student-led conferences, therefore, are that they usually follow a format designed by school personnel that can leave parents feeling disempowered and still looking for answers to some of their questions. Parents may want clarification of the information they have been given or they may want to ask about the well being of their children but feel disempowered to ask. Well being is an issue parents want answers to but teachers do not always give them an opportunity to address. Conferences are also time consuming events and therefore only take place at certain intervals throughout the school year.

The second form of face-to-face communication to be reviewed is the practice of home visiting. Home visiting can be carried out on a needs basis, such as when teachers have a concern about a child, or when teachers want to learn more about the home circumstances of their students. Home visits offer teachers the opportunity to speak one-on-one with parents without parents facing barriers such as transport, child care, or unease with the school environment.

Hiatt-Michael (2010) reported that in some regions in the United States of America, such as California, Kentucky, and Seattle, teachers receive guidance on how to conduct home visits including suggestions about what to take with them and how to greet families. Although time consuming, Hiatt-Michael claimed these training sessions are worth the effort because there are many benefits associated with home visiting.

The benefits of home visiting were also explicated in a study undertaken by Meyer and Mann (2006) involving 26 K-2 teachers from a Midwestern state in the

United States of America. The teachers in this study were required to visit the homes of as many of their students as possible prior to the beginning of the 2004-2005 school year. It was reported they visited 76 percent of homes. The teachers completed a survey about their home visiting experience and repeated a similar survey towards the end of the school year. Meyer and Mann found the home visits had improved the teachers' understanding of the home circumstances of their students. Parents and students, however, were not interviewed meaning outcomes discussed could not be compared between stakeholder groups. It is also interesting to note that not all homes were visited. Home visiting is a form of communication and connection that requires a great deal of time and perseverance in order to reach all families. It is quite probable that it was the hard to reach families who were not visited, which again leads to the conclusion that further research is required to find better ways to reach all families. Home visiting is also an infrequent way of communicating which limits the opportunities it provides to build healthy relationships between families, students, and school.

The final form of face-to-face communication to be reviewed in this section is informal communication. This can take a variety of forms, such as parents' visits to school to support events, or informal discussions while dropping off or collecting children from school. Informal face-to-face communication reduces as children move through grade levels (Deslandes & Bertrand, 2005; Drummond & Stipek, 2004; Epstein, 2001) yet "the frequency of casual conversation has been shown to directly affect the quality of the parent-teacher relationship" (Clarke et al., 2010, p. 70). Although it may be assumed parents will raise issues of concern during informal conversations, barriers prevent many parents from doing so. Barriers include parents' beliefs of role construction and self-efficacy (Auerbach, 2007; Hill, 2010; Hoover-Dempsey et al., 2005) as well as cultural differences. In a review of the extent to which parents raise concerns with school about their children's education, Schagen and Wylie (2009) found just over half the parents (53 percent) in their survey of 754 parents had raised concerns during visits to school. Schagen and Wylie's study included a diverse range of participants so they were able to quantify their report with data that showed parents without a qualification themselves and Pasifika and Asian parents were the least likely to have raised a concern during communication with their children's teacher.

In sum, the handling affordances of face-to-face communication are that they provide the potential for more in-depth discussion than paper format tools but

effector affordances can limit the value of the handling affordances. Effector affordances are influenced by issues such as the lack of honest dialogue (Minke & Anderson, 2003), the tendency for a one-way conversation to develop (Cheatham & Ostrosky, 2011; Power & Clark, 2000; Taylor-Patel, 2009), and the power parents' perceive is held by teachers (Harris & Goodall, 2008; McKenna & Millen, 2013). It is important to recognise also that effector affordances are impacted by barriers such as parents' role construction and beliefs of self-efficacy for communicating their concerns (Auerbach, 2007; Hill, 2010; Hoover-Dempsey et al., 2005). These are the types of barriers discussed in greater detail in Chapter Five.

There are themes consistently presenting during this review of the tools of communication currently being used by school. They include the importance of taking into account the purposes of all stakeholders, and the importance of providing opportunities for reciprocal communication. Advances in technology have opened possibilities for parents to receive and send information in a manner that may better fit with the needs of all stakeholders. Such forms of communication have the potential to reduce some of the limitations described in the programmes above. The following section examines how computers and telephones are used in schools and whether tools with technological capabilities can better accommodate for the different purposes stakeholders have for wanting to communicate about school issues, and the need to provide opportunities for reciprocal communication.

3.3.3 Computers

Schools use computers in a variety of ways to facilitate communication between home and school. Many schools have developed online 'intranets' and managed learning environments or 'Learning Platforms' to allow parents and students access to information and resources from their home. A Learning Platform is "the integrated development and use of a number of different tools and applications" (Selwyn, Banaji, Hadjithoma-Garstka, & Clark, 2011, p. 315). It involves the use of the school's shared management information system to "support the routine recording and sharing of data between school leaders and administrators, teachers, students and parents" (Selwyn et al., 2011, p. 315). A school's Learning Platform is expected to have the capacity to relay information via email, mobile technologies, online discussion boards and other forms of internet based messaging.

Selwyn, Banaji, Hadjithoma and Clark (2011) undertook research to determine how effective Learning Platforms were at delivering information to school communities. The schools involved in their study were six primary and six secondary schools in England. The schools were selected as a representative sample of schools making sustained use of Learning Platform technology, and as such were not representative of schools throughout England. This was because many schools considered for the study had not reached the required level of technological capability (although the researchers claimed the schools involved were representative in terms of size and diversity of types - urban/rural, co-educational/single sex). They do not, however, detail the SES levels of the schools, hence it is not clear whether the sample of schools represents a cross-section of SES communities. This is important because in England, as in New Zealand, familiarity with technology differs across SES levels due to the access different communities have to computers and/or internet information (United Kingdom Office for National Statistics, 2012).

Selwyn, Banaji, Hadjithoma, and Clark (2011) conducted interviews with school leaders, communication technology co-ordinators, classroom teachers, and parents/caregivers. It was found Learning Platforms were predominantly being used for one-way communication purposes such as to provide information bulletins to parents in a newsletter type format. Some teachers were also posting homework on the Learning Platform and messages to parents regarding homework tasks. Most schools were putting attendance, assessment, and behaviour information on to their Learning Platforms.

The researchers described parent reaction to the Learning Platforms as “mixed” (Selwyn et al., 2011, p. 318). Some parents regularly accessing the Learning Platforms reported feeling more connected to the school but the uptake of parent usage was not high. As may be expected, school personnel were much more regular users than parents, an issue school personnel attributed to parents not feeling a connection with school in general rather than not finding the features of the Learning Platform useful in their own right. Teachers said they believed some parents just saw the Platforms as an additional burden to their already busy lives. One parent commented this was in part due to the fact that the Platform was predominantly just another means by which school could broadcast information to parents, rather than parents being provided with opportunities to participate in meaningful dialogue. The researchers concluded with the comment “at best Learning Platforms were being used to ‘show-case’ examples of finished

work, provide detailed reporting on student progress, and engage distanced and remote parents” (Selwyn et al., 2011, p. 322). This comment reinforces the one-way nature of Learning Platform use.

Similar concerns with Learning Platforms were raised in a study undertaken by Shayne (2008). Shayne interviewed the parents of 292 students in Grades six to eight from a school in Missouri in the United States of America. He found parents were most commonly using Learning Platforms to check for homework, important dates, and assessment information. He reported that although many parents preferred the on-line format of a Learning Platform to a paper format, there were also parents who asked for information to be written down for them as they found navigating sites on the Internet difficult. Different teachers had different ways of updating sites and reporting information and this was also confusing for some parents.

The issue that not all low SES families have internet access affects the outcomes of both Shayne’s (2008) research and the research undertaken by Selwyn, Banaji, Hadjithoma-Garstka and Clark (2011) as only families using Learning Platforms could be interviewed. Further to this, both studies have highlighted that many contextual factors influence the effectiveness of computers to communicate and connect with families.

Findings from the Selwyn et al. (2011) and Shayne (2008) research suggest that although the handling affordances of computers and computer networks are many including that they allow for the transmission of diverse forms of information, the manner in which they were being used in the schools in their studies limited their effecter affordances. Learning Platforms provide schools and homes with the potential to communicate regularly, and with information that is relevant and up to date. However, Selwyn et al. found that often information was one-way and that the effectiveness of Learning Platforms was strongly influenced by the culture of the school. They argued school culture needed to shift towards a more “parent-centeredness” (p. 323) approach (although they did not suggest what this would look like). Shayne (2008) reported information on school websites could be confusing for parents. The notion that family members appreciate opportunities to share their concerns with school has been raised often throughout this Literature Review. The manner in which Learning Platforms are being used by school indicates family members are being provided with few opportunities to share or interact with school personnel through the use of

computers. This, therefore, means we are still struggling to find a form of communication that schools can use to effectively communicate and connect with their school community.

Research associated with the use of telephones as a tool of communication has shown that while telephones have features that facilitate opportunities for regular communication, these opportunities are also limited by the contexts in which they are used.

3.3.4 Telephones

For many years, school personnel have used fixed line telephones to ring the parents of their students. Telephone calls to parents are sometimes made because school personnel wish to involve parents in dialogue about their children's educational progress but more commonly, supported by my personal experience, telephone calls are made to inform parents about health or behavioural issues concerning their children. Although fixed line telephones may offer a means to engage parents in up to date dialogue about their children, not all teachers can access a telephone quickly and therefore often the opportunity to provide parents with timely information is lost. This is because telephones are not available in all classrooms and therefore teachers have to wait until after student contact time to make a call home. This situation also usually means teachers make the call without the student present and the student misses an opportunity to receive timely reinforcement from their parents. Mobile phones, however, have the potential to provide teachers with the opportunity to contact family members from anywhere at any time (Kukulska-Hulme & Traxler, 2005; Pohio & Falloon, 2010). Importantly also, mobile phones are a tool more widely available to low income families than computers. The New Zealand Department of Statistics (2010) *Household Use of Information and Communication Technology*, reported 85 percent of individuals over 15 years of age had access to a mobile phone in the year 2009 compared with 75 percent of households that had internet access.

An innovative idea underpinned a New Zealand home-school programme that adopted mobile phones as their medium for communication (Petchell & Glynn, 2009). Twelve families with children at a Hamilton primary school took part in a study aimed at trying to reduce the incidences of negative behaviours at the school. School personnel identified 14 students who were causing concern and met with the family members of each of those students. Twelve of the 14 families

agreed to participate in a trial behaviour change programme using mobile phones. Those families were each sent a daily text message related to the behaviour agreed to be targeted. Importantly, that message could report either positive or negative information about their child's behaviour.

The outcomes of the texting programme were reported to be very successful in terms of reducing inappropriate behaviours. School personnel attributed the success of the programme to the collaboration between home and school and the incorporation of positive messages. Positive and regular messaging they believed helped to build a relationship based on trust. School personnel had been careful to spend time talking with parents at an early stage in order to establish a plan that was built around an understanding of each child's personal life - their interests, their likes and their dislikes. This was a process that also added a component of sensitivity into the relationships formed. This information supported parents to be able to implement rewards for positive behaviour and to provide appropriate consequences for negative behaviour. In confirmation of the notion discussed in Chapter Three that parents often do not know how to support their children, Petchell and Glynn (2009) found parents did not know how to deal with problems on their own, but when they were listened to and supported, they were "open to suggestions" (p. 41). These suggestions helped parents to understand how they could reward positive behaviour and provide consequences for negative behaviour that were meaningful to them and to their children. The combined effort to develop the programme also reinforced to the students that school and home were working together.

The Petchell and Glynn (2009) study is an example of a carefully planned programme based on contributions from both home and school but, further to this, it is an example of a programme adopting an innovative and effective medium for communicating between home and school. Mobile phones were used because all parents indicated they had text capability. Petchell and Glynn attributed much of the success of the programme to the regular and consistent communication afforded through the use of mobile technology. This study confirms mobile technology can afford many benefits to a family-school programme, although these benefits are dependent on parents sharing a commitment to the purpose of the programme and an understanding of their role. In the Petchell and Glynn study, purpose was a collaborative effort and roles were clarified from the outset. An activity theory investigation pays specific attention to elements of both purpose and role construction. The Petchell and

Glynn study reinforces both these elements play an important role in the effectiveness of family-school programmes and therefore further emphasises the potential value of an activity theory-based study for researching family-school programmes.

Kervin (2005) also supports the notion that mobile phones can provide opportunities for innovative ways to communicate between home and school. She investigated whether the use of a mobile phone in an Australian Year six classroom could strengthen home-school links. The students in the classroom had the use of one mobile telephone between them. They were permitted to access it whenever they chose. They could send and receive emails, attach videos of their work, and text information to their homes. The researcher was present in the classroom over a ten week period and conducted focus group interviews with the students throughout this period. Kervin reported there were six main factors that contributed to what she perceived to be very positive outcomes from this programme. The first, and one she identified as being critical to the success of the programme, was that the programme's purpose had been identified and shared with all participants from the outset. The purpose of the programme was to share examples of student learning experiences with a nominated person from home. The second factor she believed contributed to positive outcomes was that family members were 'in tune' with what was happening. This meant student learners had a responsive audience and a heightened awareness of accountability as they understood their parents were being kept up to date with their learning programme. The third factor was that mobile technology allowed immediate communication, a feature both the students and parents responded very positively to as they liked to be able to share their achievements in a timely way. The fourth feature attributed to the success of the programme was that more regular communication had provided a stimulus for dialogue at home that was better informed than parents having to ask 'what did you do at school today?' Fifth, it was viewed as important that the children were involved in the calls and, lastly, students were able to share their learning with family members who may be in a distant location. This kept their relationships with those family members more current.

There were, however, challenges associated with the use of mobile phones that Kervin (2005) noted. One of those was the equity of use. She found some students were making more use of the phones than others suggesting that just one phone for 30 students may not be sufficient. Also, while most parents were

positive about their students using the phones, others were concerned about cost and their own technological inefficiencies. These concerns limited the responses some parents made to their children's messages. The concern people have with their capacities to use technological tools is one that Kukulska-Hulme (2007) notes is not uncommon. She claims there is a tendency for people to prioritise the benefits of mobile technologies more in terms of their hardware capabilities and their understanding of those, rather than the capacities mobile phones have to contribute to learning and communication practices. As such, the effecter affordances of mobile phones are limited by user's conceptions of how they can manage the physical features of the tool. Ideally, users will adopt a 'give it a go' approach where innovative ideas are trialled and evaluated in terms of the potential benefits they can offer.

One of the features of the programmes investigated in both the Kervin (2005) and Petchell and Glynn (2009) research that supported the handling and effecter affordances of the mobile phones was that the programmes had been established over time and with care to ensure all stakeholders shared the same purpose for their involvement and understood their role in the programme. Without this care, the affordances of the mobile phones discussed above could well have been limited to a discussion of their handling features. However, in both studies affordances related to family, student, and teacher benefits such as improvements in student behaviour and increased family involvement with school.

The overriding theme to emerge during this review has been that the context in which the tool is used impacts upon the affordances of the tool. The context must be one where efforts to involve family members are considered worthwhile and careful planning has been put into place prior to and during the establishment of the programme. Also, that family members' interest in their children's education is acknowledged and respected and efforts are made to limit the barriers that impact on their involvement.

The reoccurrence of these themes throughout each of the sections above reinforces two important points. First, it reinforces the need for research that provides further insights into issues that limit the capacity of many programmes to provide families, students, and school with opportunities for regular, timely and reciprocal communication and connection. Second, it calls for research that considers innovative ways of using tools; possibly innovative ways of using a tool

that many schools do not use to its full potential. Cultural practice, a tool available to all schools, has been explored in this research as an option for an innovative approach to support communication and connection between families, students, and school.

3.3.5 School cultural practice

Prior to discussing the features and potential affordances of school cultural practice as a tool of communication, it is important to clarify that it is organisational culture that is being discussed in this section. According to Hofstede (1991) there are three main types of culture: national culture, occupational culture and organisational culture. The focus of this section is on organisational culture, specifically school culture. Organisational culture is defined by Igira (2008) as “a system of shared meaning and expectations held and shared by members of a group” (p. 81).

Section 3.2.1 of this thesis indicated school culture was going to be discussed as an example of a psychological tool. Although school or organisational culture were not examples of psychological tools referred to by Vygotsky (1978), their features bear many similarities to the description of psychological tools discussed earlier in this chapter in the review of Vygotsky’s work. Deal and Peterson (2009), for example, describe organisational culture as something that becomes an accepted norm or an accepted way of behaving in an organisation. They define school culture as something developed from “people’s patterns of behaviour, mental maps, and social norms” (p. 9). Similarly, Ghosh (2004) claims that in an organisation such as a school, culture develops as members interact together. Interactions create a social view which is eventually drawn into an individual’s “mental map” (p. 307) and then becomes a “joint construction of meaning” (p. 307). In other words, something that could become the school culture. The description of psychological tools in Section 3.2.1 also referred to them as mediational means developed through processes of internalisation that help direct human thoughts and actions (Kozulin, 2003).

Having established that this thesis views organisational culture as a form of tool, albeit a psychological too that can be used as a meditational means for communicating and connecting, attention now needs to turn to how organisational culture develops in a school. This is a topic that has been the focus of extensive research. Deal and Peterson (2009) suggest it is a special feeling that develops in a school in a manner that is difficult to describe in words.

Ramsey (2008) claims culture develops as relationships between people evolve and the beliefs and values of people crystallise into taken for granted patterns of behaviour. He contends culture is developed from the quality and focus of relationships between people. Ramsey emphasises also that the development of an effective school culture has great relevance to the successful running of a school claiming “culture more than any other single factor determines the ultimate success or failure of any school” (Ramsey, 2008, p. 2).

There is much support for the argument that the school principal plays an important role in determining the culture of a school (Auerbach, 2010; Engels, Hotton, Devos, Bouckennooghe, & Aelterman, 2008; Fullan, 2010; Griffith, 2001; Kose, 2011; Leithwood, 2005; Ramsey, 2008; Robinson, Hohepa, & Lloyd, 2009; Schein, 2010). Schein (2010) contends the principal needs to take an active role in proposing a course of action and seeing it through. Eventually it is hoped the actions of the principal come to be “taken for granted” and the assumptions underlying them cease to be questioned or debated (Schein, 2010, p. 21). Ramsay, Hawk, Harold, Marriott and Poskitt (1993) noted some key characteristics required of principals in order to build an effective school culture. They include principals being at the hub of communications, having straightforward dealings with parents, favouring cooperation over competition, being flexible in their approach, and being committed to improving relationships (pp. 116-118). In other words, the principal needs to play a key role in developing an effective school culture. However, that does not suggest the principal works alone as he or she needs support from other school leaders (Robinson et al., 2009). The benefits of school leaders working together or in a form of ‘distributed leadership’ to reinforce culture is one supported by Fullan (2002), Robinson et al. (2009), and Spillane (2005).

Teacher commitment is also required if a school is to portray the feeling that the cultural practice is well supported. Aligning the school cultural practice throughout the school is, however, a challenging task for school leaders because teachers have a tendency to be inward thinking in their approach to their role (Hattie, 2009). Following synthesis of over 800 studies, Hattie concluded teachers need to move towards giving greater consideration to an “others” (p. 252) perspective as they tend to rely on narratives from other teachers to construct their understandings of their role. Hattie (2009) posited that if teachers’ lens could be “changed to seeing learning through the eyes of students, this would be an excellent beginning” (p. 252). This creates a challenge for school leaders who, in

order to create a school culture that respects the contributions of the community, need to support teachers to become more outward in their thinking and open to new ways of working. Bishop and Glynn (1999) agree as they contend that inward thinking can lead to deficit theorising where the belief prevails that “knowledge is determined by the teacher” (p. 166). The challenge is finding ways to move the focus outward and support teachers and school leaders to develop a cultural practice that all stakeholders can find a role in.

These definitions of cultural practice and the requirements for its development highlight that school culture is something unique and special, and something school leaders and teachers need to play an important role in promoting. Attention now turns to how school cultural practice can become a tool of communication between families, students, and school. It is important that the principal in particular and also school leaders and teachers understand that family involvement is valued and they work to incorporate this understanding into their daily programmes so it can become recognised as the ‘way of being’ at the school. If that is not the message understood by the community, the school can become an uncomfortable place for them.

One of the ways school leaders and teachers can try to promote the notion that they value family involvement is through the creation of various symbolic tools. Examples include codes of conduct, vision statements, and motto statements. Symbolic tools are intended to represent the culture in a simpler or codified form. Virkkunen and Ahonen (2011) contend that codified representations make “division of labour, collective creation, and collaborative thinking possible on a much broader scale than do uncoded representations” (p. 232). Codification can act as a secondary tool that supports a primary tool. When the primary tool is psychological in nature, such as cultural practice, a secondary tool is a powerful means of providing a visual representation of the primary tool that reinforces its meaning (Virkkunen & Ahonen, 2011). A school motto, for example, stating ‘honesty above all’, would clarify to the school community that respect for honesty is integral to the cultural practice of the school. The potential impact and value of school motto statements is an area of research that has received little attention in the literature and yet it is one of interest to this thesis if it is to be suggested that a school’s cultural practice can be reinforced through the use of an accompanying motto statement. The final section of this chapter reviews some of the limited research available related to school motto statements.

3.3.5.1 School motto statements

Not only have school motto statements received minimal attention in the literature, their potential value in embedding a school cultural practice that aims to communicate and connect school and families has received even less attention. The literature related to the history and use of school motto statements suggests that many mottos are a reflection of a school's history rather than a representation of the current cultural practice of the school. A study conducted by Synott and Symes (1995), for example, focusing on school motto statements in schools in Queensland, Australia found many motto statements were difficult to understand because they retained phrases conveying meanings from the past, often written in Latin.

Synott and Symes (1995) defined a motto as a phrase useful for “framing the school, for individualising it and creating some overarching principles and philosophies” (p. 145). In simpler terms, they called it a “linguistic beacon” (p. 145) because the linguistic presentation of motto statements sets them apart from conventional words and establishes them as something of great importance. Principals, for example, often refer to the school motto statement during school assemblies when they are reminding students of the values of the school.

From their study involving 500 schools, Synott and Symes report, however, that rather than reinforcing the culture of the school, motto statements tend to reinforce traditional values. Synott and Symes found that apart from in denominational schools where the motto contained reference to religious values, there was nothing in any public school in their sample selection that “was in any way a reflection of the pedagogic ethos which might exist in a school” (p. 146). Hence, although school motto statements could provide a unique means of supporting a school's ethos or culture in a simple but powerful way, according to Synott and Symes, school motto statements seldom achieve this aim. They are usually a reflection of broader educational rhetoric such as ‘learning to learn’ rather than encapsulating something individualised to the school.

Aagaard-Hansen and Oyugi (2013) studied motto statements in Western Kenyan schools and reported findings similar to those of Synott and Symes (1995). Motto statements in their study also tended to emphasise traditional values related to broader educational rhetoric. Aagaard-Hansen and Oyugi (2013) reviewed motto statements from 54 primary and secondary schools in Kenya and reported that motto statements in these schools tended to focus on conduct, an emphasis of

the Kenyan educational system. Examples were “discipline and respect to all” and “be among the best” (p. 14).

The research of Synott and Symes (1995) and Aagaard-Hansen and Oyugi (2013) emphasises the need for schools to reconsider some of their traditional approaches if their mottos are to become linguistic beacons that provide meaningful message to the school community. Even better, that the motto reinforces the notion that community members are valued contributors to the academic, social, and emotional well being of the students at the school. A case study in this thesis furthers this topic.

3.4 Chapter summary

This chapter has established the need for a study that provides new insights into tools that can enhance opportunities for communication and connection between families, students, and school. Issues with tools traditionally used by schools have resurfaced throughout each section. These issues include that communication is often one-way, parents do not always understand the information they receive from school (but are not always forthcoming about asking for guidance), communication does not always meet the needs of all stakeholders (family members like to know about the social and emotional well being of their children as well as their academic progress), stakeholders have different purposes for involvement or do not understand the purpose of the programme, and hard-to-reach families are often not involved in family-school programmes.

The chapter highlighted that tools such as computers and telephones offer many handling affordances that may enhance opportunities for communication and connection but that they must be integrated into a programme that is well planned and developed over time. Given that context plays such a critical role in the affordance of tools, it seems important to pay closer attention to the contextual issues that may either enhance or limit opportunities for communication and connection. Of particular interest is a review of research related to how relationships between families, students, and school develop. This is the topic that begins the following chapter.

CHAPTER 4: LITERATURE REVIEW

ISSUES WITH FAMILY-SCHOOL PROGRAMMES

4.1 Introduction

Many of the issues faced by schools when trying to implement family-school programmes have been highlighted in the previous chapter including the difficulties associated with reaching all families, and the different purposes stakeholders have for involvement. This chapter focuses on a review of some of the reasons these issues arise, such as difficulties associated with establishing relationships between stakeholders. Where possible, the chapter draws on research from low socio-economic primary (elementary) school contexts because it is those contexts that are the focus of this thesis.

Issues associated with the establishment of relationships between families, students, and school require attention because they are central to the theme of this thesis. Section 4.2 begins the review of how family-school relationships develop by building an understanding of the parameters of healthy relationships and discussing the issues that impact on their progress in the context of family-school programmes. Section 4.3 continues this discussion by reviewing the differing perceptions of the purpose of family-school programmes held by different groups of stakeholders. Section 4.4 considers how different perceptions of purpose may impact on the way stakeholders' view their role in the programmes. Section 4.5 proposes the notion that family-school programmes need to be conceptualised as multidimensional programmes that can incorporate both the overt and psychological involvement of family members. Overt involvement concerns the actions of stakeholders, such as their participation at events (Grolnick & Slowiaczek, 1994). Psychological involvement concerns their social and emotional contributions, such as encouragement, interest, or feedback (Grolnick & Slowiaczek, 1994). The final section of this chapter, Section 4.6, includes a review of potential outcomes from family-school programmes. The review considers some of the reported quantitative and qualitative outcomes from previous family-school studies. Indicators of student engagement with school are included in the review of outcomes as improved student engagement, although a

complex notion, is one consistently linked with benefits for students (Christenson, Reschly, & Wylie, 2013).

4.2 The development of healthy relationships

Family-school programmes are referred to in the literature in many different ways. One of those is as a family-school or home-school 'relationship' (McKenna & Millen, 2013; Stringer & Blaik, 2013; Wanat, 2012; Zaoura & Aubrey, 2010). The use of the term relationship is understandable given that family-school programmes benefit when they are underpinned by collaborative relationships (Christenson & Reschly, 2010; Clarke et al., 2010; Epstein, 2001). Clarke, Sheridan and Woods (2010) coined the term 'healthy' to provide their own descriptor of collaborative relationships and went on to argue that "healthy relationships between parents and teachers are essential, prerequisite conditions for the establishment of family-school partnerships" (Clarke et al., 2010, p. 62). The term healthy is an appropriate term for use in this thesis because it portrays a holistic view of relationships. It portrays the impression that as stakeholders all-round needs are being attended to, relationships grow and flourish. Clarke, Sheridan and Woods (2010) identify three characteristics fundamental to the development of healthy relationships: trust, sensitivity and equality. I add to this the characteristic of respect from the work of Bryk and Schneider (2003). While it would be ideal for family-school relationships to be based on trust, sensitivity, equality and respect, the following section overviews studies that highlight issues associated with building these characteristics into family-school programmes. The efforts made by schools to attend to these issues underpin later discussions of the features of effective programmes.

4.2.1 Trust

Trust is a most important quality in a relationship. It means sharing confidence that the other person or party will act in the best interests of the implicit or explicit goals of the relationship (Clarke et al., 2010). In the context of family-school programmes, this means trying to achieve optimal outcomes for the students involved. Families place a high level of trust in schools as the "in loco" (Clarke et al., 2010, p. 67) carers of their children. Conversely, teachers trust that families are willing to support their efforts. Bryk and Schneider (2003) add that characteristics of personal integrity are significant to the building of trust in a relationship. Personal integrity shapes the belief that trust exists and can be

actioned at times when ethical considerations of privacy and confidentiality are required.

There are various means through which trust can be strengthened. At the interpersonal level, teachers may communicate trust by seeking input from families and demonstrating their commitment to follow through on promises. Families can demonstrate trust by responding to requests and information from school. Trust may also be fostered by creating a school climate whereby families are made to feel welcome and informed about the goals and expectations of the school (Clarke et al., 2010).

Building trust into a family-school programme, however, has many challenges. A study undertaken by Adams and Christenson (2000) examining whether parents and teachers felt a level of trust had been established at their children's schools illuminates some of these challenges. Adams and Christenson undertook a mainly quantitative study involving 1,234 parents and 209 teachers from a Midwestern district in the United States. Participants completed surveys to ascertain their perceptions of the nature of their parent-teacher interactions; more specifically, their feelings of trust with the each other. Adams and Christenson found that variables related to children's age and school achievement influenced both parents' and teachers' perceptions of trust. Parents' trust in teachers was greater at the elementary level than at the junior or senior high school levels. They suggested this was because parents were more involved with school at the elementary level. They also reported that at high school level trust between parents and teachers correlated with student achievement scores and attendance rates (p. 491). The authors suggested this could be because when there is trust between parents and teachers, students receive consistent messages - including the message that education is valued. Furthermore, they found that parents' trust in teachers was greater than teachers' trust in parents.

When asked how they believed trust could be improved, just over 53 percent of parents and almost 33 percent of teachers suggested improvements in communication were required to advance the quality of family-school interactions (p. 491). Other suggestions for improving trust included improving discipline procedures, dedication to education, and mutual support. Adams and Christenson suggested that ways to improve communication between families and school required more intensive research attention. This is a fundamental aim of this thesis.

A study undertaken by Williams and Baber (2007), focusing on perspectives of trust held by four African-American parents living in North Carolina, also concluded that family-school communication required attention. Their study was conducted with the purpose of ascertaining the perspectives of a small group of African-American parents regarding the extent to which they believed their children's schools were meeting the needs of African-American learners. Williams and Baber conducted individual and group interviews with members from each of the four families. They found there were high levels of mistrust and dissatisfaction expressed by these parents when they spoke about their relationships with school personnel. Although the study participants expressed willingness to become involved with their children's education, they seldom involved themselves with school due to their feelings of mistrust. This study provides just one example of numerous where the experiences of minority families are reviewed and it is found many families feel uncomfortable being in the school context. Further attention is given to this issue in the following chapter where barriers to family-school programmes are reviewed.

Both the Adams and Christenson (2000), and Williams and Baber (2007) studies stress the need to find ways to improve communication between family members and school personnel in order to help build trust into relationships. The difficulty lies in finding effective tools of communication that can meet the needs of all stakeholders and provide opportunities to develop trust, and also develop sensitivity.

4.2.2 Sensitivity

Sensitivity in a relationship means developing the empathy required to accommodate for individual differences. This requires sensitivity to the cultural, social, religious and developmental needs and beliefs of others. Developing an understanding of students' backgrounds is a means of improving the sensitivity of teachers. In New Zealand, the Ministry of Education offers guidelines on ways teachers can improve their understandings of different groups of students. An example is a booklet entitled *Better Relationships for Better Learning* (New Zealand Ministry of Education, 2000). This booklet provides ideas for teachers who wish to improve their relationships with Māori students. Ideas in this booklet include promoting cultural role models, and providing opportunities for staff development through the use of resources such as community members or staff members who have particular skills that may be of value to others.

Family-school programmes can provide an essential means for teachers to build an understanding of their students' backgrounds and develop the sensitivity required to build positive, caring relationships with students. A programme undertaken with the aim of inviting families to share their knowledge with school through the use of "home learning books" was found to provide a means for signalling to parents that teachers were "genuinely interested" in their children and their whānau (Parkinson et al., 2011, p. 8). The home learning books provided a medium for whānau and students to contribute in meaningful ways to classroom learning.

Four teachers were involved in the home learning book research undertaken by Parkinson, Doyle, Otrell-Cass and Glynn (2011). These teachers approached the task of introducing the concept of the books to whānau by inviting them to attend meetings at school where the purpose of the books was explained. The purpose was to provide a medium whereby students could benefit from the contributions of their whānau. It was anticipated whānau involvement could in turn help teachers to structure programmes that were based on experiences meaningful to their students. The teachers believed it was important to explain to the parents that the books were not 'homework' but that their purpose was to promote opportunities for collaborative learning. Not only was it anticipated that the books would help teachers learn more about the backgrounds of their students, it was also anticipated that the books would improve connections between home and school, as well as helping convey the message that school personnel valued the knowledge and skills of the students' whānau.

The books became a tool for communication that provided many positive benefits for all stakeholders, including that students reported feeling more like part of the class during the time they were involved with the home learning books (p. 7). There were, however, issues that arose during implementation of the programme. The teachers found it challenging to attract parents to the meetings designed to explain the purpose of the books, and they also found that "some children (for example, those with little parental support) needed extra help" (Parkinson et al., 2011, p. 3).

Although Parkinson, Doyle, Cowie, Otrell-Cass and Glynn (2011) had developed a tool for communication that had the potential to improve family-school communication, the effectiveness of that tool was limited by challenges associated with involving 'hard-to-reach' families. Hard-to-reach families are

“those who never seem to get involved in their children’s education” (Mapp & Hong, 2010, p. 345). Therefore, a tool that had the potential to benefit all stakeholders was limited in its capacity to reach all families. This indicates a need for further research that helps clarify the reasons for the limited involvement of some school community members but most importantly, ways to better address these types of issues. This is where a study that aims to take into account the diversity that exists in all elements of the research context can add value.

A study conducted by Dotson-Blake (2010) did focus on reasons why some families have limited contact with school. She conducted ethnographic research with four immigrant Mexican families living in the United States of America and found one of the main issues that created barriers for the families in her study was the change in expectations between their home schooling experiences and those of their adopted country. Dotson-Blake suggested improved understandings of the past experiences of families could be a way to help them become more involved with school. She advocated for family members to become leaders at school and proposed schools should regularly undertake to implement non-traditional educational practices such as cultural events. These practices could provide greater opportunities for contributions from family members. Through these practices it is hoped “parents will become more familiar with school culture and will be better prepared to collaborate with teachers to support the educational development of their children” (p. 112).

The difficulty with these recommendations is that parents who are feeling uncomfortable with school are unlikely to promote themselves as leaders or come into school to discuss their needs and suggest possible options for non-traditional engagement practices (Grant, 2009; Mapp & Hong, 2010). The Dotson-Blake (2010) study serves to further highlight the need for research that identifies issues but also considers options for addressing those issues that respects the barriers faced by both family members and school personnel.

4.2.3 Equality

Further to challenges associated with the development of trust and sensitivity, it is also difficult to build equality into family-school programmes. Equality is the collective contribution both families and teachers can bring to a relationship. Families have a wealth of knowledge about the background of their children and teachers have expertise in learning and development. Together, they have the

potential to collaborate to provide support that is greater than each alone could offer. Involving families in information sharing processes, for example, would help them to build the belief “that they are essential in promoting educational success, which may create goodwill and increase families’ willingness to enter a fruitful relationship” (Clarke et al., 2010, p. 70). The sharing of learning experiences would help enhance the view that families are collaborative partners. It also provides opportunities for families to learn more about their children’s learning programme, which in turn opens door for greater involvement. There are many examples of programmes aimed at sharing learning experiences between families and school in the literature. The home learning books programme (Parkinson et al., 2011) discussed above was an example of a school trying to improve not only its sensitivity to parents but also parents’ feelings of equality.

The New Zealand Home-School Literacy Programme (Brooking & Roberts, 2007) is another example of a programme that was trying to promote feelings of equity between home and school. Its aim was to provide family members with practical ways of helping their children with literacy from their homes (p. 6). The programme involved lead teachers and parents. Parents attended six training sessions with the purpose of improving their understanding of literacy practices. The evaluation of the New Zealand Home-School Literacy Programme undertaken by Brooking and Roberts (2007) reported that parents’ influence on children’s literacy development during the time the programme was in place in each of the six case study schools involved was “highly effective” (p. 63). Nearly three-quarters of survey respondents perceived the programme brought about positive outcomes related to students’ school literacy achievement levels (p. 63).

An important goal of the programme was to draw from the rich resources available in the community. Brooking and Roberts found, however, that developing equality in a programme between home and school was one of the more challenging aspects of the programme. They explained that school personnel were willing to involve parents in the practical aspects of each programme, but that, for example, “no schools engaged parents about their needs, interests and expectations before the programme began” (p. 36). Schools did not recognise that having discussions with parents to determine the needs and the expectations they had for their involvement in the programme may have been an effective starting point. That was until attendance figures at programmes started to drop away, at which time an opportunity had been missed as the components of each programme had already been established and the

programmes were well underway. Had school personnel understood that parents may be unwilling or unable to voice their concerns in any manner other than by withdrawing their attendance, the issues that ensued may have been minimised. It seems important that careful planning is put into place prior to a programme getting underway in order to provide opportunities for contribution from all stakeholders. However, a major difficulty in addressing issues of equality is that equality involves issues of power.

Addressing issues of power, Todd and Higgins (1998) argue, are more difficult when stakeholders are led to believe that equality means equal power. This is a misconception that can clearly impact on the family-school context where each stakeholder has different perceptions of their role, different capacities to give time and effort to the programme, and different legal responsibilities. Todd and Higgins (1998) propose that rather than trying to promote equality, family-school programmes would be better served by a focus on “joint endeavour” (p. 228). Developing a notion of joint endeavour into a programme would be a way of recognising and utilising the different capacities of stakeholders rather than insisting on equality. This suggests that developers of family-school programmes try to find ways of involving all stakeholders without expecting equal contributions.

The issue of power and participants’ perception of it must be considered when the family-school programmes being investigated in this research are analysed. Power is a factor that could create tensions in an activity that would limit participants’ ability to attain their purpose of promoting healthy relationships and therefore the development of effective acts of communication and connection.

4.2.4 Respect

Respect is another quality of a healthy relationship. Respect is marked by genuinely listening to and understanding what others have to say and then following up on this by taking actions connected to these understandings. Disagreements can be lessened when respect is shown to another person’s opinion. The significance of respect to the effectiveness of family-school programmes was highlighted in three reports written by the New Zealand Education Review Office (ERO) in 2008. These were *Partners in Learning: Good Practice* (2008a) *Partners in Learning: Parents’ Voices* (2008b) and *Partners in Learning: Schools’ Engagement with Parents, Whānau, and Communities* (2008c). ERO is the agency in New Zealand charged with monitoring the quality

of education in our schools and early childhood centres. In New Zealand, ERO is responsible for undertaking reviews of schools as well as identifying and reporting on areas of national interest. Mutch and Collins (2012) consolidated the information contained in the three ERO reports cited above and made recommendations as to the key factors that emerged from the reports that were critical to strengthening family-school programmes. The salience of respectful relationships was highlighted by Mutch and Collins. They wrote that respect was an important quality of school leadership and claimed that “mutual trust and respect are critical to relationships in which staff and parents share responsibility for children’s learning and well being” (p. 183).

The reports and studies above all indicate that issues associated with trying to develop family-school programmes underpinned by healthy relationships are complex. It is challenging to find ways to communicate with all family members and to motivate hard-to-reach family members to become involved. Research aimed at finding ways family-school programmes can address these issues must be thorough, systematic, and include the views of all stakeholders. The views of all stakeholders are important to fully understand the complex circumstances that impact on each group. Views are influenced by many factors, one of the most significant being the perceptions stakeholders have of the purpose for their involvement in family-school programmes.

4.3 Perceptions of purpose for involvement

Research indicates family members, students, and school personnel prioritise their purposes for involvement in family-school programmes differently. Conceptualisations of purpose can impact on participants’ levels of involvement in programmes and can be a fundamental factor influencing whether programmes progress, stall or becomes ineffective for the stakeholders involved (Timperley & Robinson, 2002). Jehl, Blank and McCloud (2001) were co-authors of a Report entitled *Education Reform and Community Building: Connecting Two Worlds*. Their Report was written following “extensive community interviews and conversations with community builders and school leaders” (p. 1) focusing on the perceptions stakeholders held for the purpose of family-school programmes. It was a review of research undertaken by the Institute for Educational Leadership (IEL) based in Washington DC. Jehl, Blank and McCloud reported that differences in perceptions of purpose between family members and school personnel (students were not part of their research) were pronounced. They

reported family members placed emphasis on their role in the development of their children's personal and social skills, while school personnel emphasised student achievement and classroom learning.

The Jehl, Blank and McCloud (2001) report included data from multiple studies and therefore was not focused on particular contexts. However, as a generic observation across school sites, these authors suggested that differences in perceptions of purpose arose from differences in accountability, history, culture, and experiences between and within stakeholder groups. These observations are supported by many other studies (Bishop, Berryman, Tiakiwai, & Richardson, 2003; Parkinson et al., 2011; Phillips et al., 2002; Robinson, Timperley, McNaughton, & Parr, 1994). This further emphasises the need for research to incorporate the views of all stakeholders and to be founded from a socio-cultural framework. This is important if the research is to have the foundation required to incorporate the views of purpose of different stakeholders, and the complexity of contextual factors that influence their views.

A limitation of the Jehl et al. report (2001) was that it did not include student perspectives. As students are a stakeholder in family-school programmes, it seems imperative that their views are represented. Research undertaken by Harris and Goodall (2008) did include students and similarly to the Jehl et al. study, it found family members and school personnel held different perceptions of their purpose for involvement in family-school programmes. The views of students added a third dimension although their views were quite closely aligned with those of their family members.

Harris and Goodall conducted their research in England over a 12 month period. The research involved case studies undertaken at 20 schools involving 314 participants. The parents in the Harris and Goodall study reported they became involved with their children's school to provide "support for students" (p. 282). Teachers viewed parent involvement as a means to "improved behaviour and support for the school" (p. 282). Students reported parental involvement provided them with "moral support" (p. 282). The main difference in perspectives between parents and teachers was that the focus of parents was on their children while the focus of the teachers was on school related tasks and the behaviour of students (Harris & Goodall, 2008). The students believed parental involvement was important because it improved their attitudes to school. They attributed the moral support provided by parents to improving their attitude. One student was

quoted in the study as saying, “Your parents are your main influence really – if they don’t care about it, you don’t take much of an interest” (Harris & Goodall, 2008, p. 283). Another student claimed, “Parents should encourage their kids if they’ve done something well, because then automatically the kid will want to do better to make their parents proud” (Harris & Goodall, 2008, p. 284). The quotes from students indicate that the views of their parents, and the encouragement provided by them, are very meaningful to students. This further emphasises the importance of providing opportunities for parental involvement with school but further to this, it emphasises the need to provide opportunities for parents to become involved in with school in ways that extend beyond their physical presence at events.

Students’ perceptions about the benefits of their parents’ involvement indicated they valued the affective component of their involvement. The affective component encouraged them and supported them to appreciate the value of making the most of their educational opportunities. These understanding complemented the views of the parents in the study who stated they wished to become involved with school so they could support and encourage their children. Although it is not clear whether the family members interviewed were just the ones who took an interest in their children’s education, the findings reported in the Harris and Goodall (2008) study reinforce the notion that parents and students value multidimensional components of involvement, such as affective contributions. This notion impacts on how the roles of stakeholders might be conceptualised in the development of family-school programmes.

4.4 The roles of stakeholders

There are many perceptions of the role stakeholders should play in family-school programmes. Perceptions are founded on the beliefs individuals have of their own role, as well as beliefs they perceive others have of them (Hoover-Dempsey et al., 2010). School personnel usually adopt the role of programme developer in family-school programmes. This is understandable given school personnel are charged with providing optimal outcomes for students and most school personnel recognise the potential benefits for students when their family is involved with school (Epstein, 2002). Family members can adopt different roles depending on factors such as their self-efficacy for involvement, and the beliefs they have about whether the school encourages their contributions. Self-efficacy is an issue raised in the following chapter where barriers to involvement are discussed (in

Section 5.2.1). The focus of this section is particularly on reviewing whether school personnel adopt a role that promotes their own purposes and capacities while undermining the capacity and willingness of family members to contribute.

Many studies have contributed to a belief that it is all too common for school personnel to adopt a role in family-school communication that inhibits family members' contributions. This was a topic covered in Section 4.2.3 when issues of power were discussed, and it is a topic that has been a long held concern of New Zealand researchers such as McNaughton, Glynn and Robinson (1987) as well as international researchers such as Lawson (2003) and Auerbach (2007). Lawson's concerns arose from findings in his ethnographic research involving 12 elementary school teachers and 13 parents from a mid-western low-income city in the United States of America. He reported the parents in his study believed teachers held a strong sense of power. Parents claimed teachers portrayed themselves as "the experts charged with identifying the educational needs of children and parents alike" (p. 120). Although he found parents would have valued opportunities to share information about their children with teachers, they believed their voices and opinions were "heard only insofar as they acquiesce to the needs of the school" (p. 120). This limited the amount of interaction these parents had with school to "minimal, sporadic or altogether nonexistent" (p. 80). Parents in the Lawson study wanted to find ways they could support their children but felt restricted in their capacity to do so while perceiving school personnel promoted themselves as the experts and seemed more focused on informing them rather than finding ways to collaborate with them.

Following extensive research in the field of family-school programmes, Epstein's research (1986, 1992, 2001, 2005) also confirms that parents value opportunities to develop strong relationships with school, but struggle to find roles where they believe their contributions are respected. She argues, for example, that most parents want to know "how to stay involved with their children's education" (Epstein, 1992, p. 6) but require information from school to support them to stay involved. Epstein (1992) states "information must be given to families by the schools on how to help in productive ways" (p. 6). It is from the perspective that schools' have information that is of value to families that her seminal Framework of Six Types of Involvement (Epstein, 1995, p. 704) was developed.

While Epstein's Framework provides families and schools with valuable ideas for helping family members support their children's education, there are concerns

that her Framework is too focused on further promoting the power of teachers over parents. That is because, according to Auerbach (2007), it incorporates a major focus on practices initiated by educators. Auerbach (2007) is a critic of Epstein's Framework because she contends it does little to promote family members taking a greater role in programme development. She claims it gives minimal attention to the capacities families may have to contribute from their own pool of resources. Auerbach's (2007) concern is that models of family-school programmes such as Epstein's assume consensus and collaboration but do not account for the uneven playing field where families are challenged to find a position that fits with their skills and capacities to contribute. Auerbach (2007) explains:

Parent involvement is treated as a social fact on neutral terrain rather than as a socially constructed phenomenon on the contested terrain of schooling. Programme models fail to acknowledge the ways in which parent roles in education, and the home-school relations in which they are embedded, are a reflection of broader social inequalities (p. 251).

This is a view shared by other researchers who also recognise the challenges faced by lower socio-economic families with regard to their capacity to respond or contribute to school initiated programmes (Chrispeels & Rivero, 2001; Harris & Goodall, 2008; Horvat et al., 2003; Huss-Keeler, 1997; Kim, 2009; Lareau, 1989; McNaughton et al., 1987; Williams & Baber, 2007).

4.5 Conceptualisations of family-school programmes

Limited conceptualisations about how a family-school programme should be constructed and implemented do little to support either family members or school personnel to understand the extent of the role they can play in family-school programmes. Conceptualisations such as family members being involved with school-based activities (attending events) or being involved only at home (helping with homework) are masking the value family contributions can make to family-school programmes. There are so many more ways family members can and are currently involved that are not always recognised. Family members greatly contribute to factors such as preparing students for learning, improving students' motivation to learn, and students' self-belief that they have the capability to be learners. If the capacity of family members to support their children is to be realised, conceptualisations of family-school programmes need to be

multidimensional. Programmes need to provide opportunities for stakeholders to be involved in both overt and psychological ways.

Overt involvement may be manifested by encouraging attendance at school events, through the provision of physical resources (books, computers, workshops) and/or the promotion of participation in parent organisations or at a governance level. Psychological involvement incorporates the cognitive and affective components of those actions. Cognitive components may be support with homework, oral discussions with children or engagement with intellectually stimulating resources such as reading materials or internet information. The affective components of parental involvement are the attitudes they promote, such as encouragement towards learning and upholding the values of the school. Grolnick and Slowiaczek (1994) describe the affective components of parental support as those that impact on the emotional experiences of the child. Positive emotional support they claim promotes the perception that “the parent cares about school, and has and enjoys interactions with them around school” (p. 239).

To further reinforce the need for psychological contributions from family members, a review of literature undertaken by Jaynes (2005) found “parental expectations yielded the largest effect sizes of the specific aspects of parental involvement” (p. 253). Other forms of parental involvement included in Jaynes’ review included: parental reading, checking homework, and parental style. Expectations are a form of involvement that incorporates multidimensional factors such as cognitive (goals), affective (support, beliefs) and behavioural (tasks) factors.

Jaynes’ (2005) report followed analysis of 41 studies and led him to emphasise that psychological components of involvement matter to students. His findings also prompted him to argue that when school personnel are asked by parents “about how to become more involved, the answer may be easier than teachers commonly believe” (p. 262). This statement implies that encouraging parents’ psychological involvement involves less effort than trying, for example, to improve their overt involvement. I would suggest, however, that factors associated with improving the psychological involvement of parents can be just as challenging (if not more so) than trying to improve their attendance at school events. Setting expectations requires an understanding of the tasks the students are involved with, and a willingness by parents to become involved. These are both concepts that require regular communication between family members and school

personnel. Regular communication is required in order to support parents to establish high expectations based on sound, up to date information. The willingness of school personnel to respect the capacity of family members to contribute in multidimensional ways is also required.

Another reason why it is important to provide opportunities for parents to become involved in multidimensional ways stems from the natural inclination parents have to mediate their children's school related tasks in a manner that fits with their own understandings and resources (Kozulin, 2003). Parents tend to mediate tasks in ways that are familiar to them because they do not have the tools that are available to school personnel, such as text books, and because they are not skilled in some of the problem solving techniques commonly used by teachers. As an example, Lehrer and Shumow (1997) compared teacher and parent assistance during maths exercises. Parents tended to resort to direct intervention, often telling children the answer while teachers tried to help students make sense of problems and to solve them independently.

Respecting that differences exist between the ways parents and teachers mediate activities means considering tools of communication that allow opportunities for families to find their 'space' in their educational community. A space, according to Barton, Drake, Perez, St Louis, and George (2004), is somewhere that allows parents to "position themselves" (p. 4) in order to contribute in ways that are meaningful to them. There are both physical and psychological aspects to space. Often the physical place where parents feel the most comfortable is in their own home. From there they are able to activate some of the physical and psychological resources available to them. Those resources come from many sources including the people and artefacts that surround them. Family members are advantaged in their capacity to contribute to family-school programmes with psychological resources due to their intimate knowledge of their children, and their often untapped resources of time, skill, and commitment to their children's education. Furthermore, and most importantly, the contribution of family members has much significance to students (Cavanagh, Macfarlane, Glynn, & Macfarlane, 2012; Harris & Goodall, 2008; Petchell & Glynn, 2009).

The concern that many programmes operate from within a narrow conceptualisation of involvement that fits with the purposes of school personnel more than the purposes and potential contributions of family members was one

Hoover-Dempsey and Sandler (1997) tried to address by developing a model depicting how parent involvement might be structured. Their model focuses on motivators for involvement and builds towards recommending multidimensional forms of involvement (encouragement, modelling, reinforcement, instruction). Their model also identifies student learning attributes that may be promoted through family involvement (Hoover-Dempsey et al., 2010, p. 38). The development of this model was intended to provide school personnel and others working in the field with a pictorial representation of the motivators that drive parents' actions, such as their role construction for involvement and their efficacy for helping their children succeed. Motivators, Hoover-Dempsey and Sandler (1997) argue, are socially constructed. They are influenced by contextual and psychological variables "that are directly susceptible to school and community influence" (Hoover-Dempsey et al., 2010, p. 53).

The Hoover-Dempsey and Sandler model is based on a socio-cultural framework where context is viewed as integral to understanding how family involvement should be conceptualised. This focus has synergies with this thesis in that both highlight the notion that family-school programmes should aim to provide opportunities for stakeholders to be involved in ways that extend beyond their overt actions. The Hoover-Dempsey and Sandler model provides valuable insights further research could take up, such as how affective support can be encouraged. A characteristic of this thesis is its focus on the potential for a tool that has capacity for users to contribute with affective support to improve opportunities for the multidimensional involvement of family members with school.

Another commonality between the Hoover-Dempsey and Sandler (1997) model and this thesis is the notion that not only do the processes that lead towards student achievement require multidimensional support, but also that student achievement is itself a multidimensional construct. Acts of communication and connection are understood to be activities developed with the deliberate intention of involving family members, students, and school personnel in initiatives that enhance opportunities to improve social, emotional, and academic outcomes for students. Although student outcomes are not directly a focus of this investigation, some consideration is given to stakeholders' perceptions of whether the programmes being investigated impact on students' engagement with school. Numerous other studies have focused on outcomes from family-school programmes and evaluated them using both qualitative and quantitative

methods. The following section examines outcomes reported from family-school studies and clarifies the approach taken to outcomes in this thesis.

4.6 Student outcomes from family-school programmes

Qualitative methods are used in this thesis to paint a rich, localised picture of three family-school programmes. Although the use of qualitative methods in the field of family-school research is supported by Christenson and Carlson (2005), they maintain that quantitative studies are also required in order to substantiate regular claims that family-school programmes improve students' learning and/or behaviour. Evidence is required, they argue, if family-school programmes are to have a legitimate role in education policy and school practice.

Christenson and Carlson (2005) facilitated a review of family-school programmes to ascertain whether there were any that met rigorous research criteria, and if so, what the outcomes of those studies were. If outcomes provided evidence that family-school programmes improve students' learning and behavioural outcomes, a focus on continued family-school research and development, they argue, can be justified. They selected for the review only studies that met the standards of the American Psychological Association's Division 16 Task Force on Evidence-Based Interventions in School Psychology (Christenson & Carlson, 2005). Criteria for inclusion in their review included: a random control group, multiple assessment methods, multiple sources, and a change in target behaviour. The studies that met these criteria and were included in their review ranged in their areas of focus. The studies included: home-school collaboration (Cox, 2005), parent involvement with pre-school children (Bates, 2005) parent involvement with school-aged children (Fischel & Ramirez, 2005) and family systems interventions (Valdez, Carlson, & Zanger, 2005). Following analysis of the results from each study, Christenson and Carlson (2005) were able to confirm that in all topic areas there were positive effect gains as an outcome of parental involvement with school and that those effect sizes ranged "from moderate to large" (p. 526).

Cox (2005) was a reviewer of the home-school collaboration studies and she confirmed that "home-school collaboration interventions are effective in helping achieve desired school outcomes for children, including changes in academic performance and school-related behaviour" (p. 491). Cox's section focusing on home-school collaboration included many studies reporting gains in students' literacy achievement levels. The studies involved parents supporting school

literacy initiatives through their involvement in the programmes. One study in the Cox review was a literacy intervention programme undertaken by Morrow and Young (1997). This study demonstrated the greatest gains of the 18 studies reviewed by Cox. The Morrow and Young study reported students in an experimental group significantly outscored students in a control group on measures such as retelling, comprehension, interest, and frequency of reading. Students in the experimental group were supported by their parents during the programme while students in the control group received no parental support. Experimental group parents were provided with a kit of literacy resources they could use at home. The same resources were used concurrently in the school programme. The programme demonstrated an effect size improvement Cox coded as medium to large and ranged from .38 to 1.94 (p. 490). Cox (2005) found the studies reporting the greatest gains in improvement were ones where a reciprocal programme was developed between home and school. Her findings reinforce the previous discussion related to the importance of relationships to the success of programmes.

Christenson and Carlson (2005) claim the methodological rigour that was a criteria for studies in their review should be a feature of family-school programme research as the adoption of this methodology provides sound evidence that family-school programmes can benefit student outcomes. However, they also acknowledged that certain types of interventions have greater benefits than other types, such as programmes where reciprocal relationships were formed:

From this review it is clear that the state of scientifically based practices with parents and families to enhance child outcomes suggests a call for increased methodological rigor as programs are implemented. However, it is also clear that within each domain there are either effective, specific intervention programs or promising approaches. All domain areas reported some effect sizes that ranged from moderate to large (p. 526).

Christenson and Carlson provide valuable evidence that family-school programmes can positively impact upon student outcomes. Further New Zealand studies, although not based on the rigour of the Christenson and Carlson (2005) review, also link family-school programmes with quantifiable benefits for students (and parents). Most of the programmes reviewed in New Zealand have had an academic focus, usually literacy. One example is *Reading Together* (J. Biddulph,

2004) where the web site⁸ states children whose parents attended the programme made significantly greater gains in reading achievement. Another example is the Māori language version of Pause, Prompt, Praise *Tatari, Tautoko, Tauawhi* (Glynn, Berryman, Grace, & Glynn, 2004) where students in the home-school reading group were reported to have gained four reading levels over the 12 weeks of the programme. This is compared with students in the school only reading group who gained two reading levels (p. 20). Children in the home-school reading group also improved their reading comprehension, correct reading rate scores, and writing skills.

Many of the programmes reporting quantitative benefits report there were also qualitative benefits for participants. The *Tatari, Tautoko, Tauawhi* Programme (Glynn et al., 2004), for example, claimed an “increasingly collaborative programme between community and school” (p. 23) developed as the programme progressed. This was due to the relationships that formed between family members and their children, and between family members and the home-school liaison worker. The liaison worker in this programme made a deliberate effort to affirm the “cultural background of her students and their families” (p. 23). This affirmation helped to reassure to the whānau of the students involved that their input and experience was valued. It was an approach sympathetic to socio-cultural principles. The *Tatari, Tautoko, Tauawhi* programme respected that the cultural background of the participants influenced their ways of viewing the world and the programme was developed from that foundation.

The Flaxmere Project (Clinton et al., 2007) was a New Zealand family-school initiative that also reported both quantitative and qualitative outcomes. The Flaxmere Project involved five decile one schools from the Flaxmere district. Each school was involved in the project in a different way but the commonality was that all schools had “home-school liaison persons, computers in homes, and homework support” (p. 6). The findings from the Flaxmere Project compared results in reading and mathematics between students whose families were involved in the project with those not involved. Results showed students whose families were involved made “slightly greater gains in reading achievement than those not in the project” (p. 28). Interestingly, students not involved in the project showed greater gains in mathematics than the students involved. It was suggested this was probably because “Flaxmere Project parents were able to

⁸ www.readingtogether.net.nz

work with their children more in literacy than they were in numeracy” (Clinton et al., 2007, p. 28).

The literacy and mathematics test scores were not the only data to be reviewed in the Flaxmere Project. Researchers also interviewed parents, students, teachers, and principals. Interviews revealed different interpretations of the benefits of the Project. Parents were generally pleased with outcomes. Many believed the programme had benefited their children as well as benefiting them personally. Students reported a positive change in their behaviour and interest in schooling, possibly because their parents were also showing greater interest in their education. Teachers took a long time to believe change was occurring but “over time they saw changes in students’ belief in their ability to engage and succeed, and came to see changes in the parents’ understanding of schools” (Clinton et al., 2007, p. 41). Principals acknowledged there had been short term gains but were sceptical these gains could be maintained in the long term, mainly due to uncertainties over funding. Principals also reported their concern that the transience of the school community meant it would be difficult to maintain continuity as it was not possible for new families to join the programme once it was underway.

The combination of quantitative and qualitative data gathered for the evaluation of the Flaxmere Project provided a data corpus that was both specific and broad. There were findings, for example, specific to subject areas and details of family’s time spent using their computers. More broadly, findings confirmed many of the issues discussed previously in this thesis, such as that the sustainability of programmes can be challenged by issues such as resources and attitudes. Findings also suggest that the fluid and changing circumstances of low decile school communities make programme continuity difficult. Addressing issues such as these remains an ongoing concern for educators and researchers.

Bull, Brooking and Campbell (2008) believed an approach of examining successful home-school programmes and establishing a set of overarching principles would be a useful way of informing the development of future family-school initiatives. They used a case study method to research the family-school programmes operating at seven New Zealand schools. When they set out they intended to include both quantitative and qualitative data from their case studies in their report but found there was a “striking paucity” of documented evidence of the benefits of family-school programmes available in schools (p. 5). Their

criteria for the selection of schools initially stated schools must be able to provide “data on improvements in student achievement, participation or presence” (p. 29). The researchers found, however, it was difficult for schools to provide this evidence due to the myriad of factors that impact upon outcomes. They amended their selection criteria so they could select schools that showed a strong interest in family-school programmes and they adopted a qualitative approach to their research.

At each case study site, the researchers conducted interviews with the principal, groups of school staff, parents, and where appropriate, students. The principals selected the teachers, parents, and students to be interviewed. Bull, Brooking and Campbell's (2008) final report highlighted effective features of each programme, many of which reiterated the importance of healthy relationships to the success of family-school programmes. Some of the features of a successful family-school programme identified by Bull, Brooking and Campbell include that relationships need to be collaborative and mutually respectful, programmes take time to develop, programmes need to be goal oriented, incorporate opportunities for timely two-way communication, allow for involvement from home, and that successful programmes are multidimensional (pp. 6,7).

The research in this thesis has similarities with the Bull, Brooking and Campbell study in that it also adopts a qualitative case study approach. However, there are many differences between this research and the Bull, Brooking and Campbell study. Differences are mainly due to the activity theory-based framework adopted in this research. The focus of this research is on the issues that create tensions or alignments in activity systems and the affordances and limitations of tools that facilitate the activities being investigated. This focus requires attention to the perspectives of all stakeholders regarding issues such as how tensions or alignments impact on outcomes for teachers, students and family members. In order to clarify how stakeholders' perspectives of outcomes for students may be described, this thesis examines outcomes by describing perceptions of student engagement with school. Student engagement is a relevant construct for outcomes given it is “generally associated positively with desired academic, social, and emotional learning outcomes” (Christenson et al., 2013, p. v).

4.6.1 Student engagement with school

Fredricks, Blumenfield and Paris (2004) describe engagement as a multidimensional construct identifying it has behavioural, cognitive, and emotional

dimensions. Behavioural engagement relates to active participation. Cognitive engagement incorporates the notion of making an effort to comprehend ideas and master skills. Emotional engagement encompasses positive or negative perceptions about school (Fredricks et al., 2004). While most scholars agree that engagement is a multidimensional construct, there are many disagreements over the dimensions that engagement incorporates. Appleton, Christenson, and Furlong (2008), for example, propose adding the dimension of academic engagement. Time spent on school work they suggest is an example of academic engagement. However, Skinner and Belmont (1993) include involvement in academic activities as part of behavioural engagement. In order to streamline any confusion, this study adopts a three part typology of the dimensions of engagement: behavioural, cognitive and emotional when considering perspectives of outcomes for students.

Further to clarifying how this thesis views the dimensions of engagement, it is also important to clarify that from a socio-cultural perspective, engagement can incorporate a social perspective as well as a cognitive one. Engagement in this thesis is not only thought of (as it often is) in learning terms where indicators such as effort and persistence are referred to (Fredricks et al., 2004). From a socio-cultural perspective, engagement is a process embedded in relationships and social interactions (Pianta, Hamre, & Allen, 2013). This means that reports of student engagement may include interpersonal exchanges and the impact those exchanges appear to have on the internal motivators that drive the actions of participants (Skinner & Pitzer, 2012).

It is important to note also that engagement is generally viewed as a malleable construct (Christenson et al., 2013; Crick, 2013; Fredricks, 2011; Furlong & Christenson, 2008; Martin & Dowson, 2009; Ryan & Deci, 2009; Wentzel, 2013). Student engagement is amenable to factors in the context and the cognitive functioning of each individual. Conceptualisations of engagement do not view students as passive recipients of information, but rather as individuals who assess each situation in terms of how it meets their needs or how they may respond to the people involved. Such a conceptualisation indicates students will take a critical perspective to programmes intended to benefit them. In more general terms, “in the course of their own development human beings actively shape the very forces that are active in shaping them” (Daniels, 2004, p. 121).

This notion has implications for understanding the important role students play in research related to family-school programmes. If, for example, a student believes other stakeholders are working in their best interests, they may adjust their responses accordingly. Students are a central element in the activities investigated throughout this research. Discussions related to outcomes for students include reports from students as well as the perspectives of other stakeholders regarding the impact they believe the programme has had on student engagement with school.

4.7 Chapter summary

This chapter has highlighted many issues that impact on the effectiveness of family-school programmes. The chapter began by describing issues associated with the development of trust, sensitivity, equality, and respect. Regular communication, respect for the resources the community can offer, and genuine interest in the background of students were some of the features identified as ones required of a programme that aims to build healthy relationships between families, students and school. Issues that limit the capacity of schools to develop these features are that it is challenging for schools to find effective ways to communicate with all family members, and that it is difficult to motivate hard-to-reach family members to become involved.

It was also noted that stakeholders have different purposes for involvement and different perceptions of their role in family-school programmes. Family members have broad conceptualisations of purpose including wanting to support the social, emotional, and academic development of their children. The focus of school personnel is more on supporting the efforts of the school; while students value the feedback they receive from family members. In order to account for different purposes, a multi-dimensional conceptualisation of family-school involvement is required. Such a conceptualisation would view family-school programmes as multidimensional activities where stakeholder involvement can take different forms ranging from overt (attending school events) to psychological (encouragement and praise).

A broad conceptualisation would also allow opportunities for family and school involvement that was more respectful of the capacities of stakeholders to become involved. Respecting capacities for involvement requires a thorough understanding of the barriers that impact on stakeholders. Barriers are the focus of the following chapter.

CHAPTER 5: LITERATURE REVIEW

BARRIERS TO FAMILY-SCHOOL PROGRAMMES

5.1 Introduction

The conceptualisation of barriers adopted in this thesis is that barriers are challenges that can restrict the capacities of family members and school personnel from communicating and collaborating to establish effective programmes. This review of barriers is not intended to steer this work in the direction of deficit thinking, but rather to develop a better understanding of the issues faced by stakeholders. Acknowledging and working to address these issues is crucial to developing the sensitivity and responsiveness required of stakeholders in family-school programmes (Christenson, 2003).

This review focuses on barriers to communication between two groups of stakeholders: family members and school personnel. I consider different factors that impact on each group, defining factors as issues that influence the capacities of stakeholder groups to communicate and connect with other stakeholder groups. When discussing factors that impact on family members, I discuss psychological and family life context and within each of those categories, factors such as socio-economic status and parental knowledge and skill are considered. Similarly, when discussing factors that impact on school personnel, psychological and contextual barriers are described. Within each of those categories, factors such as self-efficacy and resource constraints are considered. Student factors are discussed within the family category where student age and stage of learning progress are considered as issues that can impact on the amount and type of involvement family members have with school.

Not all the barriers to family-school programmes are included in this chapter. This is because the range of potential barriers is broad and could include topics that extend beyond the scope of this study, such as barriers that impact on student transition to high school. I have tried to limit this review to studies conducted in primary (or elementary) school and where possible, studies that draw participants from lower socio-economic communities.

The following review of barriers is divided into two main sections. Section 5.2 examines factors that can create barriers for family members and Section 5.3 examines factors that can create barriers for school personnel.

5.2 Family factors

5.2.1 Psychological barriers to family involvement with school

This section discusses two psychological factors that can influence family involvement with school: family role construction for involvement and family perceptions of self-efficacy for supporting their children. Both these factors were incorporated into the model of parental involvement developed by Hoover-Dempsey and Sandler (1997) described in the previous chapter. The Hoover-Dempsey and Sandler model refers to role construction and beliefs of self-efficacy as motivators for involvement, but I contend they may also be conceptualised as barriers. This section focuses on the barrier dimension because this draws attention to the source of where tensions may present during analysis of family-school programmes. The identification of tensions, as discussed in Chapter Two, draws attention to areas of a programme that could benefit from intervention and change. It is an important stage in the process of making improvements to programme design and a feature of an activity theory analysis.

5.2.1.1 *Family role construction*

The beliefs family members hold about their role in education can act as a barrier to effective family-school programmes. A family's understanding of their role is determined by their perceptions of their personal responsibility for becoming involved in their children's education and the understandings they have of how others perceive they should be participating with school (Hoover-Dempsey et al., 2010). Parents make choices about their involvement practices based on these understandings, but because role construction is heavily influenced by social variables, it is a factor amenable to change (Hoover-Dempsey et al., 2010).

From the perspective of socio-cultural theory, role construction is influenced by variables such as cultural and historical experiences and social others (Chrispeels & Rivero, 2001; Durand, 2011; Gillanders, McKinney, & Ritchie, 2012; Sánchez, Plata, Grosso, & Leird, 2010). Chrispeels and Rivero (2001) set out to examine how these variables impacted on the role construction of Latino

families living in the United States of America. They found issues associated with cultural and historical role construction challenged these families to find ways to adjust to the education system of their adopted country. This was because they brought with them:

A concept of their role and a developed sense of place that is derived from deep seated cultural beliefs and patterns of behaviour and interaction that a member should assume within a social system and context. When roles are in transition or a new culture is entered, individuals past behaviours and patterns of interaction may not be appropriate, and new behaviours and patterns need to be learned (p. 120).

Chrispeels and Rivero's (2001) study investigated whether intervention strategies could be effective in supporting Latino parents to improve their understandings of education in the United States, and in so doing, support them to become more comfortable about their role in their children's education. They adopted a mixed methods approach to studying the lives of Latino families attending classes at the Parent Institute for Quality Education (PIQE). This is an Institute established to provide new immigrants opportunities to improve their knowledge of the American education system. General information classes as well as classes on how to interact with teachers and how to help children at home are available through this Institute. In the Chrispeels and Rivero study, 95 Latino families who were about to attend these classes completed a presurvey questionnaire. This was followed with a postsurvey questionnaire and in-depth interviews with 11 of the 95 families involved in the study.⁹

The researchers found that prior to PIQE classes there were two distinct patterns of involvement: minimal (nine participants) and involved (two participants). Chrispeels and Rivero claimed involvement practices reflected the parents' perception of their role at school. Parents who had minimal involvement stated they believed they had little influence over what happened with their children's education and therefore saw little purpose in becoming involved. The involved parents believed their involvement made a positive difference to outcomes for their children and therefore interacted with school personnel on a much more regular basis. Following the PIQE classes, the minimally involved parents

⁹ The number of in-depth interviews was limited due to the time commitment involved in conducting these interviews.

increased their levels of contact with their children's teachers. They were reading more with their children, and they were more likely to attend parent-teacher conferences.

It is difficult to determine from the limited information available in this study, however, whether it was only the families who were keen to become involved with school who attended the PIQE classes from the outset. However, even if this were the case, Chrispeels and Rivero (2001), indicate that the role construction of some parents is amenable to change. An approach that respects the barriers faced by minority families such as their lack of knowledge about the education system and their perception of their role construction is required to support changes in role construction beliefs.

Role construction from an activity theory perspective is closely related with the elements of Object and Division of Labour. When parents have perceptions of their role that differ from that expected of them from school, tensions may develop. As the actions of Subjects are understood to be a reflection of their understanding of the Object of the activity, it follows that if Subjects do not understand the Object or believe, due to the perception of their role (Division of Labour), that they have little influence over the Object, they are less likely to become involved with the activity. In the Chrispeels and Rivero (2001) study, the improved understanding of the American education system gained from attendance at the PIQE classes could have supported parents to understand more about the aims of the education system, which in turn, could have reduced tensions for them and help move them towards attaining the Object of the activity. As the Chrispeels and Rivero study was not undertaken from an activity theory perspective, it is difficult to substantiate these suggestions but they provide an example of how an activity theory-based approach may have conceptualised this activity.

Role construction also reflects perceptions that unequal divisions of power exist within education. This is of particular concern in the context of family-school programmes where, as discussed in the previous chapter, power is perceived as a barrier by many family members (Barton et al., 2004; Bishop & Glynn, 1999). Efforts of school personnel are required to promote opportunities for parents to understand that their skills and knowledge are valued. The activity theory framework used in this thesis focuses on Divisions of Labour in the analysis

process and interpretations are made that address how Subjects' perceptions of power may be creating tensions within their activity system.

5.2.1.2 *Family beliefs of self-efficacy for supporting their children's education*

In addition to perceptions of role construction influencing involvement, the self-efficacy beliefs parents hold about their ability to support their children's education also influence their involvement (Drummond & Stipek, 2004). In this section, the term self-efficacy refers to the beliefs parents have regarding their ability to support their children rather than the skills they possess or the perceptions they have of those skills. Hoover-Dempsey et al. (2005) contend that self-efficacy is socially constructed. They argue it is shaped by variables such as personal mastery experiences (for example, previous successful involvement) and verbal persuasion from relevant others (for example, family members, teachers and school leaders). Hoover-Dempsey et al. (2005) suggest that parents who hold beliefs of high self-efficacy for supporting their children's education are more likely to believe their efforts could be worthwhile and demonstrate greater levels of involvement. Furthermore, parents with high self-efficacy are more likely to persevere when outcomes seem difficult to achieve. In contrast, parents with lower self-efficacy are less likely to persist with involvement and hold lower expectations of the value of their contributions (Hoover-Dempsey et al., 2005).

The role self-efficacy plays in parents levels of involvement with school was examined in a research study conducted by Green, Walker, Hoover-Dempsey and Sandler (2007). They administered questionnaires to 853 parents of children enrolled in socio-economically and ethnically diverse public schools in the United States of America. The questionnaires asked family members to reflect on their involvement practices both at home and at school. The outcomes portrayed that positive personal beliefs about efficacy for helping children were associated with increased levels of parental involvement (Green et al., 2007). However, more specifically, beliefs of self-efficacy were a strong predictor of home-based involvement but a small negative predictor of school-based involvement. This, the researchers suggest may have been because "parents who are strongly motivated to be involved but do not feel efficacious in their involvement efforts are less likely to reach out to the school for assistance" (p. 540). Although some may argue this outcome suggests links cannot reliably be made between self-efficacy

and involvement, this outcome also highlights the complexities associated with family-school programme research and the need for detailed analysis.

Beliefs of self-efficacy and role construction are both potential psychological barriers to involvement, but the discussion above has suggested that both factors are amenable to change. Some examples of how programmes may address these issues have been made in the review above. This thesis aims to determine whether stakeholders believe their programme has taken account of the psychological barriers that may limit the involvement of family members with their programme.

5.2.2 Family life context as a barrier to involvement with school

Although aspects of psychological barriers may be amenable to change, many of the variables associated with the life context of families are beyond the bounds of school influence (Hoover-Dempsey et al., 2010). These variables are regularly researched and referred to in the literature, such as socio-economic status (SES) (Drummond & Stipek, 2004; Grolnick, Benjet, Kurowski, & Apostoleris, 1997; Lareau, 1989, 2003, 2011; McNamara Horvat et al., 2003) and family culture. More specifically, some of the family-school research related to family culture has studied: Latino families (Chrispeels & Rivero, 2001; Durand, 2011; Gillanders et al., 2012; Sánchez et al., 2010), African American families (Brody & Flor, 1998; Gutman & McLoyd, 2000), Pakistani families (Huss-Keeler, 1997), Asian American families (S. Lee, Turnbull, & Zan, 2009; Mori, 2008), Māori families (Bishop et al., 2003) and Pacific Island families (Nakhid, 2003). Although scholars acknowledge that factors associated with SES often affect families of minority cultures (Dearing & Tang, 2010; Hornby & Lafaele, 2011; Kim, 2009; Lareau & McNamara Horvat, 1999), the following section discusses these topics separately in order to focus on how research has portrayed each factor as a potential barrier to family-school programmes. This section also discusses parental knowledge and skills as another potential barrier that can impact on family involvement with school.

5.2.2.1 Socio-economic status (SES)

SES receives a great amount of attention in the literature as a factor that can create barriers to parental involvement with school (Drummond & Stipek, 2004; Gerritsen, 2006; Grolnick et al., 1997; Lareau, 1989, 2003, 2011; McNamara Horvat et al., 2003). Family SES is a composite index of financial and human

resources such as parents' level of education, parents' occupational status and family income (Christenson et al., 2013). Of note in the research literature on this topic are a series of ethnographic studies undertaken by Lareau (1989, 2003, 2011). Her 1989 book *Home Advantage* details her ethnographic study of two contrasting school communities, one predominately working class (Colton) and one more upper-middle class (Prescott). She reported that the higher SES families from the Prescott community were much more involved in their children's schooling than the Colton families. The barriers for the Colton families included limited access to people skilled to advise in times of difficulty and less connectedness between work and home. These barriers limited the understandings and resources family members could bring to their children's learning needs. Lareau (1989) also reported that the Colton parents had less confidence in their ability to help their children with education and a less significant perception of their role as a participant in the education process. Many of the parents in the lower socio-economic Colton community believed education was best left to school personnel. Interestingly, the barriers for low SES families identified by Lareau (1989) have many similarities with those discussed in the section directly above - limited self-efficacy and limited role construction for supporting their children. This reinforces the need to consider psychological barriers for family members when developing family-school programmes in low socio-economic communities.

Lareau undertook another ethnographic study in 2003 where the outcomes were similar to those in her 1989 study. She again found the middle class families she researched were more involved with school than the working class families. The 2003 study involved in-depth research with 12 families who had children aged between nine and ten years. She reported the working class families "depended on the leadership of professionals" (Lareau, 2003, p. 12) while the middle class families were more inclined to initiate involvement with school themselves, albeit not always positively as was discussed in the example of a mother who caused a lot of stress for her daughter around homework commitments. Lareau followed up her 2003 study with a 2011 investigation of how the families and children were progressing eight years later. She interviewed the same 12 families and reported that social class had continued to make a difference in their lives. Differences were highlighted in the approach and resources the two SES groups brought to their involvement with their children's high school education. Middle class parents were more willing to be involved with school and availed themselves of greater

access to information. This was manifested in examples such as the middle class parents seeking out information that prompted them to remind their children of exam schedules, while the working class families did not adopt this approach.

Differences in approach were again attributable to psychological factors such as that the role construction middle class parents brought to education reflected their belief that they had a right or a responsibility to seek out information. The lower socio-economic families clearly did not view their role in the same way. They were more inclined towards believing school would provide the information their children required and it was not their place to interfere.

In sum, Lareau's studies led to her claim that SES levels can be a barrier to the development of family-school programmes and furthermore that the limited involvement of lower SES families can have long term effects on educational opportunities for their children. Lareau (2011) wrote that middle class children appeared to "gain important institutional advantages" (p. 4). These advantages supported them to "acquire skills that could be valuable in the future when they enter the world of work" (p. 4). While acknowledging there were advantages for middle class children, Lareau's study also highlighted that children from the lower class families benefitted from different types of support such as kinship, but her main argument was that these advantages do not permeate into advancing educational opportunities for working class families.

While Lareau (2011) highlighted the many challenges faced by low SES families, she acknowledged she was generalising as the impact of social class is "not absolute" (p. 8). She argued, however, that possibly two thirds of children repeat their parents' educational attainment levels (p. 8). However, this situation has many complexities which the Lareau studies did not fully address, particularly that some of the consequences of inequality are the outcome of schools expecting families to change rather than finding ways to reach out to families. It was from this personal belief and experience that my thesis was initiated. Furthermore, particular issues affect different families in different ways. Although Lareau acknowledged she did generalise, it is important studies like hers do not lead to assumptions that all low SES families are limited in their capacity or interest to become involved with school. Such a perspective would only strengthen the resolve of people who take a deficit approach to family-school programmes. This is also why the development of healthy relationships is such an important

component of family-school programme development. They support educators to develop better understandings of the personal circumstances of their students.

With regard to the argument that it is important not to assume all low decile families are affected by barriers in the same way, Gutman and McLoyd (2000) conducted a study of low SES families to determine whether involvement practices differed between families, and the effect those differences had on outcomes for children. They administered both open ended and specific question interviews with 34 family members of fifth and sixth grade students. Gutman and McLoyd (2000) found there were distinct differences in involvement levels, and notably, that differences were reflected in student achievement levels. Gutman and McLoyd's (2000) findings were that some low SES parents were regularly involved with school and that these were generally the families of the higher achieving students (p. 10). In contrast, "parents of low achievers rarely visited their children's school except in response to the school's requests precipitated by the children's poor work or misbehavior" (p. 10). Although this finding clearly supports the argument that parent involvement has many benefits, the limitation of the Gutman and McLoyd study is that cause and effect are uncertain. It may have been that the parents of the higher achieving students who were more involved from the outset. Their study does not provide the detail that could determine if that was the case, although the myriad of circumstances that impact on student achievement makes identification of variables extremely difficult (Bull et al., 2008). It may have been beyond the capacities of the researchers to identify the information required to clarify pre-study involvement practices. What the study does reinforce, however, is that involvement levels differ between low SES families and therefore the practice of making assumptions only leads to the creation of further barriers for lower SES families.

While barriers affect families in different ways and some families are able to adjust to challenges so their support for school is not compromised, there is further research that identifies barriers for low SES families that it is claimed limit their frequency and motivation for involvement with school. These include limited access to extra familial or professional support people (McNamara Horvat et al., 2003) the availability of child care and transportation (Christenson, 2003), their transience as they move to look for work or housing opportunities (Jehl et al., 2001), and the availability of time as many lower income workers have less flexible working hours (Hoover-Dempsey et al., 2005). Lower SES families are also impacted by stress (Grolnick et al., 1997; Kohl, Lengua, & McMahon, 2000).

Stress is a factor that can further distance low SES families from school because, according to Grolnick, Benjet, Kurowski and Apostoleris (1997), stress takes up the time, energy, and attention of individuals. This means that parents who are under the most stress are the least likely to receive or take time to understand messages from school, for example, to ask questions about ways they can attend to their children's learning needs when school reports indicate extra learning support is required.

Grolnick et al. (1997) argue that addressing the needs of lower SES families requires interventions that extend beyond traditional approaches in order to account for the "social realities" (Grolnick et al., 1997, p. 547) of their lives. In order to respect some of the needs of lower SES families, tools that can mediate communication from both inside and outside the school context seem worthy of investigation. The adoption of a tool for communication and connection that could be used in different contexts could limit the barriers faced by low SES families.

5.2.2.2 *Family culture*

Prominent researchers in the field of family-school research claim all families want their children to do well at school (Christenson, 2003; Epstein, 2002; Mapp & Hong, 2010; Sanders, 2002). However, families have different ideas about: what children should learn, how children learn, what children should do to learn, what it means to succeed at school, and what parents should do to support their children at school (Okagaki & Bingham, 2010). Some of the differences in priorities parents have for their children's education stem from cultural differences.

Differences in priorities for education of Latino, African American, and Asian families living in the United States have been identified in the literature (Okagaki & Bingham, 2010). Latino families have been reported to have a conception of education that rates moral values highly. According to Reese and Gallimore (2000) they believe education should teach their children right from wrong, to respect adults, and to behave well. Gutman and McLoyd (2000) claim African American immigrants place similar importance on morality while Asian American families rate academic success highly because it brings honour to the family (S. Lee et al., 2009; Mori, 2008).

The notion that Latino parents place priority on education teaching their children high moral standards was reported by Reese and Gallimore (2000). They used

data from a longitudinal study of Latino families living in California, who had been involved in either ethnographic (10 families) or case study research (29 families). Their study reported that Latino families wanted education to emphasise to their children the significance of being a good person, having a high moral standard, and being hard working in addition to gaining academic skills (Reese & Gallimore, 2000). Before children start school, for example, they are read to, not with the main intention of supporting skills related to literacy, but because books provide examples of people doing the 'right thing'. Books offer opportunities for moral discussion during reading sessions.

The notion that parents use books to prompt moral discussion is one that may not be readily understood by teachers from other cultures who often view book reading as a time when 'school-like' skills are reinforced. Teachers generally encourage home reading as an opportunity to practice literacy skills, increase student interest in books, improve children's vocabulary, and spend enjoyable time with adults. It cannot be taken for granted that these practices fit with Latino parents' schemata of how literacy develops in children (Reese & Gallimore, 2000). Hence, the notion that there is a difference in priorities for education between Latino families and the United States schooling system has emerged. Education initiatives that respect the priorities of Latino families and try to build these into programmes aimed at the development of literacy skills have shown positive outcomes (Janes & Kermani, 2001; Larrotta & Yamamura, 2011; Torres & Hurtado-Vivas, 2011). Many of these programmes try to involve Latino parents during literacy sessions. This approach helps to blend traditional values with literacy practices and promotes Latino parents' understanding that they can make a valuable contribution to their children's learning needs (Reese & Gallimore, 2000).

A different focus for education is reported in the literature related to Asian families. Lee, Turnbull and Zan (2009) explain reasons Asian parents emphasise the importance of education with their children are that "education is considered critical to raising a family's social and economic status" (p. 106). A dissertation focused on the perspectives of Japanese families living in the United States of America (Mori, 2008) identifies high academic grades as an important focus for Japanese parents. Mori (2008) conducted interviews with five Japanese families and analysed survey data from a further 216 families. He reported the theme of educational achievement was one consistently referred to by families.

Ran (2001) made similar comments following research with a group of four Mainland Chinese families living in England. Ran described the situation his research uncovered as being like families and teachers “travelling on parallel tracks” (p. 311). By this he meant parents and teachers shared a common goal but had quite different approaches to achieving that goal. The families were concerned with accuracy and were willing to spend large amounts of time helping their children succeed academically. Teachers, on the other hand were concerned with process and far more accepting of mistakes.

Possibly surprisingly, considering the amount of time many Asian families are prepared to give to help their children with education and try to ensure they achieve high academic outcomes, research conducted by Sui-Chu and Willms (1996) found Asian parents were one of the least involved cultural groups at school based activities. They claim this is because a lot of involvement is home-based. Families want to know how to help their children at home in areas of skill development rather than wanting to celebrate their successes or participate in school based activities.

The diversity in priorities and expectations for involvement held by different cultural groups enhances the need to understand and promote programmes that aim to improve relationships between families, students, and school. This need is heightened through the understanding that families and individuals who share the same ethnicity also have many differences in attitude and approach to education (S. Lee et al., 2009; Reese & Gallimore, 2000). It cannot be assumed that all Latino families value high moral standards or that all Asian families place a high priority on academic achievement. There are a range of individual and family differences in priorities.

As an example of the need to build relationships in order to understand individual differences within a cultural group, research undertaken by Nakhid (2003) found concern with the tendency in New Zealand for teachers to make assumptions about Pasifika people as if they were a homogenous group. The term Pasifika refers to people whose heritage originates from one of the Pacific Islands such as Tonga, Samoa, Niue, Tokelau, Fiji or the Cook Islands but who either immigrated to New Zealand or were born here. Nakhid interviewed twelve mainly Pasifika students and five teachers about their experiences in the New Zealand education system. She found the students brought to school a wealth of different experiences and attitudes to education. Interestingly, her research found it was

the perceptions teachers had of the students' backgrounds that had the greatest impact on the students' attitudes to school. It was clear the teachers knew little about the home backgrounds of these students. Comments from teachers suggested there was a lack of interest coming from home but the students discounted these views and explained various circumstances limited the capacity or willingness of their parents to attend events at school. Examples included the students forgetting to tell their parents about parent interviews or the parents feeling shy about coming into school. Many of the parents were very supportive of their children's school but teachers were not aware of this support and were not tapping into the resources the parents had the potential to contribute to their children's education.

Similarly, research aimed at developing improved understandings of the perspectives of Māori parents regarding their children's education found a range of views amongst participants interviewed. McKinley's (2000) research included interviews with 66 parents who identified as being of Maori heritage. Although it was the overarching view of most parents that they wanted their children to do better at school than they themselves had done, concerns and circumstances differed between families and school environments. The parents interviewed included parents whose children attended English medium, bilingual and kura kaupapa Māori¹⁰ schools. Parents of students who attended kura kaupapa Māori schools had the greatest involvement in the children's schooling as kura kaupapa schools are established on the principle that parents are to be involved in decision making processes, such as decisions related to curriculum, administration, pedagogy and learning outcomes (Bishop & Glynn, 1999). Kura kaupapa Māori parents were less concerned about their children's behaviour and relationships with other children and more concerned about curriculum issues than parents from English medium and bilingual units. Individual differences between families and their attitudes towards school often related to issues with individual teachers but were also a reflection of home circumstances such as the need to care for siblings or relatives at home that restricted the capacity of family members to attend school events.

This review of culture is very limited and could be extended to include many further cultural perspectives but space restricts the amount that can be included

¹⁰ Kura kaupapa Māori schools are schools (kura) where Māori is the predominant language used and the values and principles (kaupapa) of the school reflect Māori cultural values

in this section. I have noted this as a limitation of the thesis but the point is that there are many challenges for educators as they try to address both cultural aspirations and individual priorities. This reinforces the importance of family-school programme research drawing from a socio-cultural theoretical framework where factors of culture, as well as individual differences, are considered part of the context of the research. This further reinforces activity theory as a valid framework for this thesis.

5.2.2.3 *Parental knowledge and skill*

Another factor related to the barriers that may be created from within the family is that many families are unsure about how to help their children, even when they hold the belief they should be doing so (Hoover-Dempsey et al., 2010). This barrier relates to the knowledge and skill level of parents. Hoover-Dempsey, Bassler and Burow (1995) claim that when parents feel their knowledge and skill level fits with the support required, they are willing to assist their children, but when challenged, they limit their involvement. Hoover-Dempsey, Bassler and Burow investigated the homework strategies of 69 parents of children in grades one to five attending two mid-southern schools in the United States of America. They found parents were happy to help with tasks they were familiar with, such as testing spelling words and listening to their children read, but were less comfortable when asked to help with subjects such as mathematics. Hoover-Dempsey, Bassler and Burow claimed limited knowledge and skill were the cause of limited parental involvement rather than parents not having the desire to support their children, a claim also supported by Drummond and Stipek (2004).

Drummond and Stipek (2004) focused their study on whether parents from economically disadvantaged communities believed it was their responsibility to be involved in their children's schooling. Their participants were 234 children, their teachers, and their parents. The children were from three areas of the United States of America: a rural community in the northeast, a large urban north eastern city, and a large urban west coast city. Drummond and Stipek (2004) reported that "most parents strongly value involvement in their children's learning" (p. 206). They reported similar findings to those of Hoover-Dempsey, Bassler and Burow in that involvement levels decreased as children got older and that involvement levels differed between subject areas. Drummond and Stipek also found that more parents were involved in helping with reading than in helping with mathematics. The reasons cited for not helping their children with

mathematics included parents' "feelings of inadequacy" (p. 209). Six of the 11 parents who commented they believed they should be helping their children with mathematics said they did not do so due to their feelings of inadequacy with the mathematics curriculum.

In an earlier study undertaken by Epstein (1986) involving 1,269 parents of students in first, third, and fifth grade classrooms in Maryland, United States of America, a similar finding was made. Epstein administered questionnaires to the parents with the aim of assessing their attitudes to school and their experiences with school communication and reported 80 percent of parents said they "would spend more time helping their children at home if they were shown how to do specific tasks" (Epstein, 1986, p. 280)

The studies cited above reinforce the notion that parents care about their children's education but may not have the skills to support them. The need to understand more about ways schools can build connections that support family members' to feel comfortable about coming into school to learn some of the skills needed to support their children's education has been reinforced in this section.

5.2.3 Student factors

Student factors that may be barriers to parent involvement with school include student age and stage of learning progress.

5.2.3.1 Student age

The correlation that the involvement of parents with school reduces as the age of the student increases was mentioned in the findings from the Drummond and Stipek (2004) study above. This is a notion supported by many scholars working in the area of family-school programme research (Deslandes & Bertrand, 2005; Drummond & Stipek, 2004; Epstein, 2001; Hornby & Lafaele, 2011; McKenna & Millen, 2013). Age can become a barrier to participation for reasons such as older students not wishing their parents to be present at school or because parents feel their children are better able to cope more independently as they mature (Deslandes & Bertrand, 2005). Differences in parental involvement levels can be noticeable from one year level to the next. The research of Drummond and Stipek (2004) included parents of second and third grade students. They found parents of third graders rated the importance of being involved "lower than second graders" (p. 209). Tolan and Woo (2010) account for changes in levels of

parental involvement by explaining that students' needs change as they move through school grade levels. Tolan and Woo suggest elementary school programmes should support the development of basic skills and motivations for learning; middle school programmes more focused on a healthy developmental trajectory; and high school "supporting student direction and motivation in preparation for post-high school autonomy" (p. 477). Tolan and Woo argue the focus of programmes should change to accommodate these needs. This finding suggests teachers could do with being more encouraging and explicit with parents as children move through the school grade levels. This is a further issue to be considered when investigating family-school programmes.

5.2.3.2 Student learning progress

Studies differ on the correlation between the learning progress of students and the commitment of parents to education. Some suggest parents are more involved when their children are having difficulty or have special needs (Porter, 2008) while others indicate less involvement from parents of underachieving students (Grolnick et al., 1997). Grolnick, Benjet, Kurowski and Apostoleris (1997) claim "parents who see their children as difficult may find working with their children aversive and may withdraw from such interactions" (p. 546). It is, however, generally agreed that family support is critical when learning issues require attention (Dunlap & Fox, 2007; Hudson et al., 2003; Petchell & Glynn, 2009). This is because families are an enduring resource and because they have an intimate knowledge of their children that can benefit the design of optimal interventions (Dunlap & Fox, 2007).

There are a number of barriers that may restrict the progress of family-school programmes for children with learning needs (Dunlap & Fox, 2007). These include that a degree of trust is required particularly from families who have learnt from past experiences that the interests and recommendations of school personnel are not always in accord with the best interests of their children (Dunlap & Fox, 2007). Also, some families feel a sense of humiliation that restricts their willingness to interact with school personnel. In turn, communicating with families about difficult issues can be an area of discomfort and unfamiliarity for school personnel. Further to this, teachers are pressed to provide the time and resources required to implement the strategies some learning and behavioural programmes demand of them (Dunlap & Fox, 2007).

A study conducted by Pomerantz, Moorman and Litwack (2007) was undertaken with the purpose of examining how different types of parental involvement affect children of differing learning abilities. They concluded that children who had negative competency experiences (results below expectations for their age level) benefit “when parents’ involvement in their academic lives is autonomy supportive, process focused or accompanied by positive beliefs” (p. 390). Autonomy supportive means allowing children to take an active role in their learning; process focused encourages effort rather than stable attributes such as intelligence. Positive affect comes from interactions that are caring, enjoyable, and supportive (Pomerantz et al., 2007). In contrast, students who experience negative competency may be harmed and withdraw from programmes that involve their parents when their parents’ participation is “controlling, person focused, affectively negative, or accompanied by negative beliefs” (Pomerantz et al., 2007, p. 390). Pomerantz, Moorman and Litwack suggest this is because this type of involvement deprives children of the resources they need to do well at school, such as motivation, skills, and positive beliefs about their ability.

The Pomerantz, Moorman and Litwack (2007) study suggests opportunities for multidimensional involvement would have components that benefit lower achieving children. These would include encouragement and a focus on positive attitudes. Studies cited above stress the need for research programmes that recognise the multitude of barriers that impact upon family members and also find ways of addressing these barriers; a task made more challenging due to the multitude of barriers that also impact on school personnel.

5.3 School personnel factors

This review of barriers for school personnel also includes a discussion of psychological and contextual factors. Psychological factors include beliefs school personnel hold about involving parents and beliefs about their self-efficacy for involvement. School contextual factors highlight resource constraints.

5.3.1 Psychological barriers to involvement of school personnel with families

5.3.1.1 Beliefs about involvement of families with school

The perceptions school personnel have about the interest family members have in their children’s education can influence the actual involvement of family

members and the beliefs students' hold about the value of education (Bishop et al., 2003; Cavanagh et al., 2012; Glynn et al., 2004; Hill, 2010; Huss-Keeler, 1997; Mapp & Hong, 2010; Nakhid, 2003). Following an ethnographic study conducted with nine Pakistani families living in England, Huss-Keeler (1997) concluded that when school personnel believe parents have little interest in school related matters, they are less likely to make an effort to involve them and in turn, parents are less likely to look for involvement opportunities. She reported the combination of these factors negatively affects learning opportunities for students.

Huss-Keeler (1997) involved herself in the lives of nine Pakistani families over the course of a school year. The families all had children aged between five and six years attending a primary school in the north of England. She spent time observing at school and in the homes of the families. She collected literacy samples, and interviewed family members and school personnel. During the year of her study, many incidences of school personnel making false assumptions about the parents' interest level in education occurred. She believed those false assumptions made the learning situation difficult for these children. Parents of the children in her study group, for example, were not provided with reading material and access to resources that other children in the class were given. This was because teachers presumed the parents in Huss-Keeler's study group were not interested in receiving such material. Teachers based this assumption on their observations that the parents were rarely seen at school. Huss-Keeler found, however, that the parents in her study group were very interested in their children's education and that they held high expectations for their children's futures. They just did not know how to approach the school to ask for resources or did not know that the resources existed.

This was a longitudinal study and Huss-Keeler took the opportunity to invite school personnel into the homes of some of the Pakistani students. She recorded changes in behaviour following the teachers' visits to the homes. Huss-Keeler claimed the home visits forced teachers to "confront their stereotypes of Pakistani home lives and to see the positive factors that existed, instead of focusing just on the negatives" (p. 180). She reported the home visits "resulted in an enhanced perception of the children's learning" (p. 180) and therefore a more sensitive approach to the students' learning needs followed by more regular provision of resources to these families.

The finding that the parents in the Huss-Keeler (1997) study were unaware they could access literacy resources from school or did not feel comfortable about doing so relates to their role construction for helping their children and also their self-efficacy for becoming involved with school. Together these factors seemed to perpetuate a situation of limited parental involvement. This is because the reluctance to ask for information limits the knowledge family members possess about their child's education and consequently, further limits their willingness to become involved because school becomes an unfamiliar place for them. Addressing this situation requires intervention on behalf of the school and an improved awareness of the difficulties faced by minority families. However, steps will not be taken towards these goals if teachers' perceive families are not interested in school. It is a cycle of negativity that a research framework such as that used in activity theory could help expose because an activity theory analysis incorporates the perceptions of different subject groups and helps the researcher to highlight where tensions and alignments exist and just as importantly, whether purposes for involvement with education align.

The claim that teachers' perceptions may negatively affect student outcomes is an issue confirmed in further research. Interviews focused on the experiences of Year 9 and 10 Māori students in New Zealand (Bishop et al., 2003) similarly revealed a "mismatch between the aspirations and understandings of the teachers and the principals, those parenting, and the students" (p. 29). Unfortunately, a mismatch in perspectives can often "result in variable achievement levels for differing groups of students" (Bishop et al., 2003, p. 29).

The research cited previously undertaken by Nakhid (2003) also exposed some alarming differences between the perceptions of teachers regarding the interest of Pasifika parents in education and the statements made by students about what was actually being said and done at home. The students claimed their parents do care about education but that they did not like to attend school events for reasons such as they felt embarrassed or shy. This nonattendance was viewed by the teachers as a lack of interest. Nakhid (2003) argues this perception can negatively influence outcomes for Pasifika students:

The differences that students bring to the classroom in terms of culture, language, religion and socio-economic status are said to affect learning but this empirical investigation confirms that it is more a matter of how these differences are perceived and represented by society, schools and

teachers that determine the way in which they influence learning rather than the differences themselves (p. 312).

Any findings from the Nakhid (2003) study are limited in terms of being generalisable by the small number of participants involved (12 mostly Pasifika students living in New Zealand) but the study does reinforce that the perspectives held by school personnel about family members can create barriers that impact on the effectiveness of family-school programmes. It is important that research investigating family-school programmes includes the perspectives of all participants.

5.3.1.2 Self-efficacy perceptions

Just as self-efficacy impacts on the involvement of family members with school, the self-efficacy of teachers can influence their decisions to involve families. Garcia (2004) undertook a study to determine “the relationship between teachers’ level of self-efficacy and the degree of family involvement practices reported by teachers in their classrooms” (p. 292). Data was collected from 110 elementary teachers working in the South Florida region of the United States of America. The teachers completed a questionnaire, the results of which indicated teachers’ perceived self-efficacy played an important role “in teachers engaging in specific family involvement practices” (p. 308). Teachers with higher self-efficacy beliefs about the difference their practices can make to parent involvement were more attentive to strategies such as sending home information, promoting volunteers at school and co-ordinating field trips into the community. The researchers argue there is a need to equip teacher trainees with more specific skills related to effective practices for involving families. This, they suggest, would promote skills for improving their confidence in dealing with parents. This is a concept related to both psychological and school contextual factors. Self-efficacy is a psychological factor but the resources required to attend to issues that impact upon self-efficacy such as a programme aimed at improving the skill levels of teacher trainees is a contextual factor. The limited time and financial resources available to teachers are factors teachers regularly attribute to their inability to support family-school initiatives.

5.3.2 School contextual factors as a barrier to involvement with families

School contextual barriers for school personnel include factors associated with the context within which school personnel work. The resource constraints that act as a barrier to family-school programmes are mainly associated with teacher training and limitations of time and financial resources.

5.3.2.1 Resource constraints

Most teachers have a strong sense of empathy for helping their students and are keen to develop positive relationships with parents (Christenson, 2003; Epstein, 2002). However, the resources school personnel can bring to family-school programmes are limited by constraints such as training and time. Many educators are limited in terms of the training they have received around means to interact with families and have limited knowledge of approaches for communication (Christenson, 2003). Teachers are also stretched for time as they try to manage their extensive responsibilities. In June 2007, the New Zealand Council for Educational Research sent surveys to 351 schools with the intention of developing a snapshot of New Zealand education. It was found that less than half the teachers who returned the surveys (48 percent) thought their workload was “fair and manageable, and only 32 percent that their work and personal life were balanced” (Wylie, 2007, p. 4). Issues concerning teacher workload in New Zealand have been identified as including the pace and frequency of change in the education sector, the amount of paper work required of teachers, and the additional commitments teachers must attend to outside their classroom responsibilities (such as regular meetings and professional development) (New Zealand Educational Institute, 2009). Christenson (2003) posits that the issue of teacher workload is a global one but further to this, that it is a salient issue within the context of family-school programmes because workload affects the amount of time available for communicating in a meaningful manner and the resources available to build trust into a relationship between teachers and family members.

Addressing issues of resource constraints is challenging. There have been examples throughout this study of programmes that have got off to promising starts but the sustainability of the programme has been limited by resource issues (Clinton et al., 2007; Gorinski, 2005; Timperley & Robinson, 2002). This study aims to include an understanding of resource constraints in any recommendations made for practice.

5.4 Chapter summary

This chapter has examined the barriers that influence the willingness and capacity of family members and school personnel to become involved with family-school programmes. The notion that family members do not become involved because they do not care about their children's education has been challenged. Rather, there are many factors that create barriers and limit their involvement.

It has been noted that some barriers are amenable to change. Psychological barriers such as role construction and beliefs of self-efficacy may be positively impacted by programmes that respect the challenges faced by parents. The Chrispeels and Rivero (2001) study showed the role construction of Latino parents improved following their attendance at the PIQE classes. Hoover-Dempsey and Sandler (1997) found parents' self-perception of their capacity for helping their children could be improved through their involvement with school related activities at home and time spent volunteering at school. Similarly, the perceptions school personnel have about the interest parents have in their children's education improved when teachers visited the homes of their students (Huss-Keeler, 1997).

This chapter also identified some barriers that were not as amenable to change. These include contextual factors (teacher training, time, financial constraints) and previous experiences with education. However, many of these factors are barriers only if they are perceived as being so. If school personnel take a deficit approach to a family's willingness to contribute to their children's education because they perceive the attitude of family members may have been influenced by their previous experiences, for example, that attitude impacts on teachers' willingness to involve family members (Bishop & Glynn, 1999; Horvat et al., 2003; Huss-Keeler, 1997; Lareau, 1989).

School personnel who take a deficit approach would locate issues with families or with students rather than trying to find solutions within their own resources. Resources include both psychological approaches, such as attitudes and motivation to build relationships with families, and contextual factors, such as time and priorities given to the funding of programmes. These two types of resources overlap as prioritising contextual factors requires an approach that values family-school programmes, and an approach that values programmes requires input of contextual factors such as time. This situation reinforces the need for research to consider family-school programmes as holistic activities

involving a multitude of elements, including a diversity of stakeholders, each with their own background experiences and approaches to education.

Adopting a research method that incorporates the perspective of all stakeholders is important to determine the extent to which programmes are addressing the needs of each stakeholder group and where tensions exist that may be creating barriers. That is why activity theory is so relevant. An activity theory-based study is both broad and specific. It focuses on the activity in its entirety while illuminating separate elements from within the system for more in-depth analysis. In-depth analysis can illuminate tensions or alignments in the system. Tensions may, for example, be created by the barriers that limit the affordances of tools to stakeholders.

Each of the chapters in this Literature Review has highlighted some areas of potential tension in a family-school programme and also some areas that if attended to, could provide opportunities for improving family-school programmes such as focusing on the development of healthy relationships. The final section of this chapter summarises the Literature Review.

5.5 Literature review summary

This review of literature has provided a strong argument for the need for research that can offer further theoretical and practical insights into the features of programmes that aim to connect families, students, and school. It has documented numerous issues that limit the effectiveness of many current programmes. It began by discussing the limitations of many of the tools of communication currently being used by schools. Limitations discussed included that programmes do not always fit with the experiences, beliefs, and culture of the stakeholders involved (Fu et al., 2002; Harris & Goodall, 2008; Power & Clark, 2000; Taylor-Patel, 2009) and that it is difficult to reach some families (Harris & Goodall, 2008; Lawson, 2003; McKenna & Millen, 2013; Parkinson et al., 2011). The review presented literature that demonstrated many programmes relied on one-way forms of communication and too often adopted one-size-fits-all models that draw mainly from the purposes of school personnel (Auerbach, 2007; Grant, 2009). One-size-fits all models can undermine the skills and capacities family members have to contribute in ways that fit with their beliefs (McNaughton et al., 1987) as well as their capacities for involvement. Furthermore, often students do not feature in the implementation of programmes despite most students valuing opportunities to receive feedback and praise from the people

they care about and who care about them (Epstein, 2002; Petchell & Glynn, 2009). Many of the programmes described have been counterproductive, serving only to alienate families as they deprive them of their skills and confidence to support their children (Barton et al., 2004; Chrispeels & Rivero, 2001; Christenson, 2003; Drummond & Stipek, 2004; Green et al., 2007; Gutman & McLoyd, 2000; McNamara Horvat et al., 2003; Reese & Gallimore, 2000).

Finding ways to build relationships of care and respect into family-school programmes requires deliberate attention. It requires an approach that takes account of the different purposes stakeholders have for involvement, their perceptions of their role, and the barriers that impact upon them. It also requires careful consideration of the features required of a tool can effectively mediate family-school programmes. The tool of communication is an element in a family-school programme that has much significance because it acts as a bridge that can connect home and school. It is an element research must focus on while considering the myriad of other elements involved.

Activity theory provides a research framework that enables the researcher to take a broad perspective due to its focus on the activity as a whole, but also consider how individual elements of the system impact on and are impacted by other elements. It is from this framework that this thesis intends to provide theoretical and practical insights into different ways schools in low socio-economic communities can facilitate opportunities for communication and connection with their families and their students. In order to provide these insights, attention must be paid to identifying the issues that arise in each of the case studies being investigated and the affordances and limitations of the tools they have adopted.

The following chapter reviews the methodology and methods used in this research and clarifies how quality was maintained throughout the research process. It is important to acknowledge at this early stage that the research process was influenced by my personal experiences, expectations and beliefs. I was aware during the research phases that the investigation process must include self interrogation and interrogation by others in order to maintain quality. These processes as well as other research features are explained in the following chapter.

CHAPTER 6: THE RESEARCH PROCESS

6.1 Introduction

Chapters Three, Four and Five reviewed literature related to the topic of family, student, and school communication and connection. The review highlighted the need for further insights on this topic and discussed the advantages of activity theory as a framework to support analysis of tensions and alignments in family-school programmes. This framework was detailed in Chapter Two where the principles that underpin activity theory were explained. This explanation helped establish the foundations of the methodological understandings on which this thesis is based. The purpose of this chapter is to clarify how the methods used to conduct the research fit with the methodology of the study. Explanation of the methods used helps to generate an “audit trail” (Lincoln & Guba, 1985, p. 319) of the research process. An audit trail is a record of data collection and analysis procedures used during the course of a study (Shenton, 2004). Attention to an audit trail enhances the transparency of the research by assisting the reader to understand how the research was undertaken and reassures them that the findings are consistent with the data (Flick, 2009).

The chapter begins in Section 6.2 with a description of the research methodology. This section further explains the use of activity theory as a theoretical framework and clarifies the rationale for adopting a qualitative research approach. Section 6.3 describes the process of inquiry where the case study method adopted for this research is detailed. Section 6.4 describes the data collection process, Section 6.5 explains how data coding was undertaken, and Section 6.6 details the three case studies. Finally, Section 6.7 concludes the chapter with an overview of the ethical considerations given to the research process.

6.2 Research methodology

6.2.1 Contextual considerations

Methodology is “the logic behind” the research methods used (Kumar, 2008, p. 5). It is “the strategy, plan of action, process, or design lying behind the choice and use of particular methods and linking the choice and use of methods to the desired outcomes” (Crotty, 1998, p. 3). The selection of a research methodology

that could extend understandings related to the tensions and alignments of deliberate acts of communication and connection between families, students, and school was required. Key contextual factors that influenced decisions concerning the methodology adopted include the research questions, the use of activity theory, and the personal philosophy of the researcher.

6.2.1.1 The research questions

The research questions are:

1. What tensions and alignments are identified by stakeholders in undertaking deliberate acts of communication and connection between families, students, and school within three low decile New Zealand primary schools?
2. What affordances and limitations are identified by stakeholders concerning tools used in undertaking deliberate acts of communication and connection between families, students, and school at three low decile New Zealand primary schools?

Attention to these questions requires investigating the perspectives of stakeholders. This will involve interviewing a range of stakeholders followed by analysis that positions the perspectives of stakeholders within their own contextual setting.

6.2.1.2 The use of activity theory as a theoretical framework

Activity theory was described in detail in Chapter Two. It provides a framework underpinned by particular ontological and epistemological beliefs about the nature of reality and knowledge. In terms of ontological beliefs, the socio-cultural theoretical framework on which activity theory is founded is based on the view that reality is constructed through intentional and situated human activity. In terms of epistemological beliefs, social interaction is central to the development of understanding (Jonassen & Land, 2012). From this position, in order to understand human activity, research needs to focus on the social contexts of people's lives. This is a focus consistent with an activity theory-based study (Kaptelinin & Nardi, 2006).

6.2.1.3 *The personal philosophy of the researcher*

Underlying a qualitative research process is the “personal biography of the researcher, who speaks from a particular class, gendered, racial, cultural, and ethnic community perspective” (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011, p. 11). Not only that, but the background experiences and familiarity the researcher has with the research context needs to be acknowledged. My own background experiences lie in contexts similar to those reported in this research, that is, I have experience in teaching and communicating with families in low decile school contexts. My ontological and epistemological beliefs are that reality is multiple and constructed. I also believe that gaining a greater understanding of human activity has to involve participants ascribing their own meanings to activities within the context in which they participate.

The requirements of the research questions, the use of activity theory and my personal philosophies as the researcher all lead towards the adoption of a research methodology that is context based and incorporates the perspectives of multiple participants. These decisions were also influenced by theoretical considerations.

6.2.2 Theoretical considerations

Research methodologies are shaped by the ontological and epistemological beliefs that underpin them (Bryman, 2012). By choosing a particular methodology, the researcher is committing to a particular view of the world and to particular understandings about what counts as knowledge. There are various ways of defining research approaches (Lincoln & Guba, 1985) but Bryman describes a simple two-way division within each of the fields of ontology and epistemology. He divides ontological beliefs into objectivism and constructivism and divides epistemological beliefs into positivism and interpretivism. These terms are discussed in the considerations of ontology and epistemology that follow.

6.2.2.1 *Ontological considerations*

Bryman (2012) contends there are two ways of viewing the world. One he describes as an objective position where the world is viewed as something external to social actors, while the other he describes as a constructive position where actors are deemed to have the ability to interact with the world. The position the researcher takes on these two paradigms becomes an overriding

determinant of their research methodology. Researchers adopting an objective position structure their research questions so they more closely examine the formal features of the research context, such as the policies or structures of an organisation (Bryman, 2012). Alternatively, researchers adopting a constructivist viewpoint are interested in reports of the active involvement of the people in the organisation (Bryman, 2012). Consequently, researchers coming from objective and constructionist viewpoints adopt different design approaches. A constructivist researcher would be more inclined towards interviewing and interacting with the participants involved while an objective researcher may have less contact with the research participants (Bryman, 2012). My own position and the position that fits with the socio-cultural framework of this thesis is that participants take an active role in determining their actions and so this thesis is informed by understandings of knowledge from a constructive ontological paradigm.

6.2.2.2 Epistemological considerations

Epistemological considerations concern what is regarded as acceptable knowledge within a discipline. Bryman (2012) divides epistemological beliefs into principles related to positivism and interpretivism. The epistemological stance of positivism is that the world is independent of (and unaffected by) the researcher; and that it is possible to conduct objective, value free inquiry (Ritchie & Lewis, 2003, p. 16). In interpretive research, the epistemological stance is that there is a strong connection between the knower and the known in that they interact to inform and shape one another. Socio-cultural research aligns with an interpretive paradigm as it draws from the principle that knowledge is co-constructed through the social world and the perspectives of individual experience.

Interpretivism stresses the importance of interpretation in developing meanings within experiences of the world. This assumes that the researcher is concerned with drawing on both the participants' and the researcher's understandings of the social world. Interpretive research is bounded by the belief that the researcher, the participants and the social world impact on each other. Cohen, Manion and Morrison (2005) explain this further when they claim "the very process whereby one interprets and defines a situation is itself a product of the circumstances in which one is placed" (p. 27). Snape and Spencer (2003) add that "personal interpretations are important both in terms of study participants' perspectives of reality, and in terms of researchers' understandings and portrayal of study

participants' views" (p. 20). These are concepts with which activity theory researchers must engage.

It is important to note that interpretive research is strongly influenced by the researcher's own perspective, thus making it extremely challenging (and not necessarily desirable) to design and conduct objective research in interactive social contexts. The researcher should be transparent about their own assumptions derived from their personal experience (Ritchie & Lewis, 2003, p. 17). As a researcher in this case study project, I interpret the findings based on my personal experiences as outlined in Chapter One.

In summary, key features of the research context include the research questions, the use of activity theory, the personal positioning of the researcher and the ontological and epistemological viewpoints of the researcher. The next section draws these elements together by explaining each of them contributed to the decision to adopt a qualitative rather than a quantitative research approach.

6.2.3 Qualitative research

This research adopts a qualitative methodology as it seeks to understand the perspectives of various participants in the undertaking of deliberate acts of communication and connection. Denzin and Lincoln (2011) explain that "qualitative research involves an interpretive, naturalistic approach to the world." (p. 3). Stake (2010) agrees that qualitative research is interpretive and adds it is experiential, situational, and holistic (p. 16). This research meets the criteria described by Stake and therefore can be described as a qualitative study. It is experiential as it is in tune with the notion that reality is a human construction, situational as it is oriented to specific objects and activities, and holistic as it considers the activity as a whole, including the overall motive of the activity. Finally, this research focuses on the perspectives of stakeholders, and the researcher's interpretations of those perspectives.

The interpretive approach to inquiry, while suiting the descriptive intention of this study, is an approach challenged by some researchers who prefer to see qualitative data supported by quantifiable evidence. Berg (1995) explains "even though the virtue of qualitative research is seldom questioned in the abstract, it is a practice that is sometimes criticised for being non-scientific and thus invalid" (p. 2). The counterargument to this rests with some of the limitations of quantitative research noted in the literature. These include a neglect of the influence of

participants (for example, participant experiences and understanding of the purpose of their activity) on the various components of the activity (Snape & Spencer, 2003) and the anxiety felt by participants when required to be involved in experiments outside the contexts with which they are familiar (Marshall & Rossman, 2006). In other words, proponents of qualitative research claim that quantitative research does not fully account for the social and cultural world of the participants and fails to take account of “common-sense reasoning” (Silverman, 2011, p. 16).

6.2.3.1 Criteria for establishing quality in qualitative research

Another criticism levelled at qualitative studies is that it can be difficult to determine how quality has been maintained throughout the study (Cohen et al., 2005). This section clarifies how standards of quality were maintained in this qualitative study. Explanation is given as to how reliability and validity were incorporated into the study. Although some theorists argue the terms reliability and validity are not suited to qualitative research, others support the use of these terms. Lincoln and Guba, (1985, p. 300) contend reliability and validity are terms inappropriate for use within a naturalistic paradigm where the focus is on naturalistic, situational, holistic inquiry. They propose the terms credibility, transferability, dependability and confirmability as alternative quality criteria for qualitative research. Flick (2009), however, argues that use of alternative criteria “will neither contribute to further establishing the credibility of qualitative research nor contribute to its results being considered as relevant in any way to the community” (p. 385). He recommends qualitative researchers continue to attend to principles of reliability and validity. Consequently, this section is structured around headings of reliability and validity but explains within each of these sections aspects of credibility, transferability, dependability and confirmability. Explanation adds value to understanding how quality was maintained in this research.

Reliability

The term reliability is generally understood to refer to the ability to replicate the research findings. However, the complexities involved in a qualitative study, and the impact of context on the activities means qualitative studies are often difficult to replicate (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). The epistemological stance of this research is that there is “no single reality on which inquiry may converge, but rather there

are a multitude of realities that are socially constructed” (Schwandt, Lincoln, & Guba, 2007, p. 17). These multiple realities cannot be studied piece meal but rather “holistically since the pieces are interrelated in such a way as to influence all other pieces” (Schwandt et al., 2007, p. 17). Lincoln and Guba (1985) propose that qualitative research should be aiming for dependability as opposed to reliability as dependability is a term more aligned to research founded on a constructive-interpretive approach.

One of the means of achieving dependability is through a process of reflexivity; that is, by providing a critical account of how the research was done (Seale, 1999). Seale (1999) explains this “involves a commitment to showing as much as possible to the audience of research studies about the procedures and evidence that have led to particular conclusions” (p. x). This, he claims, helps the audience to imaginatively “replicate” (p. 21) studies and helps to ensure studies are supported by adequate evidence (Seale, 1999).

Flick (2009) extends the notion of how to improve reliability in qualitative research by claiming reliability rests on the need for clear explication of two important principles. The first is to distinguish between subject and researcher statements. The second is to provide clear and detailed evidence of procedures used. This evidence, Flick claims, must incorporate the process of the study in its entirety. “The reliability of the whole process will be better, the more detailed the research process is documented as a whole” (Flick, 2009, p. 387).

This research study has provided a clear and detailed description of the procedures involved in the research process from the stage of proposal through to the stage of completing reports for the schools involved and providing explanation of how the data was coded and analysed. The findings section includes statements from stakeholders that are indented and written in italics so they can be distinguished from the commentary accompanying them. These procedures follow Flick’s (2009) suggestions for improving the reliability of qualitative research.

Validity

The validity of findings refers to their ‘correctness’. It can have two dimensions: internal validity and external validity. Internal validity is concerned with whether you are actually investigating what you claim to be investigating and external validity refers to the applicability of the study to other contexts or settings.

Lincoln and Guba (1985) refer to internal and external validity as “credibility” (p. 300) and “transferability” (p. 297) respectively as they argue they are terms better suited to a qualitative research paradigm where reality is constructed rather than seen as absolute and universal (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). I will continue with the terms internal and external validity, bearing in mind that I am addressing the rigour of this research and establishing defensible reasoning rather than claiming to deliver absolute correctness.

Internal validity is associated with what Liamputtong and Ezzy (2005) refer to as theoretical rigour. That is, the researcher demonstrates rigour and consistency in the research design. This is evidenced by the research methodology and methods being consistent with and appropriate to the research questions. Liamputtong and Ezzy (2005) write that ensuring theoretical rigour involves the researcher integrating “the research problem with the method it utilises and the concepts it employs” (p. 38). This means supporting arguments with evidence and during the research process, ensuring that the sample group has been selected with care and “can potentially tell you what you want to know” (Mason, 1996, p. 90). Sampling must be purposeful, that is, undertaken with the aim of “describing the processes involved in a phenomenon, rather than its distribution” (Liamputtong & Ezzy, 2005, p. 45). That means selecting cases that are “information rich” for studying a particular issue in depth (Liamputtong & Ezzy, 2005, p. 45). In this research, case studies where tools of communication and connection were a feature of the school programme were selected. This enabled interviews to be conducted with participants who had an intimate and working knowledge of the programmes being investigated.

Internal validity is also concerned with interpretive rigour; a quality Mason (1996) suggests is particularly difficult for some researchers to develop. She explains “many researchers encounter crises of confidence about the validity of their own interpretations” (p. 149). An account has interpretive rigour if it “accurately represents the understandings of events and actions within the framework and world view of the people engaged in them” (Liamputtong & Ezzy, 2005, p. 39). This is often represented by using direct verbatim quotes from stakeholders to support interpretations of data.

External validity refers to the applicability of the findings from one study to other setting. Although the external validity of qualitative work is more problematic to achieve than it is for quantitative work (Cohen et al., 2005), Schofield (1993)

argues clear detailed accounts of the research process help. This is so others can decide the extent to which findings from one piece of work may be generalisable to another situation. In order to achieve this, Lincoln and Guba (1985) argue “thick” (p. 359) descriptions are required; that is, descriptions that contain a sound base of information but not deliberately structured with the intention of direct transfer to another researcher. They propose case studies as a means of providing the “thick description so necessary for judgments of transferability” (Lincoln & Guba, 1985, p. 359). This is because case studies provide a sufficient base to permit a person contemplating application in another setting to more fully understand the context where the original research took place. Thick descriptions “involve investigators sharing participant experiences including rich contextual information as well as key raw data” (Yamagata-Lynch, 2010, p. 71).

Although each school context in this study has characteristics that are unique to its setting and community, there are also similarities between school contexts, such as in roll numbers, decile ratings and the general administrative and pedagogical structure that enables one school to quite readily understand the workings of another. In this respect, it is intended that some of the findings of this study may be applicable to other school communities. Schofield (1993) offers a positive slant on the possibility of gaining learnings across settings when he suggests “qualitative research on education can be used not only to study what is and what may be but also to explore possible visions of what could be” (p. 216).

A research design strategy identified as one that could further improve validity in qualitative research is triangulation. Triangulation is defined by Stake (1995) as a process that involves the researcher “working to substantiate an interpretation or to clarify [its] different meanings” (p. 173). Many different types of triangulation are noted in the literature. Cohen et al. (2005, p. 113) discuss triangulation of time, space, theoretical, investigator and method. Denzin (2009, p. 301) discusses triangulation of data, investigator, theory and method. Two points of reference for choosing a type of triangulation to validate research (or whether to use triangulation at all) are the research questions and the methods to be adopted. If, for example the research questions require “several methodological approaches” or “several theoretical perspectives” (Flick, 2009, p. 446) and the research methods allow time for participants “to be exposed to different methods” (such as time spent in their homes as well as in formal interviews) triangulation is

recommended (Flick, 2009, p. 446). However, “there is no need to undertake triangulation in every qualitative study” (Flick, 2009, p. 445).

Denzin and Lincoln (2011) suggest that triangulation is a strategy not entirely consistent with qualitative research. The ontological perspective of qualitative research is that there are multiple realities constructed by individuals. Denzin and Lincoln (2011) argue this ontological perspective “undermines traditional notions of triangulation” (p. 170) because each researcher has their own capacity to construct their own view of reality and therefore will “view an object of inquiry from their own vantage point(s)” (p. 170). This undermines the capacity for a qualitative researcher to incorporate triangulation because each researcher approaches the task of what their research is claiming to achieve from a unique perspective. Rather, what is important is that the object of the research is made clear and the researcher is able to defend their approach as being consistent with their research questions (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011).

Fielding and Fielding (2008) also question the need for triangulation in qualitative studies as they posit “triangulation in itself is no guarantee of internal and external validity” (p. 557). Rather, they propose it is important that multiple sources of information prompt the researcher to take “a more critical stance towards their data” (p. 557). Denzin and Lincoln (2011) agree that a combination of methodological practices, data sources and subject perspectives should be understood as “an attempt to secure an in-depth understanding of the phenomenon in question” (p. 5). Each strategy adds “rigor, breadth, complexity, richness and depth” (p. 5) to a study, but does not guarantee validity.

This study cannot claim triangulation through the use of multiple data sources as by far the main bulk of data came from the interviews. Included in the interview data are interviews from different groups of stakeholders. This range of interviews supported a critical stance and helped address the research questions that required stakeholders to identify tensions and alignments in their activities. The intention of this study was to obtain rich data from a range of sources. This involved careful selection of case studies and extensive interviewing in order to address this aim. Other strategies used to maintain quality were peer review and researcher reflexivity.

Peer review is defined by Shatz (2004) as a mechanism “for quality control” (p. 2). The peer review strategy I adopted was to have other research colleagues review segments of my data and for them to make comment on my coding. There

were two other researchers involved in this process, both of whom were also undertaking research in the field of education. I had a reciprocal relationship with them. I reviewed their work and they did the same for me.

I worked one-on one with each of the two colleagues. However, it was difficult for them to understand the rationale behind my initial coding of data into activity theory elements as they were not familiar with activity theory. This resulted in a lot of discussion and information sharing during the review process. Mishler (1986) acknowledges that understanding coding can be difficult for coders not working in the same field as the researcher. He explains that because meaning is contextually grounded, it is difficult for new coders to determine meaning in a response “stripped of its natural social context” (p. 3). He continues to explain the competence of peer reviewers “consists in their being able to restore the missing context” (p. 3). This means coders need to build a set of shared assumptions specific to the study to allow them to fully understand the coding approach used. Rather than the colleagues who were checking my coding leaving and returning to review, as may have been the case in check-coding for example (Miles & Huberman, 1994) we discussed the coding process together. I note that while the use of peer reviewers not familiar with activity theory may have limited the objectivity of the peer review process, it led to constructive discussions that reduced the number of themes I was creating and it was also a form of researcher reflexivity.

Researcher reflexivity “is the process of reflecting critically on the self as researcher” (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011, p. 124). A quantitative research approach might expect the researcher to operate from a neutral standpoint but life experiences, epistemological understandings, and methodological beliefs all influence the stance of the researcher. Reflexivity is not about trying to eliminate these factors but to make them explicit and try to understand how they have impacted on the on the “intentions, processes and outcomes of the research” (Smyth & Shacklock, 1998). Three approaches to researcher reflexivity were adopted in this thesis.

First, I have been explicit in writing this methodology section and including some of the issues I encountered. Those issues involve the stakeholders being interested in this research study but having limited time available to invest in it. This required me to be concise in both my interview approach and the time I spent at each school. The use of peer reviewers not familiar with activity theory

was another issue encountered. I have also highlighted my concern that I did not monitor the number of forms sent home in any of the three case studies so I could provide details of the response rate from family members.

Second, I employed a strategy of “self-reflection” (LeCompte, Schensul, Weeks, & Singer, 1999, p. 66) throughout this study. I explained my personal experiences leading up to this research and I challenged myself to justify my decisions through a process of constant review.

Third, analytic processes in activity theory-based research are in themselves a form of critical review because analysis of activity systems requires the researcher to engage in a systematic process of analysing and re-analysing the data while continually reflecting on how elements are interacting together and why tensions or alignments may be occurring (Yamagata-Lynch, 2010).

Having established this as a qualitative study and explained how quality was maintained during the study, the following section describes the processes involved in undertaking the research.

6.3 Process of inquiry

6.3.1 Case study research

A case study is described by Cohen, Manion and Morrison (2005) as a bounded system that “provides a unique example of real people in real situations” (p. 181). Cohen, Manion and Morrison explain that the unique properties of case study research enable the reader to understand ideas more clearly than they would if they were presented with “abstract theories or principles” (p. 181). Yin (2003) adds that a case study must be viewed as more than a means of data collection; but a method of understanding the activities of people in their natural context. A ‘case’ in case study research can be an individual, a group, or an organisation (Swanborn, 2010). In this research, each case is a school. There are three case study schools: School W, School R, and School H.

6.3.1.1 Multiple case study research

The findings from each of the three case studies are detailed in the activity systems analysis presented in Chapter Eight. Individual case analysis is followed by cross-case discussion. Stake (2006) expresses concern that cross-case discussion must be approached carefully. He argues the first objective of

multiple case study research is to “understand the case” (p. 2) and then in time to “move on to studying its functioning and relating it to other cases” (p.2). Some multi-case researchers focus on each case study separately and leave the analysis at that point, while other researchers undertake cross-case analysis. Determining which option works for the research depends on the specific research questions. In this instance, the first research question requires description of each case while the second requires cross-case analysis in order to identify the features of the tools that facilitated affordances and limitations to the participants involved. The features discussed are not identified with the purpose of making grand generalisations but rather “petite generalizations” (Stake, 1995, p. 7). Petite generalisation is a term promoted by Stake to emphasise the importance of researchers being clear that any generalisation they make arise from investigation of just one or a small number of cases. Stake (1995) clarifies “the real business of case study is particularization, not generalization” (p. 8). He argues the aim of case study research is to get to know a particular case really well and to describe its uniqueness. The present study respects Stake’s argument and does not try to make grand claims but to look for features from each case study that may provide some insights for others working in this field. I now explain how I went about selecting each case study and describe each school site.

6.3.2 Selection of case study schools

This research followed a two phase selection process. This is a process recommended by Cohen, Manion and Morrison (2005) who suggest the first phase should take a wide field of focus without prejudgment, while the second phase should narrow the field by identifying key foci for data collection.

The first phase of this research involved discussions with the principals of six low decile primary schools concerning their interest in having an activity of communication and connection in their school researched. It was specified during those discussions and in the follow-up letter (Appendix D) that the activity was to be one the school had developed with the deliberate intention of improving communication and connection with their school community. It was to be an initiative chosen by the school (and not by the researcher) that involved families, students, and school personnel. It was explained that the research would involve participants from each of those stakeholder groups. This phase was followed by one that narrowed the field to just three schools.

The criteria for selection of the three schools were:

- The school had a family-school programme currently operating that was developed with the deliberate intention of enhancing opportunities for communication and connection between the school and its community.
- The programme was designed and developed by the school.
- Preferably, the programme was long-standing (at least three years).
- There was a 'fit' between myself and my research interests as the researcher and those of the school.
- The school had discussed the research proposal with their staff, Board of Trustees, and possibly their community and they were willing to be involved.
- The tool of communication had been chosen by the school.
- The decile rating of the school was between one and three.
- The research could begin within the next three months.

All the schools approached expressed an interest in becoming involved in this research. It was mainly the tools adopted by each school that determined my selection of the final three schools. In order to be able to investigate three tools with different features, I chose a school using a paper based tool, one using mobile phone technology, and one using a mainly psychological tool. Other possible case study sites included one using a homework programme, one using school newsletters, and the other school did not eventually decide on their tool for investigation. The former two options were paper based and therefore had similarities with the paper based school programme chosen. The school chosen, however, was keen for me to start my research almost immediately while the other two schools had other activities they were involved with that may have resulted in a more drawn out research timeline.

A further criterion for selection was that it was important for the researcher to feel welcome at the school and to feel a fit with the school setting. The importance of researcher fit with the context of their research is one supported by Coburn and Stein (2010) who explain "researcher-practitioner collaborations are a key strategy for developing educational approaches" (p. 202). The keenness of each of the schools to have me start my research straight away helped to reassure me of their willingness to be part of this study.

Before describing each of the case studies in further detail, it is important to note that each school adopted a range of initiatives to communicate with their families. In each school, the activity to be investigated was just one component of their communication and reporting repertoire, albeit a significant activity. Importantly, the programmes investigated were ones each of the schools had developed independently of external support. They were supplementary to their mandatory reporting requirements.¹¹ The programmes were all part of the everyday activities of each school and all had been operating for at least five years, although all programmes had undergone changes during that time.

The consistency between schools in terms of their activities being ones they had developed with the deliberate intention of communicating and connecting with their school community is important. This consistency positions each school as having a similar Object which provides a comparable foundation for cross-case analysis.

Also, most importantly, it was not my role as the researcher to determine the activity to be investigated but the school principal in consultation with the school staff and the school Board of Trustees. My role was to explain the research to the principals and to present them with a letter explaining the research (Appendix D). At the time of those discussions, each principal immediately suggested an activity they had an interest in having researched but said they would discuss the research proposal with their staff and Board of Trustees. In each case, it was the activity originally suggested by the principal that became the focus of my research. It was important to each principal that as an outcome of their involvement, they received a written report detailing the research findings. They believed this would be useful to the school in terms of any improvements they could make to their activity and it would also help them to understand more about the perspectives family members had of their programme. Detailed reports were prepared as soon as possible following completion of the research and presented to each principal (Appendices A, B and C).

6.3.3 Selection of participants

Following approval from the principals to undertake the research at their school, each principal was given a master copy of the Participant Information Letters (Appendices F and G) and the Participant Consent Forms (Appendix H). The

¹¹ Section 60A(1)(ba) of the New Zealand Education Act (1989)

letters were to be copied by the school and sent home to family members to seek either their consent to be interviewed or their consent for their children to be interviewed, or both (which was usually the case). Each principal agreed to send the letters home to a cross-section of families; those the school had some involvement with and some they did not often see at school. It was in their interests that feedback from a cross-section of families was received so they could develop an improved understanding of family reaction to their activity. All the family members and students who returned completed consent forms to school were interviewed.

Each principal discussed the research with their staff and all staff members at each school indicated their willingness to participate in the research. Staff members all completed Consent forms (Appendix H). Staff members interviewed included school leaders, teaching staff, support staff, caretakers, school receptionists and in one case, a social worker. A total of 108 interviews were conducted as shown in Table 1. An overview of stakeholders interviewed is provided in Appendix E.

	Roll	Decile	Students	Family	Teaching Staff	School Leaders	Support Staff	Total
Case Study W	139	3	6	7	5	3	2	23
Case Study R	223	3	12	14	10	2	3	41
Case Study H	272	2	12	13	11	3	5	44
								108

Table 1: Case study interview details

In summary, three case study schools were selected based on criteria including that they were involved in a programme designed and developed by the school with the intention of providing opportunities for communication and connection with their school community. The willingness of the school to participate in the research, my feeling of fit with the school as a researcher, and the variation in the choice of tools adopted by each school were criteria for selection. The following section provides details of the methods of data collection.

6.4 Methods of data collection

6.4.1 Semi-structured interviews

Semi-structured interviews generally include a set of open-ended questions that guide the research process but also allow opportunities for interviewees to respond with their personal experiences and understandings (Cohen et al., 2005). This approach is consistent with qualitative research as it “enables respondents to project their own ways of defining the world” (Cohen et al., 2005, p. 146). Flick (2009) posits semi-structured interviews are suitable to situations where the interviewees have in-depth knowledge of the context under review. Having that knowledge means interviewees are able to respond with “assumptions that are explicit and immediate” and ones they “can express spontaneously” (p. 156). Also, semi-structured interviews allow interviewees an opportunity to seek clarification about a question, to have questions rephrased and to highlight ambiguities that may need to be addressed by the researcher. This helps to give interviewees a measure of control over the research process.

In this research, the interviews consisted of open-ended, semi-structured questions (Appendix I). This approach was adopted because all interviewees were familiar with their family-school activity. It was intended that their experiences would enable them to express their thoughts spontaneously and bring valuable personal insights to the study.

The methodological foundations of activity theory were used as a guide to the formation of most but not all of the interview questions. There was a question related to the participants’ experiences with the activity, one about their perspectives of the purpose of the activity, one that asked about their perspectives of their role in the activity, a question about community involvement, and a final question related to outcomes. There was an additional question asking about issues with the programme.

The decision to structure the research questions from an activity theory framework was based on the understanding that this approach has been used and recommended by other researchers in this field (Kaptelinin et al., 1999; Kuutti & Arvonen, 1992; Mwanza, 2002b). Mwanza (2002b) developed an Eight-Step Model where each step relates to a question based on an activity theory element. Mwanza claims her model provides researchers using activity theory both a focus for their research design and also a guide for their data gathering

processes. She explains the key function of her Eight-Step Model is to “help the researcher to interpret the situation under investigation in terms of activity theory” (p. 129), to which she adds her model “supports data gathering” (p. 129).

Kaptelinin, Nardi and Macaulay (1999) developed an Activity Checklist with the aim of assisting researchers to maintain a focus on the main principles of activity theory throughout their research. Each of the categories of tool mediation, internalisation-externalisation, and the hierarchical structure of an activity are aligned with questions in the checklist. Macaulay (1999) reported she used the checklist during her own research and found it provided “a flexible and non-prescriptive way of maintaining an awareness of potentially relevant aspects of AT to design concerns” (p. 31). She particularly recommended the checklist to researchers who are new to the concepts of activity theory because she believes it helps them to orient their thoughts when facing issues of uncertainty during their research.

Another analytical tool was designed by Kuutti and Arvonen (1992). They developed a matrix that includes two levels of activity theory design. One level incorporates the activity theory elements of Tool, Subjects, Object, Rules, Community and Division of Labour. The adjoining level suggests potential uses of each of those elements in computer systems design, such as to support routine procedures, to support decision making, or to underpin further development of the tool.

Each of these activity theory research designs offers valuable ideas from which research can be framed, but it is important the design is developed to suit the research aim and context. In this research, activity theory elements structured most questions while another focused on general issues with the activity. This supported the researcher to attend to identifying tensions and alignments in the activity during the analysis process.

Another feature of this research was that questions were prepared in advance. This is an approach questioned by Yamagata-Lynch (2010) who suggests predetermining questions may not provide opportunities for participant input into the research design process. She advocates for participant involvement during the question development phase of the research. Often activity theory-based studies take place over an extended period of time which enables the researcher opportunities to play an active role within the research context and to involve participants in many aspects of research design (Yamagata-Lynch & Smaldino,

2007). However, in the context of this research, extended periods of either researcher or participant involvement were not possible as was explained in Chapter Two. Therefore, in order to make efficient use of the time available at each school it was important that the research questions were developed in advance. However, the decision to use a semi-structured interview approach meant that questions could be clarified and amended during the research process. This allowed opportunities for interviewees to expand on issues that were of interest or relevance to them.

6.4.1.1 Interview process

All interviews were one-on-one; that is, just the interviewer together with each interviewee. All the school based interviews (school leaders, teachers, support staff and students) were in a face-to-face situation. The interviews with parents were telephone interviews with a microphone recording the conversations (participants had agreed to be recorded). There was no time limit placed on any of the interviews although the teachers' time allocation was determined by their relieving teacher's schedule. The time allocation for most teachers was 45 minutes. By the time the teacher arrived, I introduced the topic, and they allowed time to return to class, the interview time for most of them was around 30 minutes in duration. The principals' interviews were up to 45 minutes long. School support staff interviews were up to ten minutes through their own choice as they did not elaborate on issues. Student interviews were all very brief as they tended to answer each of their questions in around one or two sentences. At times, additional questions were asked to encourage students to elaborate on their brief answers but responses to these questions were also concise. Family members also tended to be quite brief in their answers. The family interviews lasted for around five to ten minutes each.

6.4.1.2 Face-to-face interviews

Conducting a face-to-face interview where the interviewee feels comfortable about speaking and responding to questions involves the establishment of a working environment where effort is made to develop a level of trust and respect. This can be developed firstly through the processes that occur prior to the interview taking place such as through the ethical practices of ensuring informed consent and confidentiality. Secondly, comfort is achieved during the process of

the interview when the interviewer communicates interest and attention to the interviewee (Legard, Keegan, & Ward, 2003). .

Conducting one-on-one interviews can itself be a means of achieving a level of comfort, as participants are not constrained by the presence of other participants. I chose to structure the study in this way because participants were speaking about issues that were very personal to them. I also recognised it as an approach that respected the circumstances of those involved as it enabled participants' flexibility to choose a time that suited them rather than having to co-ordinate with others.

In this research, I met with each school principal prior to undertaking the research but I had not met with the classroom teachers, students or family members prior to their interviews. It was therefore important that I reiterated the confidentiality and anonymity of the research process at the beginning of each interview in order to develop a degree of trust. The principals had informed the teachers of the research intention and timing so this improved the understanding and expectations the teachers had about the research process. The principals and teachers were also shown copies of the interview questions as they began their interviews. This helped to maintain structure and efficiency during the interview process.

The timing of my interviews was developed in consultation with the principal from each school. It is important to note that all three schools were extremely accommodating by allowing teachers release time through the use of a relieving teacher. Each school developed a schedule with time slots and teachers placed their names alongside times they believed suited their teaching programmes. This schedule and the use of a relieving teacher was a positive reflection of the value each school placed on this research. Interview transcripts were returned to all school personnel for review a short time after the interviews. I did not receive feedback about any of the transcripts. The students were also interviewed one-on-one during their day at school. Family members were all interviewed by telephone.

6.4.1.3 Telephone interviews

Telephone interviews can provide opportunities to reach a wide range of respondents from a diverse group who may otherwise miss the opportunity to be interviewed because they are unable or unwilling to travel into school to

participate. Telephone interviews allow for flexibility in interview times, an approach that is respectful to the participants involved. The consent form completed by family members offered them a choice between interviews at school or at home (via telephone). Without exception, all family members chose the home option.

6.4.2 Observations in case study settings

The majority of my time spent at each school site was taken up with the interview process but I did take some time to involve myself with some of each school's activities. These involvements included joining staff for morning tea, interacting with students during their lunch break, and visiting classrooms at all three school sites. I also attended the early morning 'staff meetings' at School H and assemblies at School H and School R. My observations were aimed at gaining a deeper understanding of the phenomenon under study (Cohen et al., 2005).

Flick (2009) contends that there are different categories of observation techniques, each of which can be differentiated by a question. These categories include systematic versus unsystematic observation (is a predetermined standardised procedure being used?), covert versus overt observation (is the observation being revealed to those involved?), non-participant versus participant observation (is the observer active in the field?), and observation in natural surroundings versus observation in artificial surroundings (is the observation taking place in a laboratory for example?) (Flick, 2009, p. 222). The procedure of observation used in this research study was unsystematic and nonparticipant. It was a method of improving my understanding of the surrounding research contexts with minimal interference. I was able to observe events as they naturally occurred and reflect on those "in order to integrate implicit impressions, apparent incidentals and perceptions" (Flick, 2009, p. 225). I made notes following the observations to remind me of any incidents I observed. Information from these notes is integrated with the research findings from the interviews and the documents viewed and included in the Findings Chapter.

6.4.3 Documents viewed

All schools were willing to provide me with documents to show evidence of the programmes operating in their schools. Some of these documents I viewed on site and others I took away with me. In School W, I viewed samples of children's work. In School R, I was given access to the school's intranet site where data

related to the programme I was investigating was recorded (explained further below). I was also provided with School R's Acceptable Use Procedures Statement (2009) that set out expectations for the use of the mobile phones at their school. School H provided me with their Parent Information Booklet, their Administration and Organisational Policies, and a report written by The New Zealand Principals Federation about School H's values programme. This report praised School H for upholding values education as a priority at the school.

I was given access to the school's intranet site at School R. This site is called their ETap system. I was able to view all documentation associated with the school's use of the mobile phone programme during 2008 and 2009. From the ETap site I was able to confirm information I had been given in the interviews. That included that over 80 percent of the calls in the 2008 year were of a positive nature. There is a straight forward positive/negative question for the teachers to complete when they record information about each contact on the ETap site. This means that information related to the positive or negative nature of calls can be readily collated by the principal and included in his reports to his Board of Trustees, sponsors and at staff meetings.

The site also had details about each of the contacts made to students' homes. Staff members recorded the main purpose for contacting parents and some information about the response the parents made to their child if this was possible (the child may make a comment when they finish talking on the phone). The responses I viewed from parents were all quite brief and praise focused such as 'well done' or 'good boy'. These types of responses were confirmed by students when asked what their parent said when they rang home.

In summary, a case study approach was adopted for this research and interviews were the main method of data collection. Data from interviews were supported with information from the informal observations and documents. This data required coding as it informed the interpretive stage of the research process. The following section describes how data coding was undertaken.

6.5 Data coding

To gain an overview of the interview coding process, imagine a sieve was placed over each of the sets of interview transcripts on two separate occasions. The first 'run through' with the sieve separated the transcripts according to activity theory elements. The second run through followed a thematic coding approach.

Although this seems straightforward, coding was an iterative process that involved multiple stages of revision. Figure 8 details the data coding process.

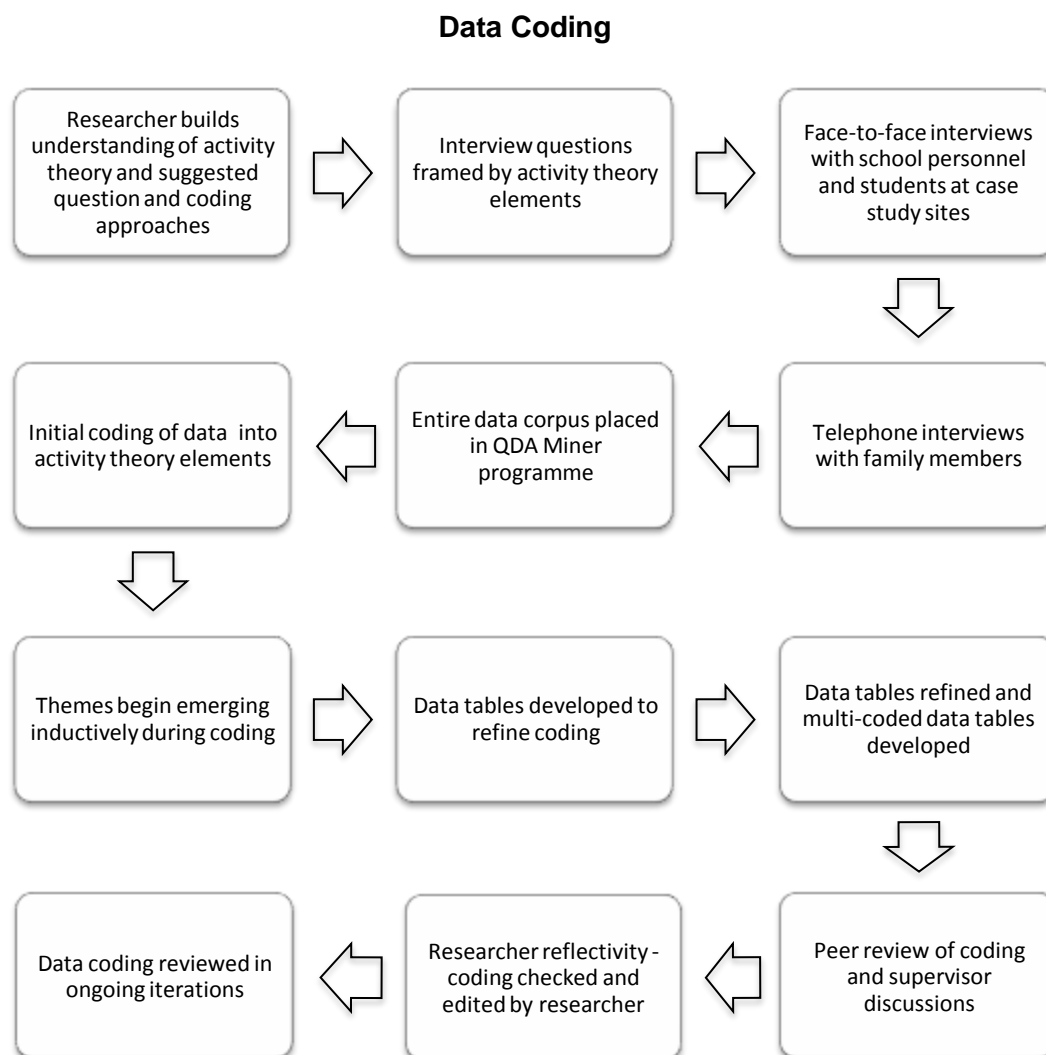


Figure 6: Data coding process

QDA Miner¹² is a qualitative analysis software tool for coding and analysing collections of qualitative data. I trialled this tool and decided to purchase it as I found its ease of use preferable to alternatives such as Nvivo. In QDA Miner, each of the interview transcripts is placed into a programme folder. Once the researcher has developed codes, they colour code each transcript in a similar manner to using coloured highlighter pens. Codes can then be retrieved and reviewed to determine themes.

¹² Refer to: provalisresearch.com for further information on QDA Miner

Each of the interviews from within each data set was initially coded using activity theory elements of Tool, Object, Rules, Community, Division of Labour and Outcomes. The structure of most of the interview questions into activity theory elements helped to determine initial coding categories. This was a deductive approach to coding that was followed by an inductive approach. Within each of the activity theory categories, themes emerged that required further analysis. The themes that emerged within the activity theory element of Rules at case study W, for example, were: assessment, return of books, parent comment and barriers. Themes differed at each case study site and were not predetermined but arose through interpretation of the data collected. Appendix J provides details of all activity theory elements and themes.

I drew on the thematic analysis approach described by Braun and Clarke (2006) to help inform my development of themes. Thematic analysis Braun and Clarke (2006) define as a means for “identifying, analysing and reporting patterns within data” (p.79). The researcher begins by determining an approach to theme coding then undertakes the coding with the expectation that themes will be revised and reflected on during the coding process. This is an inductive approach to coding which is described by Braun and Clarke as “a process of coding the data without trying to fit it into a pre-existing coding frame, or the researcher’s analytic preconceptions” (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 83). The advantage of the inductive approach is that it allows for flexibility as themes are not predetermined. This approach fits with the interpretive epistemologist stance taken by this work which draws from the principle that knowledge is co-constructed through the social world and the individual perspective of the world (Bryman, 2012).

When undertaking thematic analysis, there are further choices the researcher is required to make, such as how to select which data are to be coded. A researcher can select dialogue relevant only to a certain focus and analyse this data in depth, or they can choose to include the entire data set in their analysis. In this research, the entire data set was coded. Through the use of the activity theory framework, data had already been coded into manageable units and from there, thematic analysis provided an opportunity for further in-depth understandings to be made of the data coded into each of the activity theory element.

It is also important to note that themes were not developed according to quantitative criteria such as frequency. This is because Braun and Clarke (2006)

suggest a theme should not necessarily be dependent on quantifiable measures “but rather on whether it captures something important in relation to the overall research question” (p.82). What is important is that this same approach to thematic analysis was held consistent throughout all the case studies.

Although all data were coded, not all of it is included in the findings chapter that follows. Stake (2006) explains this is the way case study research often works:

The case researcher considers many features of the case. Some are selected to be studied. Only a few can be studied thoroughly. Because much of the important activity of the case is recognizably patterned, both coherence and sequence are sought (p. 3).

Deciding on themes, whether or not to include themes in the Findings Chapter, and whether or not patterns have developed from themes are critical stages of researcher interpretation. Decisions are made by the researcher “to gain an experiential understanding of the case” (Stake, 1995, p. 40). The position of the researcher plays a substantial role in interpretation of qualitative research but as Stake (1995) explains qualitative research will always include researcher input. In reality, during case study research, the interpretations made by the researcher “are likely to be emphasised more than the interpretations of those people studied” (Stake, 1995, p. 12). That was why it was important to be transparent about the personal philosophy of the researcher (Section 6.2.1.3).

Coding into themes in this study was a challenging process that involved a great deal of researcher reflexivity (described in Section 6.2.3.1) and repeated coding attempts. It was important to keep the research questions in mind during the coding process because as Yamagata-Lynch (2010) explains “investigators need to go back to the research questions and use [these] as a vantage point for re-experiencing the data and preparing thick descriptions of those experiences from the investigator perspective” (p. 72). However, it is important that the researcher tries to preserve the “*multiple realities*” (p. 12, italics in original) of the participants involved. Multiple realities are an expected outcome of case study research. Interpretation of them is made more dependable through the use of “thick descriptions” (Lincoln & Guba, 1985, p. 359). As noted earlier, thick descriptions represent the perceptions of the participants involved and support the reader to develop understandings of interpretations made. This study incorporates descriptions that provide the detail required to support readers to understand

each case, how and why particular themes were developed and the implications for research and practice.

A further challenge with data coding in this study was that many of the statements made by interviewees were brief, some just one line. Statements were also not elaborated on, especially in the case of young students, and hence determination of some themes had to be made from a limited source of data. All participants, whether they preferred to make one line statements or speak at length, however, made a valuable contribution to this work. That was because they answered questions from their own experiences and to the best of their abilities. Stake (1995) argues, the role of the researcher is to determine the 'best sources'; that is, sources that "best help us to understand the case, whether typical or not" (p. 56). Best sources in this research were a range of stakeholders, each with personal experiences to share – regardless of the brevity or length of their dialogue.

An advantage of adopting the coding approach selected was that at the thematic coding stage, data had already been coded according to activity theory elements. This assisted the process of coding into themes because data of a similar nature were already clustered together. I was assisted in the coding process, as mentioned earlier, through the use of the QDA Miner software tool.

One of the benefits of QDA Miner was that the programme provided me with a tool to retrieve 'key words'. Once I had an idea of themes, I identified key words from as many themes as I could so that they would alert me to references to that theme in the data. By inputting the word 'scrapbook' for example into the key word retrieval option, I was able to retrieve text related to the theme of 'format' in case study W. Similarly, the key word 'instant' brought forth text related to the theme of tool immediacy in case study R. This did not work consistently across all themes but it was one tool provided by the software that helped to make coding more manageable. The key words I used for retrieval have been underlined in the data table presented in Appendix K.

Another benefit of the QDA software package was that with just one click, all the data coded into any given theme could be displayed in a concise format. That format included the activity theory element, the theme, and the subject category (school leader, teacher, support staff, student or family member). This facility helped to improve the manageability of the data as data retrieval was a

straightforward process and changes made to data coding could be constantly reviewed.

Having now explained the methods of data collection, each case study will be described followed by an account of the ethical considerations given to the research process.

6.6 Case study details

6.6.1 Case study W

6.6.1.1 School context

School W was a Decile 3 urban primary school with a roll of approximately 139 students ranging from Year 1 to Year 8. The school was multicultural and acknowledged its multicultural community in its school vision graphic.¹³ This was a pictorial representation of some of the values important to the school, including symbolism from Māori, Indian, Asian, America, New Zealand European, Pacific and Asian cultures. The pictorial representation of values was supported by a vision statement that emphasised community and learning. Its main message was that they were a community of empowered, connected learners making a difference.

The leadership team at the school comprised a nonteaching principal, a teaching deputy principal and an assistant principal. The principal had been at the school since 2003. He was keen to have this study undertaken as he was interested to find out more about the perceptions family members had of the school's family-school programme. He hoped the research could help the school consider improvements that would benefit the school's connections with their community. He was personally keen to be part of the study as were all the leadership team and classroom teachers. The school sent letters home to families asking for their consent to participate. The number of letters sent home is unknown but seven were returned. This issue is noted as a limitation of this research in Section 9.5. All the seven family members who returned their consent forms were interviewed. The tool selected by the school for communicating with their community was their Brag Book.

¹³ The school vision graphic is not included in order to maintain anonymity for the school.

6.6.1.2 Tool in use for communication and connection: *Brag Book*

The Brag Book was a type of 'portfolio' as discussed in Section 3.3.1. It was a book that contained samples of students' work accumulated throughout their school year. The principal explained it was called a Brag Book in recognition that it included samples of work the students could feel proud of and therefore 'brag' about. The Brag Books had been in use in the school for over five years prior to this research. Although staff could not recall when they were first introduced, their earliest memories of using them were when they were in a clear file format where student work was slipped into clear plastic pockets. In the year prior to this research, the format had changed to a large scrap book with blank pages. The scrap book format required work samples to be glued onto blank pages. Students took their Brag Book home at the end of terms one, two, and four with the intention that they could share their work with their family members and 'brag' about their efforts. When the books went home at the end of term four they did not have to be returned to school. The books could be kept as a permanent reminder of the students' work during that year at school. The Brag Books usually went home on a Thursday towards the end of terms one and two and were to be returned the following Monday. A feed-back sheet was included in the books for parents to make comments on. Parents were also required to sign the books to show they had viewed them before returning them to school.

Some of the pages of the books contained photographs showing the students engaged in various activities but most of the pages were taken up with samples of student writing, and topic study work. In the senior classes (Y3-8), the books also included some test results and a goal setting component which was part of each teacher's classroom programme. Teachers established goals together with students and the goals were written into the Brag Books (there was no mention of parent involvement in this process).

A new initiative brought in the Deputy Principal, who had been at the school for a little more than a year at the time of this study, required teachers to indicate on the work samples the students' level of progress with a 'below', 'at' or 'above' rating scale. This assessment was made by comparing their work against national exemplars or by administering tests. Note this study was undertaken in 2009, the year prior to National Achievement Standards becoming a requirement of all state primary and intermediate schools in New Zealand. This new policy

has created some tensions amongst staff as will be explained in the following chapter.

6.6.2 Case study R

6.6.2.1 School context

School R was a Decile 3 urban primary school with a roll of approximately 230 students ranging from Years 1 to 8. The school mission statement portrayed the school as adopting a caring approach. It stated that the school “aims to provide for the needs of all our children by giving them opportunities to develop their potential in a caring environment” (School R, 2009).¹⁴

The leadership team at the school comprised a non-teaching principal and non-teaching deputy principal. The principal had been at the school since 2005. Shortly after starting, he initiated what he described as a school hui¹⁵ involving all members of the school staff. It was a weekend retreat at a venue not far from the school. The intention of the hui, according to the principal, was to discuss how to better involve families with school and attend to the needs and purposes of all stakeholders in order to improve outcomes for students. The principal explained that one of the issues discussed and the one that dominated proceedings at the hui was that many staff had a strong desire to be able to make immediate contact with family members when they had something to share with them about their child. He recalled that staff members believed all stakeholders would benefit from an activity that allowed both personal and real time contact between school personnel, students, and their family members. Communication by mobile phone was suggested as an option as mobile phones appeared to be a means of facilitating regular contact between home and school. Staff members were aware most families had access to a mobile phone and followed this assumption up with a survey sent home with students which found over 90 percent of families had access to a mobile phone. Teachers understood that, with the use of a mobile device, contact could be immediate and, importantly, it would give students the opportunity to share their good news with their family members themselves.

The mobile phone idea was followed up by the principal who sourced some sponsorship to help with costs and in 2006 the school ‘Phone Home Good News’

¹⁴ The mission statement cannot be referenced with the school details in order to maintain anonymity for the school.

¹⁵ Hui is a Māori word meaning a meeting

programme began. Follow-up staff meetings were held to discuss rules and procedures around the use of the phones. At these meetings it was decided that the main purpose of the phones' use would be to focus on positive news around student achievement. This focus was documented in the school's Acceptable Use Procedures Statement which stated that the purpose of the mobile phones were to "facilitate positive dialogue and communication around student achievement" (School R, 2009). This purpose was communicated to family members through the school web site, newsletters, parent-student conferences, and informally.

6.6.2.2 Tool in use for communication and connection: Mobile phones

In order to enable the teachers to make real time personal contact with the families of their students, personal mobile phones were made available to each of the teachers and also to the two leadership personnel, the office administrator, caretaker, two support staff members, and the chairperson of the Board of Trustees (15 phones). All phones had voice, text and video capability. Teachers could take the phones home but while they were at home the phones were to be used for school purposes only.

The school continued to have meetings to decide on further procedures for acceptable use. These meetings did not involve community members although the principal consulted with the School Board of Trustees and included any changes in procedures in the school's Cell Phone Acceptable Use Procedure document, a document made available to the school community. It was decided at these meetings that calls should be related to: curriculum, achievement, behaviour, special events, and important learning milestones. Each teacher was to aim to make 40 contacts per week (one positive call per child per week plus some incidental calls and negative calls if required). It was decided the students were to talk on the phone when a voice call was made but were to do so with adult supervision. Students could also write text messages when their literacy levels allowed them that capability.

A record was kept of all the contacts made with the mobile phones. The school used a system called ETap for this purpose. This is an internal intranet programme. Each teacher could access and input data related to their students on the ETap system. All communications made from the school cell phones were to be recorded on this system. Teachers were to identify the student involved,

whether the contact was made for positive or negative reasons and add further detail around the purpose of the communication. Teachers were also required to identify the person receiving the call and to make additional notes if the child made a comment the following day at school about any responses they received from home about their phone call the previous day.

The principal had access to school-wide information. He used this to report to the School Board of Trustees and to the programme sponsor. He also used this information to follow-up on students who were regularly causing concern and in so doing, provide support to teachers and/or family members. Similarly, he had the data to be able to acknowledge and encourage students who were consistently being recognised for positive reasons. He contacted the whānau of children himself to offer encouragement if they were consistently appearing in the positive data.

Since the introduction of the 'Phone Home Good News' programme in 2006, two additional mobile phones had been purchased for use by two support staff members.

6.6.3 Case study H

6.6.3.1 School context

School H was a Decile 2 contributing primary school (Years 1 to 6) located on the outskirts of a New Zealand city. Its roll was approximately 270 at the time of this study.

The leadership team at the school comprised a principal and non-teaching deputy principal and a part time teaching assistant principal. The principal was very experienced and had been at the school for approximately 10 years although he had various amounts time away on professional leave, at which times the deputy principal took over his role. When the principal started at this school, there had been some quite traumatic circumstances associated with the resignation of his predecessor. He believed his new appointment was an opportune time to focus on team work. He initiated many new ideas with the intention of trying to improve relationships both within the school and between the school and its community. One of the most salient was trying to build a culture of caring at the school.

6.6.3.2 Tool in use for communication and connection: Cultural practice

The practice of prioritising a culture of caring was a deliberate action undertaken by the principal with the intention of improving relationships. He believed relationships between the school and its community should be a focus of the school because without this, the holistic development of the students would not flourish. A main feature of the culture was a school motto that stated that at this school 'we look after each other'. The principal was not sure how the motto came about other than believing it established as a reflection of the caring culture he was trying to promote.

In summary, this section has described each case study school and the tool adopted at each school for purposes of communication and connection between family, students, and school. Before detailing the findings from each case study, the ethical considerations given to data collection phases are explained.

6.7 Ethical considerations

Section 6.4 identified interviews as the main source of data collection. Interviewing a range of participants and asking them to consider questions that may be personal or contrary to the principles of the organisation within which they are employed has the potential to cause harm and therefore ethical considerations must be taken into account. The consent process that allowed this research to proceed ensured in formal terms that all participants were respected, in particular through the requirements of informed consent, confidentiality and anonymity. This research received ethical approval from The University of Waikato Faculty of Education Research Ethics Committee on 29 July 2009.

6.7.1 Informed consent

The principle of informed consent is fundamental to ethical research because it concerns an individual's right to choose to participate. Underlying this right are four basic principles: full information, comprehension, competence, and voluntarism (Frankfort-Nachmias & Nachmias, 1996).

It is the responsibility of the researcher to provide full information to potential participants about the aims of the study, the research process, and the ethical procedures in place to reduce harm. The initial stage of informed consent was a

discussion with the school principal. This was followed up in each case by a subsequent discussion between the principal and the school Board of Trustees as it was necessary to gain their consent before proceeding further. Having completed this process, letters were given to staff members asking for their individual consent. In all cases, there was a 100 percent acceptance to be part of the research from staff members.

In discussion with each principal, it was decided not to send letters to each home as it would be difficult to let families know they had not been chosen for the interviews. Instead, the school leaders sent letters to what they said was a range of families and I was not involved in this process. All of the families who responded with their acceptance were interviewed.

The comprehension and competence of participants to understand the research process, and therefore offer consent that is truly informed involves providing an opportunity to discuss the process if required. Consent forms were taken home and in many instances, parents commented they discussed the process with their children prior to allowing them to participate. There was no compulsion on the part of the families or the staff members to return the forms but there were contact numbers made available should they require further information or wish to discuss the research in further detail.

Finally, participants must be able to volunteer to participate free from any “fraud, deceit, duress, or similar unfair inducement or manipulation” (Berg, 1995, p. 212). This principle of voluntarism is particularly important in a school context which is “inscribed by differential power relations” (David, Edwards, & Alldred, 2001, p. 352). There was potential a principal could assert power over staff members and therefore make it difficult for them to withdraw their consent. In order to try to reduce any harm this may cause, the confidentiality and anonymity of all participants was assured. This was written into the Participant Information Letters (Appendices F and G), the Participant Consent Forms (Appendix H), and confirmed verbally at the start of each interview.

6.7.2 Confidentiality and anonymity

Confidentiality means respecting each participant’s right to privacy. This involves the deletion of identifiers such as names. Had it not been for the assurance of confidentiality and anonymity, there is a possibility some teachers may not have

participated as they expressed their desire to remain anonymous. For similar reasons, the participating schools are also identified by code names.

6.8 Chapter summary

In summary, this study incorporates a qualitative methodology and an interpretive approach to inquiry. The bulk of the corpus of data is drawn from the interviews conducted at each of the three case study schools. These interviews were conducted with the same set of participants at each school: teachers, leadership personnel, support staff, family members and students. The schools were chosen because they offered a range of approaches to communicating between home and school: pen and paper, mobile phones and engaging in a school culture in which acts of communication between families, students and school are embedded. Significantly, the programmes had been selected by the school themselves as it was an initiative they were interested in receiving further feedback about. Each school was provided with a full report immediately following the analysis of the data (Appendices A, B, and C). Key findings from these reports are incorporated into the following chapter.

CHAPTER 7: FINDINGS

7.1 Introduction

This chapter presents findings from each of the three case studies. The description of each case study is divided into sections that incorporate the activity theory elements of Tool, Object, Rules, Community, Division of Labour and Outcomes. The element of Subject is not detailed separately because information relating to Subjects is dispersed within each of the other activity theory element sections. Elements cannot be described without incorporating data from Subjects because interviews are the main source of data. Subjects in this study include: family members, students, classroom teachers, school leaders, and school support staff.

Data included in the Tools section mainly relate to how Tools were being used at each school. From an activity theory perspective, the Tool is the resource used by Subjects to shape their activity (Kaptelinin & Nardi, 2006; Yamagata-Lynch, 2010). The main focus of the Tools section is on Subjects' perspectives of activities that afforded or limited opportunities for them to communicate and connect with other members of their school community.

The Object section considers the perspectives participants had of the purpose of their activity (Brag Book, Mobile Phone Programme, or Cultural Practice). In the explanation of activity theory in Chapter Two, the Object was described as the ultimate motive of the activity (Kaptelinin, 2005). It was also discussed that Subjects are not always conscious of their motives but are conscious of their shorter term goals. In order to ascribe meaning to the Object section that may lead to discussion of Subjects' perceptions of the longer term motive of their activity rather than focusing on their shorter term actions, the interview question related to Object asked them to consider the main purpose of their activity (research questions are detailed in Appendix I). This question is in line with the organisation of an activity systems analysis recommended by Mwzana (2002a) who recommends an interview question related to Object should ask participants why they believe their activity is taking place (p. 86). Comments in this research drew attention to issues such as how participants believed the activity began, how it was evolving, and what its main focus was.

The Rules section examines data that address issues related to both the written (policy and procedures) and unwritten rules (norms and expectations) of each activity, while the Community section considers the extent of the involvement of a group that is usually wider than the Subjects themselves. The Division of Labour section addresses how tasks were shared. This involves issues related to the roles of Subjects, such as how they and others perceived they should address the responsibilities of their role. This section also considers how issues of power may have created tensions in the undertaking of each activity. Finally, the Outcomes section of each case study analyses perceived Outcomes for both students and family members. Outcomes for students are described in terms of whether or not Subjects (including the students themselves) considered the activity had positive benefits on student engagement with school. The Outcomes for family members are described in terms of whether or not the activity may have improved opportunities for communication and connection between family, students, and school.

This description of activity theory elements has established that within each of these sections, various themes were discussed. Appendix J defines each theme and Appendix K provides an example from the data to support that definition.

There were many incidences during the coding process where data could have been coded into more than one theme category (that is, multi-coded). Decisions that underpinned the coding of data items that required particular attention because they were items frequently discussed or ones that the meaning of required clarification are detailed in Appendix L (School W), Appendix M (School R), and Appendix N (School H) as well as in the text below.

As explained in Section 2.3.1, because activity theory elements are also terms used in common language, a capital letter is used when referring to an element in activity theory terms, and a lower case letter is used when referring to an element such as object or rules in common language. All personal names used are pseudonyms.

7.2 Case study W

The first case study to be described is School W, a decile 3 urban primary school. At the time of this research, it had a roll of approximately 139 pupils, a teaching staff of five and a leadership team of three, one of whom, Diane, was a teacher in a senior class and had part time release to fulfil her role as a leader in the school.

Diane is identified in the Findings below as a school leader rather than as a teacher because it was mainly from her position as a school leader that she based her comments. The Tool investigated in School W was the Brag Book.

7.2.1 Tool

Tools were described in Chapter Three as having physical (pen and paper) and psychological (transmission of cognitive or emotional knowledge) properties. In this case study, the Tools section focuses mainly on issues related to the physical properties of Tool because in the interviews with teachers, school leaders, family members and students' comments focused on themes mainly related to the physical features of the tool such as its *format* and *content*. Comments also related to the degree to which the Brag Book functioned as a *regular* system of feed-back and to the *links* between the Brag Book and other reporting requirements. These themes provide a structure for the following section which is an analysis of the way the Brag Book Tool was being used at School W.

7.2.1.1 Format

A number of issues will be discussed concerning the use of the Tool at School W but one that all participants agreed on was that they preferred the evolved scrapbook format of the Brag Book as opposed the clear file format they had been using initially. The scrapbook is a large book with blank pages for gluing students' work samples on to.

All the teachers preferred the scrapbook format mainly because it provided a more permanent record of their students' work. This permanency is a consequence of the work samples being glued on to pages rather than slipped into interchangeable pockets. Mark, one of the teachers, stated his strong belief that the Brag Book should function as a permanent record:

I think the thing is that clear files tend to, it's easy to remove things and then they get lost whereas it's glued down and it should be permanent and it should be there so I think I prefer those scrapbooks as a solid record. (Mark, teacher)

Another teacher, Kate, commented that the gluing of samples helped to ensure that neither the students nor the teacher could change their minds about what

was included and therefore the work could be viewed as reliably portraying students' performance at a particular point in time:

I quite like a scrapbook because it's quite a good sized book, the papers are thick so you can quite easily glue or do . . . I mean clear files I find, you know, people tend to take the paper out and forget to put them back and I think the good thing about a scrapbook is once its put in, that's it, there's no room for change, there's none of this 'oh you did better yesterday'. (Kate, teacher)

These two teachers, therefore, were clear that the Brag Books should provide a permanent record that portrayed samples of student work at a particular point in time.

Other teachers favoured the scrapbook format because it allowed for some contribution and independence on the part of the students while keeping the work samples more secure.

I do like the scrapbook because the pieces aren't falling out and the kids can glue it in themselves. (Gaylene, teacher)

The students' contribution to the presentation and formatting of samples was important to the teachers because many found presenting work samples took a considerable amount of time. It was helpful to have the students take responsibility for some aspects of this task. For many students, however, the skill of gluing samples in neatly was not one they had mastered. Many, particularly junior school students required a lot of assistance to help them to glue their samples neatly but their teachers said they were willing to put up with this inconvenience because they perceived there were benefits in the scrapbook format compared with the clear files, such as the permanency of samples.

Leadership personnel agreed that the scrapbook format was favourable because it provided a more permanent record, kept the samples safer and also helped to improve the overall presentation of the work. Diane explained these points further:

I actually prefer the scrapbook. I've had both and in a lot of ways it is a lot easier to slip work back to back in a clear file but I do prefer the scrapbook. I think it does, although its gluing is perhaps a little bit of extra work, I think it does keep it together,

nicely and I think its kept together, you know some children drop their clear files then, you know it can all fall out whereas that doesn't happen with a scrapbook and somehow I think that even if the children do really, really good work on the presentation of their work it somehow looks a lot different in the scrapbook than it does in the clear file in the transparent sheets. (Diane, school leader)

Different views about the advantages of the scrapbook format were also shared by the students. They too liked the presentation of the scrapbooks and the safety of their work in this format:

It looks nice in the scrapbook thing. (Anna, student)

I think it's really good being in a scrapbook because when we used to put it in the clear file, things used to fall out if we hold the file the wrong way. (Natalie, student)

Family members' views were similar to those of the school staff and the students as indicated by Mary and Robyn:

I like the scrapbook. (Mary, family member)

I think the scrap books are a good idea because you don't lose them, everything's glued in. (Robyn, family member)

There was, therefore positive support from all participant groups for the Brag Book to continue in its scrapbook *format*. All participants liked the notion that the scrapbooks provided a good medium for displaying a permanent record for student work samples. This same support between participant groups was, however, not evidenced when the *content* of the Brag Books was discussed.

7.2.1.2 Content

Diane, indicated the Brag Books could be a lot of work for teachers if they required their students to produce samples of work specifically for the Brag Books. She did not want the teachers to be adding to their already busy schedules by doing extra tasks:

We've been reinforcing to staff not to do work specifically for the Brag Books but to take things off the wall and put them in, you

know so take published work off that's been, and put it in, um take photos of visual art, take photos of them doing co-operative games or whatever but not doing specifically extra things for the Brag Book but using things that are relevant to the unit and not doing extra work. (Diane, school leader)

Lynn, another member of the leadership team agreed with Diane's views and added that if teachers asked students to do special work for their Brag Books, the families may get the wrong impression of their child's level of progress and in her view, the wrong impression of the purpose of the books:

But really what we're trying to get teachers to understand is that it's an ongoing thing and it really is a true representation of what the kids can do and don't try to get them to do over and over and over otherwise the parents will be thinking 'oh look what my kid can do, aren't they clever' where as in actual fact, it's more the teacher who did it. (Lynn, school leader)

Rae, one of the teachers, however, said she planned specifically for Brag Book work in her programme. She said she found this was a more manageable way for her to ensure the Brag Books were kept up to date:

To make it manageable for me I've just gone 'this is a Brag Book piece of work' and known right from the beginning in my planning so in my unit plan I've just gone that's the thing we'll do for our Brag Book. (Rae, teacher)

Although Diane suggested teachers should not feel they needed to make an extra effort to do work for the Brag Book, the teachers felt there was an expectation for work included in the Brag Books to be of a high standard and therefore they believed they had to put extra effort into the preparation and presentation of these samples. Importantly, however, they did not feel the pressure of this expectation as coming from school leaders but rather from family members. Rae explained:

What will the parents think of me as a teacher? You want to make it look beautiful so it doesn't reflect badly on you, so that has been an issue for me in the past is to say, I will make it look good not by necessarily doing the work for them but really pressuring the children to have it up to scratch. (Rae, teacher)

Rae's way of coping with the issue of high expectations from family members was at times to include students' first draft in order to show how they had progressed. Other teachers agreed with Rae that the Brag Books were a lot of work and they felt pressure from families to ensure the books were presented well. Interestingly, it was mainly in staff meetings that decisions over issues such as content and presentation were considered. There was no reference made to involving families in these decisions. Kate talked about reflecting on the procedures involving the Brag Books in staff meetings:

We do reflect, you know, I mean well obviously things come up, you know, I mean I know we've had a few meetings about how we could look at improving it within the school. (Kate, teacher)

Although the staff had regular meetings between themselves, they believed they had not yet reached a point where there was agreement over how best to address content and presentation concerns. Gaylene explained that although they were trying to incorporate the views of teachers, students and family members in any amendments to the programme, she believed the current programme had not yet accomplished that aim:

So it's finding something that works for both teachers and families and the children too [and] I don't think we've come to that place yet. I don't think we have. (Gaylene, teacher)

A statement made by one of the parents provided an example of the importance of including families in decision-making processes. Carlos stated that one of the concerns he had with the Brag Books was that he was unable to understand some of the specialised, assessment related language used in the books:

I can see what my daughter has learnt but then I don't have the correct gauge because even the things they call stanine, I'm not aware of how it works. (Carlos, family member)

This statement demonstrates that one parent at least had issues with the language used in the Brag Books. Greater opportunities for contribution from family members into the process of Brag Book development could draw attention to such issues.

The reasons given by staff for not involving families included: their perceived lack of interest in school related activities, many were English second language

speakers, many had not had positive personal schooling experiences and that some family members were too shy to come into school. Jane, a teacher, spoke about the very limited amount of parent involvement in this school:

There's a few who will come in, like there's a couple of, there's probably maybe two parents who, like two kids in my class who have a parent who comes in maybe once or twice a term who, you know drops them off in the morning and comes and looks at their work but other than that not really, like I try and say 'oh show your mum that' but I think lots of parents at our school, not lots but some are a little uncomfortable with the you know, like they just feel a bit shy. (Jane, teacher)

The comments from teachers above related to their perceived expectations from family members about the quality of the content in the books are interesting given there was minimal involvement from family members with the Brag Book programme. Minimal involvement would have made it difficult for teachers to ascertain the priorities of family members as they reviewed their children's books. It seems family members such as Carlos were more concerned about being able to understand the content included in the books rather than what the content looked like. This was not an issue raised by teachers and one they were possibly unaware of given that, as explained by Sarah above, meetings related to Brag Book development only involved staff and not students or family members.

It is important to clarify that the involvement of students and family members with the development of the Brag Book programme and who were involved in discussions related to issues concerning the ongoing implementation of the programme are examples of data that could have been multi-coded. This is because these data could have been included in the Tools, Rules or Community sections of the Findings. In the Tools element, data related to how the community was involved in the development or review of the Brag Books was detailed above and in the following subsections. In the Rules section (7.2.3), teacher reports of some of the barriers that may limit the capacity of community members to adhere to some of the rules of the Brag Book are described. The Community section (7.2.4) includes data that further confirmed the community response to the Brag Books was minimal as were the staff attempts to involve the community. The criteria used for coding data that could have been multi-coded are explained further in Appendix L (1).

7.2.1.3 Regularity

The regularity of the books being sent home was an issue where there were also differences of opinion between teachers, school leaders, and family members.

The teachers found the books a lot of work and would prefer to have them completed less regularly as Mark explained:

*I think it was felt that it was just too much going out every term.
(Mark, teacher)*

This view was supported by the principal who also expressed a concern about the amount of work involved for the classroom teachers:

We've looked at how many times we should be doing it in the year and we're still reviewing that really but we won't be doing it four times a year because it's too much for us, we think three but we're still trying to work that one through. (Principal)

On the other hand, parents like Patricia wanted them to come home more often:

I actually prefer them to come home a bit more often than once a term. (Patricia, family member)

The amount of extra work required of the teachers to prepare the books to a high standard underpins their wish to have the books go home less frequently. The other reason the school leaders did not believe the books needed to go home too often was that they saw the Brag Books as just one component of a range of reporting tasks undertaken by the school.

7.2.1.4 Links with other reporting requirements

The school's programme for communicating with parents included: Brag Books, meet the teacher evenings, parent interviews and student written reports. School leaders and families had their views on how these systems interrelated.

Lynn, a member of the school leadership team, placed value on all forms of reporting. She expressed the view that meet the teacher meetings, parent interviews and individual student reports along with the Brag Books, all had an important role to play in the school's reporting programme:

It's under the umbrella of reporting to parents and underneath that there is meet the teacher, parent interviews, Brag Books and reports. (Lynn, school leader)

A parent also acknowledged that the Brag Book was just one component in a range of reporting tools used by the school. Mary saw it as something that supported parent interviews and written reports:

I see it as a back up to parent interviews and reports. (Mary, family member)

The Brag Books were viewed by most participants as a Tool that played a complementary role to parent interviews and written reports. This was a perspective that was generally well supported by all participants, as was the perspective that the scrap books format provided the favoured option for the presentation of Brag Book samples. Differences in the perspectives of the participants interviewed were in the expectations and meaningfulness of the content included in the Brag Books. Most teachers asked their students to do work specifically for their Brag Books and were careful to ensure the work was presented to a high standard. School leaders, however, preferred that work was not done specifically with the Brag Books in mind as work done for the Brag Books may not fairly reflect the current level of the child's progress. One of the parents also noted that it was difficult to understand the grading system used in the Brag Books. There were also differences of opinion between the participants interviewed with regard to how often the Brag Books should go home. Both tensions and alignments between Subjects involved in the Brag Book programme are therefore evident. The following sections note further tensions, beginning with issues associated with the object of the Brag Book programme.

7.2.2 Object

The Findings related to Object concern participants' perspectives of the purpose of their activity. In this case study, participants interviewed varied in their opinion of the Object of the Brag Book. Teachers mainly described the Object of the books as being to provide an ongoing record of students' work, a record they hoped the students would feel proud of. School leaders described the Object as being to provide a summative record of students' work. Students thought the books were in place to provide an opportunity for them to share their work with

their family. Family members differed in their opinions and expressed a multidimensional view of the Object of the books.

Terms used by teachers to describe the Brag Books as an ongoing record included 'snapshot' and a 'visual'. These terms denote the concept that the Brag Books are not a summative record, but a picture of where a child's progress is placed at a particular point in time. The following section explains this further.

7.2.2.1 Ongoing record

Diane had recently introduced a rule requiring the teachers to indicate on the students' samples of work whether they rated that sample as being 'below', 'at' or 'above' expected levels of progress. Most teachers felt uncomfortable about this rating system because they believed students would be less inclined to feel proud of a book that rated them as falling below expected levels of progress. Furthermore, this questioned the Object of the book as a 'brag' book because the students had less to brag about if their samples were rated poorly. Kate's comments reflected those made by all teachers on this matter:

They're not assessment as such; they're children's best work or just something that they've thoroughly enjoyed. They're just an indication of where they're at at that particular time. (Kate, teacher)

Gaylene emphasised she believed there was a lot more to student learning than what could be shown in one sample in a Brag Book and she felt the assessment criteria was detracting from her belief that student learning was a complex matter. She wanted the books to reflect an overall picture of progress for each student and added she believed assessment should be included as part of other reporting systems but not as part of the Brag Book:

I've found it really hard in the last term to actually get the assessment bit, you know you pick out a piece of work and you have to look at the whole picture with the kids rather than just that sample of work and I don't like the idea of putting an assessment on it. I just think, I think it's the kids work and that [assessment] can be done through reporting and stuff too. (Gaylene, teacher)

Rae, another teacher, believed the benefit of the Brag Book was that it could provide parents with small samples of how students were progressing rather than an overall summary of their progress. She described the object as being to provide 'snapshots' of progress:

*To give the parents a snapshot of where their children are at
(Rae, teacher)*

Kate's perception of the Object of the books was similar to that of Rae. She also believed the samples included in the books were useful as they added a visual dimension to the understandings parents had of how their children were progressing at school:

*So parents can monitor how far their child has progressed, it's a
visual for them. (Kate, teacher)*

7.2.2.2 Summative report

Although teachers stated they believed the Object of the Brag Books was to provide an ongoing record, perceptions of school leaders differed. School leaders considered that an important role of the Brag Book was to report achievement information to parents as the principal stated:

I think that it's by and large reporting. (Principal)

Diane, the member of the leadership team who initiated the change to the books to incorporate assessment information suggested children, parents and teachers should be sharing assessment information from the Brag Books together. She believed the Brag Books provided an opportunity to include samples of work that could provide evidence to support assessment information:

*For assessment and evaluation for the children, you as a
teacher, and the parents and you've got concrete examples.
(Diane, school leader)*

7.2.2.3 Share with family

Students interviewed were clear that the Object of the Brag Book should be to show their families what they were doing at school, and particularly to show their families their best work. The following are three examples of comments from

students that confirm this was their opinion of the Object of the Brag Book programme:

So we can show our families our best work. (Mele, student)

To show your family what you can do at this school. (Mia, student)

To show parents your good work. (Elizabeth, student)

7.2.2.4 Multidimensional

The seven family members interviewed ranged in their views of why the Brag Books were in use at their children's school. One was very vague and not sure he knew much at all about the Brag Book programme (David). One parent spoke about the book as being a good keepsake for his children and as such was in agreement with the teachers regarding the object of the book being something the students should feel proud of:

To keep a record of their life as they're growing up (Bryce, family member)

Another referred to the books as providing a useful starting point for discussion:

I go through it with him and we talk about things (Patricia, family member)

Mary thought the books helped to keep her informed about her children's learning and behaviour

Generally I'm more informed about learning and behaviour (Mary, family member)

Carlos wanted it to help him gauge learning although it was Carlos who stated he believed the books did not achieve this object because the teachers used a term he could not understand (stanine). Maria liked to look at the pictures in her daughter's book.

Therefore, between the parents interviewed there were Objects discussed that ranged from learning and behaviour, to being a keepsake, and to include pictures that were interesting to look at. This range of opinions reinforces that because school personnel had not clearly identified the Object of the programme for

themselves, they were not able to deliver consistent messages to family members that could help them to understand the Object of the programme and work towards achieving that Object. Differences in opinions from parents may also confirm the multidimensional nature of parents' perceptions of their role in a family school programme. Chapter Four included literature that suggested parents like to share in information that clarifies their children's academic as well as their social and emotional development. The comments from parents above indicate these were topics parents in this case study also prioritised.

Although all the parents interviewed (except David) were able to comment on their perceived view of the book's Object, Gaylene, one of the teachers, believed not all the parents of the students in her class would be able to comment on the Object. This was because the way the books were being used changed regularly and this could confuse parents:

I think there is a little bit of confusion for families as to exactly what the purpose behind it is and it seems to change from term to term. I think this is something that happens anyway because it's a work in progress. It didn't work last year so we're going to try this this year and I think gradually we'll get there. (Gaylene, teacher)

The statement made by Gaylene draws attention to the issue that it was school personnel who were making decisions about the Brag Book programme and family members were not involved in this process.

In summary, while teachers were concerned about the assessment component in the books, school leaders expressed the view that assessment was a valid Object for the Brag Book programme. Students believed the Object of the books was to show their parents their best work. Family members interviewed had different perspectives of the Object of the books. The following section, Rules, depicts there were also a range of understandings related to the Rules of the programme.

7.2.3 Rules

Rules are conventions set in place to create boundaries around an activity (Engeström, 1999). They can be written (policy and procedures) or unwritten (norms and expectations). Rules created many tensions at Case study W, most

notably the rule to include assessment information in The Brag Books. This was an unwritten rule as there were no policy documents concerning the Brag Book programme at the school but it was a rule clearly understood though disputed by the teaching staff.

Before describing the issues associated with this rule and the other rules that created tensions at this school, it is important to clarify that the topic of assessment was one that could have been coded into the analysis sections of Object, Rules, or Division of Labour. Data were coded into the Object section if it related to purpose. The Rules section includes data concerned with the implementation of the assessment rule and the Division of Labour section includes data related to how decisions about the inclusion of assessment information were made. These coding decisions are explained in detail in Appendix L (2).

7.2.3.1 Assessment

Gaylene expressed her concerns with the rule that required teachers to include assessment information in the Brag Books:

It started off at the beginning of the term it was meant to be just kids samples of work – Brag Book of their best work that they'd chosen and then it's like it's well you've got to put this assessment sheet on it now and that marks them and gives them below or at or above. That's what it's got to have on it now and I don't like that. (Gaylene, teacher)

The teachers were also concerned that students might receive negative comments from home if their Brag Book assessment rated them as being below expected levels of progress. Jane explained her thoughts on this:

One thing that I am, like I feel concerned about with the impact on their learning is the above and below. I feel awful doing it. I felt concerned about how that would be interpreted at home and what the message would be to the kids. For little kids especially it can be disheartening and I feel like it doesn't actually improve their learning because if mum and dad think you're dumb, what is that going to tell you about yourself? (Jane, teacher)

While these comments are similar to those described previously in the Object section, it emphasises that the concern with the assessment rule permeates throughout all the activity theory elements in this case study. In the Object section, the concern for the teachers with this Rule was described as being that the inclusion of assessment information distracted from their perceived Object of creating a book that supported other reporting information by providing an ongoing visual record of student work. The Rules section has continued this theme but has given further detail regarding the impact of this rule.

7.2.3.2 Return of books

The assessment Rule was not the only Brag Book rule that was creating concerns for the teachers. The Brag Books went home towards the end of each term and they were to be returned to school the following week. Having them returned to school was an ongoing challenge for teachers as Mark explained:

I've had them go home and they've got lost and don't come back.
(Mark, teacher)

This is a rule that is difficult to implement but it is important because unless the books are returned to school, they clearly cannot function as an ongoing record. The principal agreed this was a salient issue. The numbers of books not returned led him to question the value the families saw in the books:

They are having to chase back quite a number of them and it seems to be the same ones all the time so you then start asking how important do the parents see it. (Principal)

Teachers agreed there were families who consistently returned the books on time but others who were slow at returning them, if they came back at all.

7.2.3.3 Parent comment

As well as being required to return the books to school, family members were asked to comment on their child's work on a feed-back sheet contained in the books. Teachers and school leaders anticipated this would provide parents with an opportunity to write something that may encourage their children and/or commend them on their progress and the efforts they had made with their work. The teachers tried to make it clear to their students that someone from home must complete this form before their books were returned to school. The feed-

back sheets also had the potential to provide teachers with valuable information regarding the reactions the children were receiving from home, and areas that may require additional focus or that were of special interest to the families. At the very least, parents were to sign the sheet to indicate they had sighted the books. However, as Mark commented, not only did most books come back without any comments, many parents had not even signed the sheet:

I wasn't accepting them back until I had parents' signatures that they had seen them, sighted them and the first day I remember I had all these books stacked up and about three quarters of them went back because mum, dad or whoever hadn't looked at them. There was a place for a parent comment and so I expected to see a parent comment. (Mark, teacher)

As well as finding it difficult to encourage parents to sign the books, Gaylene and Mark both commented that when the feed-back sheets were completed, the comments in them from parents were not always encouraging for the students. Gaylene was concerned that not only did some parents fail to acknowledge the progress their children were making, some suggested on their feed-back sheet that their children could be making more effort with their work than the effort they saw evidenced in their Brag Book:

For some it hasn't been a positive sort of an experience, you know, you can do better or you're more capable than this. (Gaylene, teacher)

Mark would have liked to have seen more encouraging comments from family members (comments the students could really feel proud of):

I've had some shockers, I've had one 'well at least you're at school', but mostly 'this is good' but nothing in depth that the kid could look back at and go 'wow'. (Mark, teacher)

7.2.3.4 Barriers to Rules

The reasons suggested by the teachers and school leaders for some families being unwilling or indifferent about including a comment in their children's Brag Book are similar to some of the barriers to involvement discussed in Chapter Five. Teachers Rae and Lynn believed it was difficult for some families to follow the rule that required them to include a comment in the Brag Book because they

felt a bit uncomfortable about writing something the teachers would see. This Lynn suggested was because many parents had limited schooling experience:

I think they are a bit shy to write something that is going back to the school. (Rae, teacher)

A lot of our parents have not had very positive schooling experiences. (Lynn, school leader)

Jane added that difficulties also arose because many families were speakers of English as a second language. She suggested that understanding the purpose of the feed-back form was challenging for these parents. Mark's concern was with the attitudes of parents. He thought some were quite indifferent about completing the comments section. He described his thoughts as if he was speaking as a parent:

Just for the purposes of the school we've just got to fill this in and so we just write and we just generalise 'good'. (Mark, teacher)

While at the school I looked through a sample of one class's Brag Books (24 books). I found I could confirm the comments made by the teachers. The majority of comments from parents were brief such as 'good' or 'well done' but usually there was no comment made at all.

The Rules of the Brag Book programme, therefore, created tensions in the activity system of the teachers. The first tension to be described was the assessment rule. This was a tension mainly between teachers and school leaders and did not directly involve students and family members. This tension was directly related to differences in the perceived Object of the programme. The teachers' perception that the Brag Book was to be an ongoing record of progress led to a tension for them between the Rule of including assessment information and creating a book that the students' could feel proud of and something they would want to keep adding to.

The second tension in the Rules section of this activity theory analysis was related to the necessity to have the books returned to school and the third to the feed-back sheet. These two tensions involved school leaders, teachers, students and family members. They also involved the element of Object because part of the reason for family members not following the Rules was because they did not fully understand or did not support the Object of this activity. A clearer

understanding of the Object could prompt return of the books so work samples could accumulate. There were many barriers identified that limited the capacity of families to comment in the books and these barriers along with the tensions described above will be a feature to discuss in the analysis of this case study in the following chapter.

The limited involvement of the Community with the Brag Book programme has already been a feature of this case study but findings on this issue are developed further in the following section.

7.2.4 Community

In activity theory terms, the Community is the wider group involved in the activity that has an influence on the Subjects (Roth & Lee, 2007). In this activity, there was no reference made to the involvement of the wider community with the Brag Book programme such as students sharing the books with grandparents or cousins (although this may well have been the case). The Community in this activity therefore comprises the school leaders and teachers, the students, and their parents.

7.2.4.1 Involvement

All teachers spoke about the limited involvement parents had with the school and this is reflected in the Brag Book programme. Rather than facilitating increased communication and connection between family members and school personnel, the Brag Book programme received little attention from parents and as Mark, one of the teachers again confirmed, there was virtually no feedback about the books from family members:

I've had one mother phone me. Of the four times I've sent Brag Books home, I've had one mother phone me and only because she was a little concerned about her child's maths scores. (Mark, teacher)

Two support staff personnel also said they received little feedback from students' families about the Brag Books.

I don't actually get any feedback (Amy, support staff)

No-one comes in to talk about the Brag Books (Hayley, support staff)

One of the staff members suggested the books had the potential to provide a link between families and school although her comment was directed more at the school providing information to families rather than suggesting the books could provide a medium for ongoing reciprocal communication:

I think it is really a way of letting the parents know what their kids are doing at school. We never see the parents, you know so it's just that one link. (Gaylene, teacher)

The principal was aware of the lack of connection between family members and school personnel. He said he hoped some of the value the school may gain from this research would be to understand more about what the parents thought of the Brag Books. He anticipated this may help with some of the school's future decisions around its use:

I'm intrigued to know what parents think. Is it really something that they want, is it something that they actually value or is it just something that you know, oh yes, send it back, can't really be bothered. We get very little feed-back from the families and so it will be good to hear. (Principal)

This information was included in the report written for the school following the interviews (Appendix A).

7.2.5 Division of Labour

The themes that relate to the Division of Labour element of the activity theory analysis include how staff went about deciding on the rules of this activity and the extent of the students' involvement in the selection of samples.

Data related to assessment are included in this Division of Labour section if the data relates to who made assessment decisions. For example, who decided on the assessment rule and who chose the samples to be included in the Brag Books. Appendices L (2) and L (3) explain this further.

7.2.5.1 Assessment

In terms of the assessment rule, the teachers were of the opinion it was the school leaders who played a dominant role in the decision making process. This view was reflected in the comments made by Rae:

Last term we got given this sheet that we had to do stars on where they are at versus the correct one, so like if they were working below or at level we did stars beside each of the learning intentions and I found that really tricky because I think we got given the sheet I think maybe near the end of term, or, right at the beginning of term anyway, because I hadn't designed my things [teaching materials] with that purpose in mind, I found that really hard and I don't think my stars were valid, I just did them cause I had to (Rae, teacher).

School leaders, however, differed in their opinion of the decision making process. The principal indicated they were trying to be collaborative and yet Rae's statement above did not reflect this view. The principal said they were trying to develop a reflective cycle with the staff in order to bring about improvements:

We talk with the teachers about how it's going each time after they come back. Have they all come back, what were the comments this time, what can we do better for next time so we try and have a reflective cycle within the routine of them going out so that we improve each time. (Principal)

Although the principal claimed a reflective cycle was in place, it seemed teachers were not stating their concerns over the assessment issue during discussions, or their concerns were not being addressed. The differences in opinion over the assessment component in the Brag Books were still to be resolved. There was no indication of community or student involvement in decision making processes.

7.2.5.2 Student involvement

Another issue associated with the division of labour was related to who selected the samples to be glued into the Brag Books. Most of the teachers wanted the students to take some responsibility for the selection of samples but found this created difficulties for them in the busy classroom environment. Rae, a classroom teacher, said she felt the programme was more manageable when she did most of the choosing and allowed children to select samples only when the students asked to do so:

I mean if the kids really like something then we'll put that in there as well but to make it manageable for me I've just gone 'this is a Brag Book piece of work'. (Rae, teacher)

Rae added that although she chose most of the samples, she did not feel comfortable about approaching the task this way. She believed the students should be taking more ownership:

I think a Brag Book is meant to be more student directed so the children can go 'I like this bit of writing the best because of this'. (Rae, teacher)

The role of a teacher as the sole selector of work samples was also not a role Jane felt comfortable with. It was her opinion that the students should have more input:

We make sure that the kids have an opportunity to choose some of the work that goes in there. (Jane, teacher)

Kate took a dominant role in the selection of samples to be included and explained that her selection criteria were based on the amount of effort she believed the children had put into their work:

I will pick things, and you know like we'll do something whether it be, you know a piece of writing or whatever it may be and if I think it looks really nice I might put that into their Brag Books. (Kate, teacher)

You can generally tell when a child's kind of made that extra effort so you kind of slot it in. (Kate, teacher)

School leaders supported the view that students needed to take some responsibility for the selection of samples. Diane expressed the opinion that not only would she like to see the students having a larger amount of input into the selection of samples, she would also like the students to evaluate their selection:

The children have the opportunity to choose work that they're most proud of and put that in the Brag Books and evaluate 'I am proud of this work because' or 'I have chosen this work and I am proud of it because' . . . (Diane, school leader)

The students were of the opinion that in the majority of cases, the teachers decided on the selection of work samples. The criteria they said the teachers adopted was to pick their best work:

Actually the teacher chooses what we put in, we don't actually choose. (Hera, student)

Teacher chooses some good work and sometimes we choose. (Elizabeth, student)

Our teacher only chooses the work that is best. (Mele, student)

These comments indicate that a tension had developed for the teachers because despite their recognising that students could benefit from greater involvement in sample selection, they were not always able to provide these opportunities for students. This tension may also have been an outcome of the Object of the activity not being clearly identified. Teachers liked students to maintain a high standard of presentation (Rae) and that placed pressure on them to take greater responsibility for the selection and quality of the work samples included. However, the need to maintain quality in a book that was intended simply to show a snapshot of how a child was progressing may not have been necessary.

The Division of Labour of the Brag Book programme involving planning the programme, selecting assessment information and choice of work samples was almost entirely a school driven process and mainly the work of the school leadership. There was minimal family or student communication and connection with the programme.

7.2.6 Outcomes

Outcomes from the Brag Book programme clearly relate to the perceived benefits for students and the reported outcomes for family members.

7.2.6.1 Student outcomes

Teachers were asked what they perceived the desired outcome of the Brag Book programme to be. Two of the five teachers said they had not been aware of impacts on student outcomes during their experience with the Brag Book programme. Three teachers believed there were aspects of the book that could be helpful to student engagement. Kate and Jane did not believe there was any impact on the students. Kate was surprised by the suggestion. She said:

No, why would you suggest that? (Kate, teacher)

Jane suggested the books may even have a negative outcome if the student's sense of themselves as a learner was impacted negatively by the assessment rating system:

I felt concerned about [assessment levels in book] for the little kids and the impact it would have on their learning. (Jane, teacher)

Mark was somewhat unsure. He attributed a goal setting component he had included in the books to providing a motivating factor for students. He did not, however, indicate whether or how the students were involved in the goal setting process:

Having those goals [in the Brag Book] and then being able to see the results of those goals I guess is a good thing and being able to see an improvement through the year. (Mark, teacher)

Rae's statement clarified that in her classroom, goal setting was also a part of her Brag Book programme and that the students were involved in the goal setting process. She believed goal setting was motivating for the students although she clarified she had to regularly remind the students of their goals:

When they set their goals, I find that that's really motivating or it motivates them for a week or two then you have to keep going back. (Rae, teacher)

Gaylene did not comment on goal setting but she indicated the books could be used as an aspect of the *classroom* learning programme:

I think they could be used more in the classroom as part of the learning programme. (Gaylene, teacher)

Mark, Rae and Gaylene were indicating that through use of a goal setting component in the books or by using them as part of the classroom programme, there was potential for the Brag Books to positively influence the students' learning programme. However, this evidence is limited only to the brief comments above and is countered by the earlier comments of Kate and Jane. Interestingly, there was no suggestion that family members were involved in the process of goal setting in the Brag Books.

In terms of the views of the six students interviewed, just one student said the books encouraged her to make a better effort because she could track her own results (Natalie). Another said students should make more effort but did not relate the comment to the Brag Book programme (Elizabeth). Three students said they completed the Brag Books to show the parents their best work.

Natalie said the books were useful for her to track her progress:

To see like when we do a maths test and then we do a maths test again we can see how much we have achieved. (Natalie, student)

Elizabeth suggested believed people should put more effort into their work:

We should put more effort into our work. (Elizabeth, student)

Other students' comments were not related to their approach to school or to their learning but rather focused on sharing the books with family members:

You put some stuff in and your mum can see it. (Mia, student)

It's really cool and we get to show our mums and dads. (Mele, student)

The Brag Books provided a document for student work samples to be kept together in one place and in this respect, had the potential for students to review their progress with family members. Natalie was, however, the only student who said that she reflected on the samples in her Brag Book but she did not indicate there was any involvement from her family in this process. In fact, when asked what she perceived her family's impression of her Brag Book was, she was not sure:

Actually I don't know what my family thinks of it. (Natalie, student)

Comments from the seven family members interviewed indicated the Brag Books were well liked by their children. They felt their children were proud to bring them home and were keen to share them with family members:

Children are proud to bring them home. (Mary, family member)

She really likes them, she's really keen to bring them home and show us what she's been up to. (Robyn, family member)

My son is proud of his efforts. (Bryce, family member)

The indication from these family members was that their children enjoyed sharing their books. However, as noted previously, the statements made by the parents interviewed were not always consistent with the statements made by teachers about the responses to the Brag Book programme from other parents. The teachers indicated many parents showed little interest in their children's Brag Books while some of the parents interviewed said their children loved bringing their books home. It is important to reinforce that only a small number of families were contacted by the school about being interviewed and only seven returned forms agreeing to participate in this research. It may be that most of the parents interviewed were ones who had the strongest interest in their children's schooling. The teachers, however, are exposed to a broad spectrum of families, therefore possibly accounting for some of the differences in opinions. This point will be discussed further in Chapter Nine.

There was insufficient data to enable summary comments on how the Brag Books influenced student engagement with school. It is difficult to associate student engagement with, for example, the enjoyment some children gained from their books because many different factors may have prompted these comments, such as children's attitude to school in general or to their teacher in particular.

In terms of how the teachers' perceived students were responding to the Brag Books overall, their feeling was that the responses of the students were largely determined by the interest family members took in the books as Jane explained:

I think the student involvement is kind of largely determined by the family involvement, you know, there are some kids who don't care about their portfolios [Brag Books] and I think that their parents don't look at them. (Jane, teacher)

Jane indicated there was a less than pleasing approach from some students to the Brag Books:

There are students who don't really want to take their portfolios [Brag Book] home. (Jane, teacher)

Mark agreed the attitudes of the parents were reflected by the students and largely determined the approach they took to the Brag Book programme:

It's mixed, some who when they go home their parents go through closely, look at it, want to do very well. Whereas, some other children who don't have that experience at home because basically no one's really bothering to look at it, their attitude reflects that. (Mark, teacher)

Overall, the teachers were of the opinion that it was the students whose parents took an interest in the programme who made the most effort with their Brag Books. However, there were many elements of the Brag Book programme that may have created barriers to parental involvement such as the requirement to complete a form that required knowledge of English and the limited understanding parents had in the development of the programme. Also, teachers had little or no knowledge of the experiences and skills that families possessed that could have been incorporated into designing and operating the Brag Book programme. The outcomes for family members continues this theme.

7.2.6.2 Family outcomes

The activity theory analysis presented in the sections above has consistently highlighted that the family involvement with the Brag Book programme was minimal. Family members may have supported or encouraged their children's efforts while the books were at home but this cannot be assumed given the large number of books returned without signature or comment. It is also clear that family support, had it been offered to children, was generally not done so in collaboration with school staff. Jane, a teacher, reinforced this as she commented that when she asked a parent about their child's Brag Book, the parent was not sure what she was referring to:

I don't know what I think about family involvement. I was talking to someone's mum about their portfolio [Brag Book] the other day and they hadn't even seen it. (Jane, teacher)

She went on to say she had never had any verbal feed-back about the Brag Books from any family members:

I have never had any verbal feed-back, no never, ever, ever
(Jane, teacher)

Jane was also concerned that because some families did not appear to be taking an interest in their children's Brag Books, this attitude reflected onto the students' involvement with the Brag Book programme.

In terms of improving connection and communication between families and school, this programme had limited impact. It seems from the teachers' comments that few parents had connections with the Brag Book programme and that had not improved the communication and connection of family members with other school activities.

7.2.7 Summary of case study W

The data indicate that there are positive aspects to the use of the Brag Books, but also many tensions, consistently related to the Object of the books. Tensions around Object affected how Subjects perceived the Rules and how roles were viewed, such as who determined whether the books should include samples of assessment.

The involvement of parents with the programme was reported by all teachers to be minimal. The teachers identified possible barriers that may have impacted upon the low levels of family involvement such as that parents did not fully understand the purpose of the programme (Gaylene), parents were English second language speakers (Jane), parents had not themselves had positive schooling experiences (Lynn), parents were a bit shy (Rae), some parents had little interest (Mark), and parents were uncomfortable about coming into school (Jane). The concern with comments such as these is not the question of why family members are not participating with the programme but how this situation could be improved.

The Brag Book may have had the potential to promote communication and connection between families, students and school but the overall finding from this case study was that that did not appear to be the case. The following chapter will include a more detailed analysis of the issues that arose in this case study through the use of activity theory systems analysis. The final chapter will discuss the implications of that analysis for practice and further research and also on how the situation may be improved.

7.3 Case study R

School R is a decile 3 urban non-contributing primary school with a roll of approximately 228 pupils at the time of this study. The Tool adopted for the purposes of communication between families, students and school in case study R was a mobile phone. All classroom teachers, school leaders and some support staff personnel had the use of a mobile phone. These personnel used the mobile phones together with students. When contact was made from the mobile phones, it was the student who spoke on the phone or shared in the writing of the text. The involvement of students was an integral part of the phone's use as is explained further in the Division of Labour analysis in Section 7.3.5.

The analysis of case study R follows the same format as case study W. It is framed from the activity theory elements of Tools, Object, Rules, Community, Division of Labour and Outcomes. This chapter section begins by describing the features and use of the Tool. Within this element, themes describe the features of mobile phones as ones that afford users opportunities for communication that are accessible to most of the school community, and are immediate, flexible, reciprocal, and regular.

7.3.1 Tool

A major benefit of adopting a mobile phone as a tool of communication at School R was that it was accessible to over 90 percent of the school community. It also enabled immediate contact between families and school, and contact could be reciprocal and regular. This Tool section elaborates on these themes.

7.3.1.1 Accessibility

The principal at School R was adamant that to be successful and sustainable a tool for communication between families, students and school must be accessible to as many stakeholders as possible from anywhere at any time:

For it to be successful it's got to continue being whole school, it can't be isolated in one class or another. We can't go to a model of sharing phones, it has to be sustainable. You can't have say three or four phones in a school this size and then you go and get it, it just doesn't work. The teacher needs that phone on them all the time for any opportunity, whether it's in the playground, in

the classroom, at a sports day or whatever to be able to use it.
(Principal)

In order to ascertain that mobile phones were an option that was accessible to all stakeholders, the school sent surveys home to their community in the form of a brief questionnaire. They found over 90 percent of the school community either owned their own phone or had access to one. Furthermore, over 90 percent of the community indicated in the survey that they were willing to be contacted by the school with information regarding their children's education or well being. These were determining factors in the decision to go ahead with the mobile phone programme. Choosing a tool that was accessible to the community was of prime importance.

The survey did, however, raise an area of concern in identifying there would be almost 10 percent of students who could not be included in the programme because their family did not have access to a mobile phone or did not want to be part of the programme. School personnel did not want these children to feel left out so they decided that rather than phoning home with their good news, these students could phone a member of the school leadership team.

A related concern was how to accommodate those few students whose parents gave them disturbing feed-back when they rang home. This was a topic raised by one of the teachers, Ruth, who explained that children who indicated they had received negative feed-back no longer rang home but instead rang a member of the leadership team:

Response to call from some parents is disturbing so those children phone one of the leadership team instead. (Ruth, teacher)

It was apparent the school had found an effective means of ensuring full participation and so was able to provide opportunities for access anytime, anywhere to almost all of the school community. The theme of access has many interrelationships with the theme of immediacy because anywhere, anytime access means the phones should be available for use at the moment they are required.

7.3.1.2 Immediacy

Mobile phones allow teachers opportunities to provide their students with access to a family member at times that are the most meaningful for them. The principal argued this was a very motivating concept for students. The notion that a call could be made at any moment had become what the principal termed the kaupapa¹⁶ of the school:

It's been great because I think the kids have embraced this with a positive attitude so the student involvement has been around things like you hear the comment sometimes 'that's worth phoning home about', they've picked up that kaupapa of that, if we're caught being good then actually something will happen, it won't just be a certificate at assembly on Friday, my parents will actually get to hear about it and have the opportunity to share that with me and that's powerful for them. (Principal)

The principal reported that immediate feed-back from family members meant a great deal to students. Immediate feedback also meant that any behavioural concerns could be dealt with before they escalated, as Carol, one of the teachers, explained:

*It's the there and then and then it's being able to deal with it.
(Carol, teacher)*

Family members reported that they also appreciated opportunities to deal with concerns from school as soon as they could to reduce the chances of concerns escalating. Krystal spoke about the advantages of the mobile phones in this regard:

I think it's probably better that we hear more about what's going on instead of waiting till it gets to that point where it's a serious and you are coming in, you know there's that little bit of trying to get it out early type of thing. (Krystal, family member)

The teachers added that the phones allowed them opportunities to send instant text reminders to families. This helped to maintain regular communication links and also saved time as Sarah, one of the teachers explained:

¹⁶ Kaupapa is a Māori word meaning the principles or ideas that form the foundations for actions

Great to have ability for instant messaging – much more effective and better use of time as otherwise have to phone parents after school. (Sarah, teacher)

Considering the busy schedules most teachers operate within, they were appreciative of a tool that helped them to make better use of their time and to build relationships with family members through the communication of regular, helpful information. Sarah expanded on the reasons for her reminders:

Useful for reminders such as to bring their togs for swimming, homework, conferences and assemblies (Sarah, teacher)

Parents also found the use of the phones for text or voice call reminders useful. Tina, a parent of one of the students, explained she preferred this way of receiving reminders rather than more traditional options such as newsletters because newsletters did not offer such timely information:

Sometimes they send newsletters out and I forget but the children ring up that day and let you know to come to these things, so no, it's really good. (Tina, family member)

This example of the benefits of *immediacy* of communication is one that may also contribute to the subsection of *flexibility* of the phone's use. Phone users are able to choose between text, voice and video message options.

7.3.1.3 Flexibility

The teachers explained that the flexibility in message options enabled them to respect the circumstances of each family. They made an effort to find out about the routines of the parents and to determine together with parents which messaging option they preferred. Many were available to take voice calls but others favoured text messages. Claire, a parent with three children at the school said she chose to receive voice messages although if she was busy, she put her phone on to silent and listened to the message at a time that suited her. She said this flexibility worked well for her because she did not miss out on information and could still praise and encourage her children when they got home from school:

Because I'm working I don't have my phone on, I usually have it on silent because I'm actually busy, but I do get the message,

they leave a message and tell me why they've rung and it's always positive, and so I get them when I go home after school. I give them, 'oh wow, I got your message today that is awesome, I'm really glad, you keep it up'. (Claire, family member)

Krystal was an example of a parent who was grateful for the efforts made to keep her regularly updated on her children. She believed text messages provided an effective way of achieving this:

It's a bit hard for them to get hold of me but even just receiving the text saying that my daughter's doing really well with this today is really nice to know. (Krystal, family member)

Receiving a text message allowed parents an opportunity to reply at a time that suited them although a voice message had the advantage of providing the family the opportunity to give instant feed-back to their child and for this reason it was an option adopted when possible. Carey, a family member, said she appreciated having the choice of both.

It's good to have both [voice and texting] so that it's not just one or the other all the time. Having the both of them is good. (Carey, family member)

The video messaging option was seldom used and therefore was not commented on by family members, although one of the leadership team pointed out that it was useful at times to be able to show parents a sample of work from their child's book through the use of a video message.

Flexibility has meaning other than referring to the format of the message (text, voice or video). To Shirley, a family member, flexibility also referred to having choices about who received the contacts. Shirley explained:

They're quite funny cause depending on what they've done, they'll pick who they want to ring. It might be me or it might be dad. Sometimes, you know my older daughter she always wants to ring dad and the younger one always wants to ring me. (Shirley, family member)

Teachers and parents were all positive about the capability of the phones to provide flexibility and in so doing, accommodate for family circumstances that

could otherwise prevent opportunities for communication and positive interactions between family members and their children.

7.3.1.4 Reciprocity

Natasha, a teacher, valued the reciprocal contact that had developed since the introduction of the mobile phones. She spoke about some of the texts she had received from parents:

*Find lots of parents text back and initiate text themselves.
Parents text in their news such as a new baby in the family and
accidents children may have experienced. (Natasha, teacher)*

Family members also spoke positively about having the capacity to contact their child's teacher. Tania, one of the student's parents commented she felt a sense of understanding had developed between her and her son's teacher and as a consequence, she felt she was really being listened to when she contacted his teacher:

*Like me and his teacher we have quite a good rapport going. If
I've got any issues I mean I can text her and she answers and I
feel like I'm being heard as a parent if I have any problems or
anything like that. (Tania, family member)*

Tania suggested that through the development of her relationship with her son's teacher, she had gained in confidence and felt it was now worth making the effort to contact school because she believed her contact would be followed up with an appropriate action.

Arihi, another parent also explained she liked the opportunity to contact school. She spoke about the advantages of making teachers aware of home circumstances that may be relevant to the well being of the students:

*It's a good system to have because we keep in contact with the
teachers especially if parents have concerns and can't make it
down to school, we can text to the teacher 'can you ring' and they
ring us and yeah, we are able to sort things that way and the
same with management in the office. (Arihi, family member)*

Claire, another parent spoke about using the reciprocal properties of the phone for reasons that were quite moving. Her message was one that would be greatly appreciated by all teachers:

*I may also text the teacher back and say you're doing a great job.
It's good to hear that my children are ringing home with all this
positive news. (Claire, family member)*

The families therefore take the opportunities provided through the phones not only to contact their children's teacher with news but also to provide encouragement to their children and also support the efforts of school personnel.

7.3.1.5 Regularity

The regularity of contact afforded by the availability of the mobile phones was something Natasha, a classroom teacher, believed helped to improve relationships between herself and family members:

*This regularity of contact is important for relationship building.
(Natasha, teacher)*

7.3.1.6 Issues

There were a few difficulties associated with the use of the phones in practice that created issues for some teachers. One of these was that not all children understood that they only had a limited time to speak on the phones. Students were inclined to take the opportunity to have a 'chat' with their parents rather than focusing on the information they were delivering as Patricia explained:

*Had to teach children how to talk on the phone – just to go
straight to the point and not to 'chat' (Patricia, teacher)*

Mykala also commented that it was a bit harder to find the time to make calls in the junior classes because the students were less independent:

Age of students relevant to ease of use. (Mykala, teacher)

The issue related to keeping up to date with phone numbers was also highlighted:

*A lot of phone numbers change regularly and it's hard to keep up
with correct numbers. (Ruth, teacher)*

These issues are examples of ones that were being dealt with on a regular basis in meetings aimed at fine tuning the programme in order to make it easier for the teachers to make regular use of their mobile phones. Interestingly, there were no comments about parents overusing the phones, that is, teachers being disturbed by over anxious parents or parents who were calling them too often. One teacher (Ruth) did say there was a parent in her class who quite regularly text to ask her to tell her child to walk to nana's house after school. She indicated she was happy to pass messages such as these on. Text messages do not have to be responded to immediately and therefore the tolerance of teachers to receive messages during class time is improved by the flexibility provided by mobile phone technology. As the parent was texting rather than phoning, the teacher was able to retrieve the messages at a time that suited her.

The section above has detailed themes associated with the features and use of the mobile phone as a Tool in this case study. These themes have mainly covered the accessibility of mobile phones to the school community, the advantages of immediate communication, the flexibility of use and the benefits of reciprocal communication. I move now to the Object or the perceived purpose behind the introduction of the mobile phone programme.

7.3.2 Object

The stated Object of the mobile phone programme at School R was to "facilitate positive dialogue and communication around student achievement" (School Cell-Phone Acceptable Use Procedures, 2009).¹⁷ When asked what they thought the purpose of the programme was, many participants believed its purpose was to build positive relationships between the school and the community.

7.3.2.1 Build positive relationships

A positive focus was viewed by the principal as an important factor in the development of the mobile phone programme. This positioned the mobile phone programme within the positive kaupapa or principles of the school:

I guess my thinking was to steer the conversations with the staff around a model that would focus on the positive rather than the negative and that was part of our journey as well, our kaupapa of

¹⁷ This was a document made available for me to view at the school. It was written with staff consultation and approved by the School Board of Trustees in 2009

where we were heading as a school that if we accentuated the positive, we'd have much stronger relationships with our kids, our students. (Principal)

I was given access to the school intranet site and was able to confirm that in the year 2008, over 80 percent of the contacts made with family members had a positive focus.

The positive focus underpinned, according to the principal the main Object of the programme which was to strengthen relationships between families, students, and teachers. The principal reflected on the meetings that were held in 2006 when the programme began:

We were talking around how to strengthen relationships with our whānau, our parents in our school and some of the discussion and brain storming that came out of that was teachers saying it would be great if we could actually talk to parents in real time and I came up with this solution, well what if you had a phone? (Principal)

Since then, the programme had sustained its momentum because, according to the principal, it was integrated within the kaupapa of the school where communication and connection with family members was a fundamental part of the daily lives of the school community:

The main purpose of the programme is to develop and strengthen positive relationships with the whānau of the students that we're responsible for and that's it in a nutshell and it's through communicating with them, this is one of the ways and its part of a bigger picture but it's a very powerful way of doing it. (Principal)

All teachers supported the notion that an important purpose of the programme was to improve relationships with family members. The following are some examples of comments from teachers related to the question of Object:

To build relationships with whānau (Trish, teacher)

To have a partnership to reinforce what's happening in the classroom. (Anna, teacher)

A positive means of building partnerships with parents (Sarah, teacher)

7.3.2.2 Learning

Three teachers also made reference to learning as a purpose of the mobile phone programme. They referred to the mobile phone programme helping families to celebrate learning, improving family involvement with learning and to improve levels of understanding about learning progress:

Celebration of kids' learning (Anna, teacher)

Getting families involved in their children's learning (Marie, teacher)

Informing parents about what's happening with their children's learning (Mykala, teacher)

7.3.2.3 Behaviour

Family members' comments about behaviour were a consistent theme. Of the 14 parents interviewed, nine made direct reference to information about behaviour as a purpose of the programme. It appeared many parents still viewed their role in education as being to support the school to improve their children's behaviour. The following quote from Carol, a teacher, however, indicated that the positive focus of the programme had changed the emphasis from what had in the past been communication related mainly to negative behaviour to one associated with positive behaviour:

When they're good they get to, you know that's their reward, ringing home and telling mum and dad or whoever you live with that they are being good and behaving at school and doing the work and stuff. (Carol, teacher)

As a result of the programme's positive focus, Claire, one of the parents explained that many parents had stopped worrying when they saw the call on their phone was coming from the school:

I know when it did first start, I know a lot of parents were probably thinking, 'oh no, what's happened, you know cause usually that's the only time they were contacted was if your child

was sick or if they'd made a wrong choice and they'd be like 'oh no, what's happened?' You know, they always thought the negatives and I think its slowly changed, um its changed their way of thinking and it's like 'hey, it's not always negative they're ringing, its mostly positive. (Claire, family member)

7.3.2.4 Information flow

The other Object that was spoken about by family members was that it was important to be kept informed so they could support their children and support the school. The parents believed this was an important purpose of the programme. All parents made reference to this theme in their statements. Carey's response to the question of purpose is an example:

I think to give the kids a bit of back-up, a bit of support. (Carey, family member)

Family members believed an important element in the process of information flow was the involvement of their children. This they believed helped their children to take responsibility for their actions. Krystal explained this further:

It's actually very good because my son tends to take more responsibility for his actions when he has to admit to them. I think it's more of an ownership thing, ownership of their behaviour regardless of what it is. (Krystal, family member)

Many family members felt the purpose of the programme was to keep them informed because this meant they could support the efforts of the school. Eve's comment provided an example of this:

The benefits of it is that it has changed the attitudes towards what they do in class and that because they know that they're not able to get away with it, that we will find out, we will know what they're up to and I think that the whole purpose of this phone calling home thing is a lot of people and a lot of parents knowing what's going on in the school with their children. (Eve, family member)

Tania, a parent, explained that the mobile phone programme enabled her to support the actions taken by the school and to explain both negative and positive

consequences to her son. She concluded by saying she believed these conversations had helped her son to try harder at school:

For me personally it's to have the link between the school and the parents, the teachers and the parents and keeping us, like in a partnership of somewhat. For me personally that's how I view it. Its keeping us together and all informed. It makes me feel a part of the schooling system and everything he's going through and I really appreciate that cause when he comes home well then I can back up whatever his teacher has done or she's put in place or growled him for, you know I can back it up at home and explain it more thoroughly, what his actions might mean, the consequences, how it affected other people all that kind of thing, and in a good sense we do the same thing, he gets a reward or he gets praised and it does make him want to work harder.
(Tania, family member)

7.3.2.5 Students

The students' perspectives of the purpose of this activity have been coded separately because their comments often included reference to a combination of the themes described above. Tane's response to the question of the programme's purpose is an example. He included a combination of learning and behaviour in his comment:

It helps my learning so that I focus and know not to talk and stuff so I can phone home for positive. (Tane, student)

Aroha also focused on learning and behaviour when asked what she thought the purpose of the programme was:

So people can share about their learning with their parents and tell them how good they've been. (Aroha, student)

Another student, Pania, said she believed sharing her progress with members of her whānau was the purpose of the programme. She related this to the outcome of building her confidence:

So that you get to share with your whānau what you are doing at school and that builds up your confidence. (Pania, student)

Other comments from students related to purpose were mainly that the programme enabled them to share their good news with their family and in so doing, receive positive feed-back and praise.

The review of findings related to the Object of the mobile phone programme, particularly the responses of the students suggests an overlap in this activity between the elements of Object and Outcome, that is the purpose and the outcome of the activity. The comment from Tane is an example as he claimed the mobile phone programme had helped his learning. This suggests the activity contained elements of both process and outcome or that elements are moving this activity towards a shared outcome. This concept will be elaborated on further in the Discussion Chapter.

In summary, the principal claimed the Object of the mobile phone programme was to build positive relationships with parents. This was a stance supported by teachers. The view of the parents was that the mobile phone programme helped to keep them informed so they could support their children and the school. Some parents believed having their children involved in the programme was important so they (their children) could take more personal responsibility for their actions. The students reported the programme's Object was to let their parents know how they were getting on at school. There was no doubt that informing parents was a very powerful motivator for the students. Students also said the programme helped them to improve their behaviour and their attitudes to school.

7.3.3 Rules

The School Cell-Phones Acceptable Use Procedures (School R, 2009) recommends that teachers make 40 contacts with whānau each week. The details of all contacts are to be recorded on the school's intranet programme ETap. The recording of calls was deemed necessary by the principal in order for him to report to the programme sponsor and to the school Board of Trustees, but also for the leadership team and the teachers themselves to monitor their calls and to follow-up on concerns with students. Through the use of the ETap programme, teachers could check they were making regular calls to each home and furthermore have an overview of calls in order to check whether calls had a behavioural, academic or attitudinal focus. Students who had a lot of behavioural calls, for example, could be referred to the resource teachers associated with the

school.¹⁸ However, several issues emerged concerning the rules of the programme including the time involved in recording the details of each call, and also the frequency of calls the teachers were required to make.

7.3.3.1 Recording of calls

The recoding of calls was time consuming for teachers. Part of their concern related to having to duplicate some of their tasks. Texts could not be automatically transferred to the ETap programme and therefore had to be written up a second time. There was some discussion from leadership personnel related to the purchase of a programme that would reduce the workload for teachers:

*Looking at adding more tools to enable the programme to be more user friendly such as to avoid doubling up on having to rewrite text onto computer to keep a record of what was said.
(Lesley, school leader)*

There had been no resolution to this issue at the time of this study but options were being considered. There were arguments both for and against supplementing the existing programme with additional resources. A programme enabling them to transfer texts straight onto the ETap system would be time saving for the teachers but there was quite a substantial establishment cost involved. The time taken to write up contacts and the number of calls to be made were, however, topics spoken about by most teachers.

7.3.3.2 Number of calls

Teachers such as Anna found the recommendation to make 40 calls home each week challenging:

Finding [meeting] the requirement as to the number of calls challenging (Anna, teacher)

Sarah explained that for her the challenge was not a negative one but rather something she was trying to find solutions to:

The requirement as to the number of messages is a challenge to remember – not a negative but a challenge. (Sarah, teacher)

¹⁸ New Zealand primary schools may apply to access the resources of a Resource Teacher of Learning and Behaviour (RTLB). These teachers are funded by the New Zealand Ministry of Education.

The principal maintained it was important to have consistency of contact between classes and that the regularity of contact was one of the strengths of the programme. He was concerned that without regular contact, the programme may lose momentum. He believed the community and the students had come to expect that regular contact between home and school would be made:

There's pressure from the parents' expectations, from the community and family for the programme to be up and running and operating. There's pressure from the students wanting to be caught being good without any conditions placed on how they're caught or when they can make their call. (Principal)

Although both themes in this section depict minor tensions in this activity between teachers and the rules, these are tensions that were viewed by most as challenges rather than obstacles. How these tensions impact on subjects' capacities and approach towards the Object of the activity is an issue discussed in the following chapter.

7.3.4 Community

The community involvement with the mobile phone programme was broad. It encompassed all the school personnel including the principal, teachers and support staff, and the students and their family members. Many participants also spoke about wider family involvement.

7.3.4.1 Involvement

One of the parents spoke about her relations liking what they were hearing about School R so much that they wanted to know how a mobile phone programme could be introduced into their children's schools:

Some of my relations have kids that have some sort of behaviour problem, whatever it could be, the majority of it is gang related so yeah they have asked me how they go about getting it into their school. They say to me 'why is it that your school's got it but our school doesn't have it'. (Tania, family member)

One mother spoke about her children choosing to phone either her, their father or their aunty depending what it was they were phoning about that day:

The children get to choose who they want to call when there's a positive one and so my son always seems to come to me, well my daughter, oh she actually has had one call and she wants to go to her aunty so she wants to tell her aunty how well she's done. (Michelle, family member)

Another parent said that although the children's grandfather did not get called, he fully supported the programme:

The kids don't ring their papa but he is completely on board. He studied childhood education at University. He thinks it's a brilliant idea. He's a big follower as to what's going on at school in regards to this. (Tina, family member)

The community interest in the mobile phone programme was extensive. The school has had national media coverage and a lot of positive feed-back from various members of the community. The principal described the extent of this interest:

The school involvement has grown to having a national profile now on what we do. I've spoken at several conferences across the country around the phone home project. We've had media coverage on TV1, we've had print coverage – numerous reporters and that, MPs, local body politicians and so forth all being part of it. Every parent I've spoken to and any person associated with the school is 100 percent behind it. Everyone I speak to that has nothing to do with the school but is learning about our school is blown away by the concept and thinks it's awesome. (Principal)

The principal said he would like to continue promoting the programme because he believed the value of it was such that it should be given greater consideration by many more schools.

7.3.5 Division of Labour

This element of activity theory encompasses a discussion of the involvement of students with the mobile phone programme. It also addresses issues of power as explained in the introduction to this chapter, Divisions of Labour include divisions that are both horizontal and vertical (Engeström, 2001). Horizontal

divisions concern the *roles* of subjects, while vertical divisions concern perceptions of *power*. In this case study, it was suggested by parents interviewed (Tania, Tina, Dallas, and Patricia) that the mobile phone programme had helped to break down some of the vertical divisions of power. This provided greater opportunities for family members to become involved with school as they had begun to feel more comfortable in the school context and speaking with teachers. These issues are explored in the following the section on student involvement.

7.3.5.1 Student involvement

Student involvement was an important component of the mobile phone programme. It was the students who spoke on the phone when a call was made to their homes and in the more senior classes, the students wrote the texts themselves, although they did so under the supervision of an adult (teacher or support staff member). The teachers supported the concept of student involvement but expressed concerns that having to involve the students took them away from their classroom programme. Anna and Marie spoke about their concerns on this matter:

Find the school day is very busy and it's hard to fit in the time to phone. (Anna, teacher)

Classroom is noisy but have to phone from classroom as can't leave kids. (Marie, teacher)

Teachers were trying to find a solution to this issue as they appreciated it was necessary for them to monitor all the contacts being made. Anna said she had accommodated phoning time into her class timetable in order for her to make time to assist her students to contact their parents. The students had come to understand that the teacher would be busy helping students to make calls during that time:

I have learnt to set time aside for phoning. I find after morning tea and after lunch are the best times while other students are silent reading. A student who has made a good effort phones home. (Anna, teacher)

Although Anna still allowed students to make incidental contacts when the moment called for some immediate feed-back, she found allowing this regular

time helped her to keep up with her requirement to make 40 contacts with whānau each week. Other teachers used different systems to maintain the regularity of contacts required, such as a checklist for students or progress charts. The progress charts had predetermined goals for the students to reach in order for them to phone home. The teachers found these charts were good motivators for the students as Lesley explained:

Achieving goals is a priority and this is usually covered in class.

The phone backs up this progress. (Lesley, school leader)

Eve and Carey, two of the parents, thought it was important that their children were setting and achieving goals and also that it was their children making the contacts as they understood this to be motivating and an enjoyable experience for their children:

I think my children don't mind it, I think they actually quite like that they're able to ring home and let us know what they're up to, especially if it's a positive thing because I think that it uplifts them too. (Eve, family member)

She likes it too knowing that when she's done good she can boast about it, you know she can ring me and say 'yah' kind of thing, it's exciting for her. She enjoys it and its giving her a chance to make contact with me during the day. (Carey, family member)

Isoefa, one of the students, agreed it was important to him that he made contact with his family himself as this helped him to develop a sense of pride in his achievements:

I think that everything that I learn and I've done a great job with it, it just feels terrific to share it with my parents. (Iosefa, student)

Oliver believed hearing the information from him made his parents proud:

My parents are really proud of hearing their kid tellin them what they've been up to (Oliver, student)

Therefore, although the teachers found it difficult to find the time to be with the students while they made contact with home, it was significant to the success of the programme that the students maintained their role in the programme. The

teachers were challenged to give students this time but understood the importance of doing so, and therefore had developed ways of building this into their classroom schedules.

7.3.5.2 Perceptions of power

Another issue concerning Division of Labour that was raised in the interviews was the division of power. Tania said feelings of inadequacy she had experienced in the past due to her feelings of inferiority to teachers had been reduced through the more regular contact she was having with school due to the phone programme:

Maybe it's from my day back in school but the teachers had a sense of power about them kind of thing, so I kind of stood back and waited for them to approach me and tell me what's going on and everything else but now not so much, you know, I'll stroll up and say 'hi, how's things?' and then we'll talk about how my son is going and everything. (Tania, family member)

Tina shared Tania's sentiments feeling that since the introduction of the mobile phone programme, she was more comfortable about being at school and speaking with the teachers:

I'm not an extremely forward person so I kind of linger at the back and because of this [programme] I find it a lot easier to just stroll up and yarn like she's a friend, not like she's a teacher. (Tina, family member)

Dallas indicated that the relationships she had formed with school staff had brought about a more personal connection that made her feel more comfortable about speaking with teachers:

You feel more of a person than just a parent. (Dallas, family member)

Patricia, one of the teachers, felt that from her perspective as a teacher, she had witnessed a change in approach by family members. She said she believed the programme had broken down many of the barriers associated with power because the programme had built relationships that reduced the apprehensions the parents had previously been experiencing:

Broken down lots of barriers because many parents were shy about coming into school because their own [schooling] experiences hadn't been positive but this programme builds relationships which have helped to break down many of those barriers. (Patricia, teacher)

These comments help to justify the value of this programme for reducing barriers to family involvement. This claim is further supported by the comments related to programme outcomes.

7.3.6 Outcomes

Family involvement with this programme has been described as regular and extensive. The way the mobile phones were used afforded participants immediacy, flexibility, reciprocity and regularity of contact. This provided opportunities to build positive relationships and in so doing break down many of the barriers that had previously restricted the involvement of family members with school. In terms of perspectives on programme outcomes for students, I begin with the students' comments followed by comments from teachers and family members.

7.3.6.1 Student outcomes

Iosefa was very positive about the impact of the phone home programme on his opportunities for learning:

It's great because I get a chance to learn new things and then share it with my family once I've got really good at it and the teacher's proud so I get to call them. (Iosefa, student)

Iosefa spoke in a positive manner about his attitude to learning new things, attributing the outcomes of new learning to opportunities for sharing his learning with his family and to make his teacher feel proud of him.

Tane too was positive about opportunities to make connections with home. He said these connections encouraged him to focus more on his learning. His statement seems to indicate that he understands that getting on with his work and behaving well led to improved opportunities to make phone calls home and that this was motivating for him:

*It helps me so I learn and I focus and know not to talk and stuff
so I can phone home for positives. (Tane, student)*

Hemi also made comments related to making more effort with his work because he wanted to phone home:

*It actually makes you work harder to get it so you can use your
time wisely and then you get to phone home. (Hemi, student)*

All the students had in their comments a statement that indicated they believed the phone home programme had improved their effort at school their behaviour and/or their attitude to learning. The following are some further examples of the brief statements made on response to the question “do you think the mobile phone programme helps you at school?”:

*It helps me learn because if I've been good I'll learn more.
(Aroha, student)*

I write better so I can phone home. (Brian, student)

It makes learning much more fun. (Pania, student)

It makes me try harder. (Jamie, student)

It makes me work harder. (Aidan, student)

I always do my best work and do good things. (Te Ara, student)

*It helps me with my learning because I move up a level and I get
to phone home. (Heidi, student)*

The indicators of school engagement were explained in Chapter Four as incorporating multidimensional components related to behaviour, emotions and cognition (Fredricks et al., 2004). Behavioural indicators identified included effort and involvement (Skinner & Pitzer, 2013). The comments from the six students above all evidence indicators that these students were making an effort and showing involvement due to the opportunities the mobile phone programme provided for sharing good news with family members. Emotional indicators of engagement included pride and enjoyment (Skinner & Pitzer, 2013). All the statements from the students cited above evidenced indicators of pride and/or enjoyment.

All seven statements indicated a very positive attitude to school due in part to the opportunities the mobile phones provided for communication with home. The comments indicate improved student engagement with school because clearly some of the indicators of engagement were present. However, the myriad of issues that can impact on any given context mean it is only possible to say that this programme is likely to have contributed to improved student engagement in this school.

Although not specifically related to student engagement, the responses from school leaders, teachers and family members indicated the students were certainly enjoying the opportunities to phone home. Anna, one of the teachers said she was able to confirm students enjoyed the mobile phone programme because her students were always asking to phone home:

They love it and always ask to phone. (Anna, teacher)

Mykala believed this attitude made the programme worthwhile:

Student responses make the programme worthwhile. (Mykala, teacher)

Hannah, one of the parents spoke of her daughter working hard so she could phone home, a goal she said her daughter really tried hard to achieve:

(My daughter) is really proud of her academic achievements so she really enjoys getting to ring home. (Hannah, family member)

Lesley, a school leader, also reported that the students loved the opportunities provided by the mobile phone programme to receive feed-back from home.

Get excited and love the follow up with home. (Lesley, school leader)

Debra, a support staff person who had been working at the school for five years believed she had seen:

Huge improvements in the behaviour of the students since this [mobile phone] programme came in. (Debra, support staff)

Students attributed their positive learning outcomes to the mobile phone programme. They valued the opportunities it gave them to receive feed-back from home and this motivated them to work harder and to behave well. The

mobile phones were an effective means of providing the feed-back valued by most students as reported in a study by Petchell and Glynn (2009).

7.3.6.2 Family outcomes

There have been statements throughout this case study that have indicated the mobile phone programme helped to improve the connection and communication of family members with school. Examples included, statements by Arihi who liked to communicate with her children's teachers, Tina who liked the reminders she received, Tania who also made reciprocal contact with school, and Dallas who felt a lot more comfortable about speaking with school personnel due to the relationships developed during regular phone contact. Also, Natasha, one of the teachers, explained that her relationship with the families of the students who do not have a mobile phone is not as good as her relationship with those who do:

There are four parents without cell phones in my class and it is those parents that are unknown to me as no relationship has been formed. (Natasha, teacher)

Wyona, one of the support staff personnel claimed the mobile phone programme had:

Broken down barriers between home and school on many dimensions. (Wyona, support staff)

The principal reported that the response from families had been extremely positive:

I've had numerous emails and personal contacts from parents saying what a wonderful idea it is. (Principal)

Shirley, one of the parents, added a further dimension to the benefits she believed had come about as an outcome of the mobile phone programme. She believed the programme had opened the way for learning conversations at home:

I just think it opens up more opportunities for them to lead discussions about what they're doing like you might ask them what they did at school and they just say whatever but if you say 'hey, you called me about that, what's that all about', so you've got more in depth knowledge about what they're doing. (Shirley, family member)

Further to the evidence of mobile phones supporting communication at home, statements also indicated relationships at home had improved. Katherine, a parent, claimed the regular information she was receiving had improved opportunities for communication between her and her daughter:

It's made a difference to my relationship with my daughter. It's impacted on my relationship with her in a really positive way because we just seem to communicate better. (Katherine, family member)

The principal also believed the regular communication with parents provided opportunities for them to be better informed about their children's learning and in so doing, open possibilities for discussions at home that were founded on up to date information:

It gives a starting point for students to talk to their parents about their learning and that's a really powerful reason for having something like this in place. (Principal)

Verity, one of the support staff personnel reinforced the principal's statement:

It helps communication to build between students and their parents as parents are more informed about what their children have been doing. (Verity, support staff)

Quade, one of the students explained the regular information prompted family responses, reinforcement for positive information and possibly school visits if the information was of a negative nature:

If it's positive they [family members] will say 'well done' to me. If it's negative they will tell me to listen to the teacher and they come in to school to see what my behaviour has been like. (Quade, student)

Family members interviewed were unanimously positive about the phone home programme. Many of the benefits they saw in the programme have already been highlighted such as children really loving to phone home and improved positive and reciprocal relationships between parents and teachers. However, in addition to these benefits, Bex felt the programme had helped to improve her personal confidence:

It's hard to explain for me personally but it means a lot, it really means a lot to me personally. Sometimes I feel that I'm not doing my job properly as a mother but when you get phone calls like that you know that you must be doing something right for your child. (Bex, family member)

This statement from Bex indicated the affordances associated with the use of the mobile phones extended beyond the physical capacity of the phone to transmit messages. Bex indicated the use of the phones had for her, helped to affirm and reassure her in her role as a mother.

The overall findings from this case study were that the mobile phone programme had made a powerful positive difference to the school. But, just as importantly, the programme had become integral to the daily lives of the entire school community as seen in two statements from the school leaders:

It has made a huge difference to the school. (Lesley, school leader)

It becomes part of the vocab (vocabulary) of the school, kids know what phone home means and it's not a negative any more. (Principal)

7.3.7 Summary of case study R

The phone home programme highlighted that a mobile phone has many features that facilitate subjects to contributing to deliberate acts of communication and connection. It is a tool that can mediate immediate, flexible, regular and reciprocal communication. Furthermore and most importantly, it is a tool available to most of the school community and a tool that can be used from home. Although some tensions were noted such as the challenge of allowing students to make calls during class time and the time consuming task of recording contacts, all participants interviewed nevertheless believed the advantages of the mobile phones as a communication tool outweighed the challenges.

7.4 Case study H

School H is a decile two urban primary school with a roll of approximately 280 students at the time of this research. The tool adopted in this school to support communication and connection between family, students and school differs quite considerably from the tools described in the previous two case studies. It is the entire *school culture* (shared values, beliefs and practices) that is being identified as a tool that was deliberately developed to provide improved opportunities for communication and connection between families, students and school.

As the school culture was the focus of the interviews at this school, it was spoken about regularly and in many different contexts making data often difficult to code into activity theory elements. The criteria adopted were that if data related to *how* the school culture developed, it was coded into the Tool element. The Object element includes data related to *why* the school culture was developed. The Division of Labour element describes *how* different subjects viewed their role in enacting the school culture. Appendix N (1) describes coding decisions related to the school culture.

The school motto is a prominent symbolic statement of the school cultural practice and emerged as a theme due to its importance to the continuance of the school culture. It was a theme that included data related to the activity theory elements of Tool, Object and Division of Labour. Data related to how the motto developed are described in the Tools element. The Object element describes the Subjects' perspectives on why the school motto was developed. The Division of Labour element describes how subjects viewed their role in maintaining and practising the school motto. Appendix N (2) describes coding decisions related to the school motto.

7.4.1 Tool

Discussion of the Tool element begins with a focus on the development of the school culture and how its accompanying motto statement is understood by the school community.

In the Tool element, data included relates to the role of the principal in the development of the school culture. Data related to the principal's role in the ongoing existence and salience of the school culture is included as part of the Division of Labour element (Appendix N (3)).

7.4.1.1 Development

Many participants described the school culture as having just evolved into a normalised way of being for School H and its community. Most staff could not identify specific acts they could attribute to the introduction of the school culture. Sheryl, one of the school leaders, believed the culture was something people got a sense of when they entered the school. She had experienced this herself and she was one of the many who believed the culture had just evolved:

It does just evolve well and truly. When I first came here I noticed it straight away, I really did. There was sort of calm about the kids. (Sheryl, school leader)

Chris, one of the teachers, agreed it was hard to point to how the culture had developed but the special feeling in the school was something that was certainly noticed by visitors to the school:

I think we've got a really amazing school here, and it's not one thing we've tried to do. It's not one thing that you can put your finger on that makes it the way it is and it's not until we have so many people come in from the outside and just say 'wow', you know there's just something here, so I actually think we've got an amazing school culture here. (Chris, teacher)

7.4.1.2 Principal's role

Although the principal did not contradict the staff because he also claimed that aspects of the culture had just 'evolved', he understood more of the background to the development of the culture. His views indicated that there had been deliberate intention behind the development of the school culture.

As he had been in a position of responsibility at the school for over ten years, the principal recalled many events that were initiated with the specific purpose of trying to develop the school into a place that welcomed the community, and further to this, that the school was itself a sharing, caring place. To begin, he spoke about how he had tried to develop the school grounds to give a community atmosphere:

We've done it in lots of ways, I mean the buildings here. We've spent a lot of money on the physical environment, I've overspent in fact on the decks out there but it's important, I mean even that

area out there was designed to make it like a village, you know, the commune inside and things like that. (Principal)

The school caretaker took an active role in maintaining a tidy environment because he agreed the physical environment was an important element in the development of creating a caring atmosphere:

Keeping the school looking tidy is important to promoting a caring atmosphere. (Stewart, support staff)

The principal offered further examples of how he had tried to develop a caring culture at the school, such as redesigning the staffroom to make it a friendlier space and even taking the sign 'staffroom' off the door so the community would also feel comfortable about using the staffroom space.

Another example he gave was the introduction of the fish tank into the foyer area. The fish tank he believed would be a way of alleviating some of the anxieties felt by parents as they entered the school as it gave a starting point for a conversation. More importantly, it opened opportunities for parents to begin conversations:

Even that fish tank, you see parents come in and you go over and you talk about the fish and it's very nonthreatening and it's actually giving them the avenues to get to you rather than the other way around. (Principal)

Although the principal offered many examples of the ways he and others had tried to develop the school culture, he also acknowledged that development of the culture had been challenging and had taken time. He commented that when things did go astray "as happens at times" (Principal), the school did not adopt a 'blame' approach but rather looked within its own structures for alternative solutions:

If a parent doesn't follow those rules sometimes we get quite upset about it where we actually should really be looking at why do we have that rule. (Principal)

The principal acknowledged there had been difficulties associated with trying to make parents feel welcome at school and also agreed with earlier comments that at times the approach must just evolve to suit situations as they arise:

We started to talk about and it's hard in memory, the fact that we needed to make people welcome in the school, we'd always been welcoming but schools are not welcoming places to parents and I don't just mean here, schools have a habit of welcoming parents in on their grounds and I don't mean the physical grounds, as under their rules, so we brought in over that time period about over a year or so when we started to look at the concept of looking after each other and it evolved almost by accident. (Principal)

The strong presence and influence of the principal at this school was a significant factor in helping this school to develop the culture in the manner it has.

Another very important factor that helped develop the school culture was generating the motto statement that effectively codified and embodied the school culture.

7.4.1.3 School motto

The school motto stated 'we look after each other'. The Parent Information Book positioned it as the statement that guided how everyone thought and interacted together. The Parent Information Book stated "we look after each other at (this school). Our wairua,¹⁹ our way of doing things, our commitment to each other, how we deal with problems, all flow from this" (School H, 2010).

All participants agreed that the motto was fundamental to their school's 'way of being'. The following quotes explain how different groups of participants make regular reference to the motto, which in turn reinforces its strong central presence in guiding the way the school community thinks and interacts, making it more than just mere words. Jenny, for example, explained she uses the motto regularly during her interactions with students:

The 'we look after each other' is helpful and verbalised often in interactions with the students. (Jenny, teacher)

Janice believed the simplicity of the motto contributed to the students' understanding of it and their regular use of the motto, such as when interacting with other students and helping new students get used to the way "we look after each other" at this school:

¹⁹ Wairua is a Māori word meaning attitude or spirit

The students support this motto as they interact with other students – particularly as new class members arrive and get used to the way we do things around here. (Janice, teacher)

Gail commented that the motto was concise and meaningful. She liked the way it just said what it had to say without having to explain it further:

It's a good prompt to use without having to do a lot more discussing as the children are so familiar with the motto. (Gail, teacher)

Jenny, Janice and Gail all indicated there was widespread reference to the motto and confirmed its value to students and teachers alike.

Evidence that the use of the motto was widespread and had become part of the way the students conducted themselves both in and out of school was confirmed in comments made by family members. Tony and Jade said the motto meant more to their children than just words. They believed their children were putting the words into action:

I think that they do look after each other. It just says what it says and that's what they're doing and I've watched with him with his other mates and they do, they just look out for each other and play with all of the kids, you know so I think that motto is working to the 'T'. (Tony, family member)

It seems to work. It seems to work to look after each other. I don't know how it does because I've seen at the other schools that I don't think it would work as well but somehow they do it in that environment, you know, the kids just seem to know. They all seem happy to be there. (Jade, family member)

Jade acknowledged that in her opinion the codification of the culture into the motto statement helped to reinforce its meaning. Both Tony and Jade believed the motto helped their children to feel happy at school and that was important to them, reinforcing the notion that parents care about the holistic development of their children.

Each of the 12 students interviewed expressed a clear understanding and support for the motto. Many commented that it helped them to remember that it was important to take care of other people. The following quotes from Te Pura

and Emma are examples from a number of positive quotes received from students concerning how they incorporate the motto into their school lives:

If we didn't have that school motto we wouldn't be able to care for each other and we wouldn't be kind or nice to each other. (Te Pura, student)

It teaches you how to look after each other. (Emma, student)

In summary, the school motto was a codified representation of the school culture. It reflected a philosophy that the school must involve all parts of its community if they are to strive for the best outcomes for their students. The motto embraced teachers looking after each other, teachers looking after students, students looking after their peers and so forth. Although, many Subjects believed the culture had just evolved, there were many deliberate actions taken by the principal to develop and maintain the school culture. All Subjects collaborated to incorporate the culture into their daily routines. Participants' statements suggest the culture had slowly moved from being a deliberate set of actions to be implemented to becoming normalised as acceptable ways of behaving. The motto had become an integral part of the school culture. The following section examines why this tool was developed.

7.4.2 Object

There was a shared belief in the school community that the school culture had developed in order to create a caring community atmosphere at the school. A caring school community was understood as a way of being that valued relationships and the all-round well being of students.

7.4.2.1 Caring school community

The Object of developing a caring school community was viewed as essential if the school was to attend to the all-round well being of the students. In order to achieve this, the students' families needed to be connected with the school as the principal explained:

If you want the best for your kids and you want to believe in a partnership then you actually have to have the families welcome and wanting to be in the school and feeling that they can come in. (Principal)

In order to achieve this aim, the school had to focus on building relationships with their community and it was the understanding and acceptance of this Object that underpinned the development of the school culture:

It's actually about developing true relationships where kids, staff and parents feel that they can talk and communicate, [that] they'll be listened to generally and that people care and that you are doing your utmost for their kids and if you can get people believing that then the rest comes. (Principal)

A School Information Book stated that the aim of the school was to provide opportunities for students that would support them throughout their lives. The Book stated “we aim to help the children to become good citizens, able to lead happy, useful lives” (School H, Parent Information Book, 2010). The School Information Book continued that it was a goal of the school to ensure “children have an educational programme which develops their intellectual, social, emotional and creative areas so that they acquire basic skills in and understanding of: oracy, literacy, mathematics, the sciences, arts and Māori culture” (School H, Parent Information Book, 2010). In other words, the school aimed to attend to the social, emotional and academic development of their students. Family involvement was viewed as integral to that aim and a caring school culture helped to expand opportunities for family involvement.

Interestingly, some of the students added a physical safety dimension to the reason for having the school culture in place. Kiri, a student, explained she believed there was an interrelationship between feeling safe physically and being able to get ahead with her school work:

When I'm doing my work no one will push me around then I'm able to get on with my work better. (Kiri, student)

Matu believed the culture at the school helped to provide an atmosphere that supported both his physical and emotional well being:

So we don't get hurt and we don't get hurt feelings. (Matu, student)

Tahnee, another of the students, commented she believed being in a safe environment involved looking after not only the physical environment but also the people within it:

So nobody gets hurt and we look after the property, our teachers and our school mates. (Tahnee, student)

John, a teacher, supported the students' well being as a primary reason for maintaining the caring community culture:

If you've got an environment or a culture where you're allowed to be yourself, you're allowed to be not good at some things and good at other things I think that helps you to get good at everything. (John, teacher)

Kerry, a family member, expressed similar sentiments. She believed that the students benefited when the school culture was one of respect and caring. She alluded to the school as a learning community, which she believed was an important reason for introducing the culture:

If they learn together they get a lot further than just on their own. They can learn from others and it doesn't have to be only the teachers, it can be other students as well, and it can be in a community environment. (Kerry, family member)

The school culture and guiding motto were therefore 'brought into being' according to the principal, teachers, students and family members to develop a caring community atmosphere where all participants felt comfortable in supporting and communicating with each other. The students were integral to the practice of the culture. Their comments indicated a clear understanding of what the school culture meant to them and how it boosted their feelings of well being and safety. There was no evidence of tensions with regard to the perceived Object of this activity but rather there was a high level of consistency and alignment between and within groups of subjects.

7.4.3 Rules

The cooperative and collaborative atmosphere of the school culture reduced the need for specific rules. The only reference to rules was a comment made by the principal.

7.4.3.1 School motto

Adopting a Māori phrase, the principal called the motto the school's whakatauki.²⁰ He suggested that because they have this whakatauki and because it is so successful, they don't need any other rules in the school. He explained:

We've done it round the whakatauki or around the thing of 'we look after each other' and it's the only rule and we make a big deal about it. (Principal)

In the place of formal rules at this school, there were a number of norms or commonly held expectations that had become the taken for granted way of behaving. An example was the regular morning coffee meetings attended by all teaching staff, school leaders, support staff, caretaker and social worker. This meeting welcomed staff to school for the day and provided an opportunity to communicate any messages that could enable personnel to plan their day more effectively. The trust and respect for each other that were spoken about previously were plainly evident during these meetings. I attended them during my time at the school and could sense a great deal of mutual understanding, together with much collegiality and good humour. The principal's comment referring to being true to "we look after each other" was precisely what I experienced through the collegial conversation and idea sharing time that was integral to these coffee meetings. This being the case, and with evidence that these same values were carried over into other parts of their day, the need for formal rules was minimized.

7.4.4 Community

The community involvement with this school was wide reaching. Within the immediate circle of influence were those directly involved with the school. These included: students, family members, school leaders, classroom teachers and school support staff. The support staff included two office personnel, caretaker, teacher aides and also a social worker. The staff also made use of their wider community on a regular basis. Family members were welcome in all classrooms at any time and also into the 'staffroom' to join with teachers in a collegial manner. Teachers invited community members into school to speak to the students about their careers and to hopefully inspire the students to work hard.

²⁰ Whakatauki is a Māori word meaning motto or slogan

7.4.4.1 Wide community network

The school social worker provided an important link between the school and the community. The principal explained the social worker was employed partly through the school's own funding and partly through some fundraising efforts the school had embarked upon. Unfortunately, this funding stream was running out and her time with them was limited. He was concerned about this because he believed she fulfilled an important role in helping to address the wider needs of the school community and consequently, improving opportunities for students. He explained her role:

Her role was to go in and identify the members of the whole family and do an IEP (Individual Education Plan) on the whole lot, whatever the needs were based on the concept that education is the key to shifting families out of that trap so she'd sit down and say what does mum need, what does dad need, what do the kids need so the aim is that within five years they're out of the trap. (Principal)

In this role, the social worker helped the school to cross the boundaries between home and school. The principal saw this as having both immediate and long term benefits for the students. The social worker's role was often to act as an advocate for the parents. She had to focus on addressing concerns such as housing, health, employment and finances. The time involved in these tasks was beyond the resources of the teaching staff, although when the social worker's input finishes, the principal said they will return to door knocking and trying to make connections with families in their own homes as much as possible. This was clear evidence that the school was willing to make every effort to maintain communication and connection with its community.

Julia, the social worker confirmed the comments of the principal. She said it was her role to support the families and to help them to feel comfortable about coming into school:

I try to work with the families and promote the importance of education with them and to encourage them to visit school. (Julia, support staff)

Beyond the immediate circle of the school was the wider school community. The school also made use of this resource. An example of involving the wider school

community was given by Kylee, one of the teaching staff who spoke about members of the wider community helping students with their goal setting and long term aspirations:

There's been a lot of work around the children seeing people moving forward so that they develop an understanding of careers and listen to people that have been successful in different fields. Just talking about the fact that you can leave here and you can go and train and this is what you can do and this is what my job is and this is how much I get paid for doing that. I think it's to do with; it's them being able to actually believe that it's possible for them to move forward and to do the things we keep telling them they can do. (Kylee, teacher)

In this statement Kylee was emphasising the value of involving the wider school community. It helped to give a reality to the teaching programme and also connected the community with the school. This interrelationship between what went on at school and the practices and aspirations of the community was an important focus of this case study. It helped to reinforce the school culture because the involvement of community members showed they also cared about the wellbeing and future prospects of the students (as did the teachers who probably sought out community members to come into the school to speak with the children).

Sophie, the support staff member who is often one of the first points of contact for visitors to the school, explained she made an effort to make the community feel welcome:

I let them know that they are welcome and that the school is there for them. (Sophie, support staff)

Nicole and Lily, two other support staff member also commented on the effort the school made to welcome the community.

The school makes an effort to make the community feel welcome. (Nicole, support staff)

There's just a feeling that makes the school feel welcoming. (Lily, support staff)

Lily's comment emphasises that the school culture plays an important role in the welcoming atmosphere at the school felt by the community.

7.4.5 Division of Labour

Two main themes arose in the Division of Labour element of the activity theory structure. The first concerns the role of the principal. His comments indicate he supports the notion of leadership as a distributed task. He speaks about his role as well as that of his supportive staff in helping to maintain the culture at the school. The second subsection focuses on the co-operative nature of the school community and that all members of the community accept a degree of personal responsibility for the continuance of the school culture.

7.4.5.1 Role of the principal

The principal took a strong leadership role in this school, adamant in his view that all the school community should take a regular role in the enactment of the school culture. In so doing, the school culture would not just be words but something he could put into practice through his actions. He spoke about being present in the playground at the end of the school day in order to make informal connections with family members:

So I don't know what the answer is but its relationships, it is actually taking the time to go and say hello to a parent. Going out there at 3 o'clock if you can get out there, and it's just saying 'gidday, how are you?' (Principal)

The principal also attributed much of the continuance of the school culture to the efforts of the staff. He praised his staff for the manner in which they supported each other and supported the culture of the school:

So we've also developed a staff around it, my staff are totally individualistic but they are superb, they're all individuals with a passion and a belief. (Principal)

He continued on by saying that not only was this commitment their passion but as a staff, it was also their professional responsibility:

It's weird here because people come in with a concern and they're apologising, you know, 'I'm sorry about coming in' and I say 'no, that's my job'. (Principal)

He often repeated his endorsements for his staff as he spoke. Importantly, endorsements were reciprocal. Kylee, a new member of staff said that the teachers at the school seemed to be united in their support of the principal and the school culture. From the perspective of a new teacher arriving at the school, she believed the support of the staff had helped her to fit into the school quite quickly. She added an acknowledgement of the efforts of the school leaders and the passionate teachers who had helped her to fit in to the culture of the school:

I've got it from the other staff here and when you come in and the cultures strong. I think it's from staff, led by the boss and management team but definitely just that group of very passionate teachers. (Kylee, teacher)

A strong sense of the co-operative nature of the school community was evidenced in response to the question about how subjects saw their role in promoting the school culture. Participants also took a positive approach that included high expectations of themselves and others.

7.4.5.2 Co-operative

The data from interviewees indicated that teachers, students and family members all shared responsibility for the continued existence and salience of the school culture. Interviewees were asked to speak about their role in looking after each other. Although there were many minor variations in answers, a consistent theme emerged. That theme was that all participants accepted a degree of personal responsibility for ensuring the care and well being of others, and encouraged others to do the same.

Kay, one of the teachers, spoke about the staff working well together as a team. She believed the trust the staff showed in each other helped them to co-operate well together:

All the staff work very hard and there's a great deal of trust among the staff. (Kay, teacher)

James expressed his opinion that the co-operative approach was enhanced by finding out what the strengths of each staff member were and building on those strengths. He added that through this approach, they were able to make a positive difference to the lives of the children:

People figure out what their strengths are and then they work to their strengths and when they do that of course they light up the lives of the kids. (James, teacher)

This same attitude was expressed by Petra who referred to a sense of respect between staff members and she also spoke about the respect the staff had for their students:

I don't know what it is as far as I think there's a freedom for people to 'be' and there's a respect and the children know they're respected or acknowledged. (Petra, teacher)

It was Cameron's belief that much of the caring approach was the outcome of teachers having high expectations of themselves, of each other and of their students:

Expect that they will do well [the students]. (Cameron, teacher)

Kylee supported this statement. She was of the opinion that high expectations were fundamental to the approach taken by staff to their involvement with their students:

It's about a 'yes we can' attitude I've noticed here. The staff feel they can really make a difference and that what they do makes a difference. (Kylee, teacher)

It was also pointed out by Penny that the staff consider the needs of the students and their families when making decisions around the best approach to suit different situations:

We tend to adapt to suit the needs of the family or the child. (Penny, teacher)

These quotes indicate the teachers worked well together as a team - building on each other's strengths and carrying high expectations of themselves and their students. Many were passionate about the contribution they believed they could make to improve the lives and opportunities of their students through trust, respect and a genuine compassionate approach to teaching. James expanded as he reflected on a conversation he had had with one of his troubled pupils. He started off by asking the boy:

'Why do you keep coming to school' and he [the boy] said 'because you showed me I can have a different life, all I've got to do is make the right choices'. He has courage to do that but he has trust in me that it will work because I believe in him. We have to be telling them all the time that we believe in them and that we love them and that we care about them. Yet there's nowhere in our education system that gives any recognition of the fact that we as teachers of these children who are our most precious resources should love them so much that we need to show them that's where you can go, you can have a future.
(James, teacher)

This moving statement reinforced the caring approach of the staff and their genuine concern for their students. Penny agreed that the staff were all passionate about their students and their school community. She supported the statements made previously about the school employing a type of teacher who was willing to co-operate well with others and that the leadership team played a critical role in attracting staff such as James to the school:

We're a motley lot and quite fiery some of us, but passionate . . . and I think they've attracted a certain type of teacher. (Penny, teacher)

The attitudes of the staff and the vision and support shown by leadership personnel were integral to the continuing embodiment of the school culture within the school community. There was clearly a team approach to ensuring the school culture was current in the thoughts and actions of all participants. Further to this, the principal played a key role in selecting and supporting staff and helping to promote a team approach. The co-operative approach of the school staff was also acknowledged in the Values Education in New Zealand Schools Report (2006). This Report stated that teachers at School H worked well together as a team and that the teachers were clearly the driving force behind the values philosophy (at School H) and central to its success.

Comments from family members and students indicated the efforts made by the staff to encourage their involvement and to care for their children were positively received. Jade and Kim, two family members, both said they believed staff listened to their concerns and that staff would take action to try to remedy problems. This encouraged them to approach the school to discuss their

concerns. Opportunities for communication helped reinforce shared responsibility for the well being of the students and that also involved the community. Jocelyn and Kim's comments reflected they were willing to become involved in school related matters because they believed their efforts were worthwhile:

I wouldn't hesitate if I had any issues, you know, concerning anything, I'd probably get in and get seen to and have an answer quick. (Jocelyn, family member)

I don't really have any problems, I mean like if there's something wrong with the kids I go down and they listen to you, they don't just say 'oh yeah' and then still get them to do something they can't do. (Kim, family member)

The students too were clear that "looking after each other" meant them taking a degree of personal responsibility for ensuring this happened. Catherine, for example, suggested she fulfilled her role by helping others and letting other children play with her:

I let other people play with me. I help new kids that have just started. (Catherine, student)

Tiana said that everyone participated positively and in a friendly manner and for this reason she enjoyed being at this school:

I like it because everyone looks after each other. (Tiana, student)

Charlie added that the students also helped to look after the teachers, reinforcing the reciprocal nature of the culture:

We have to look after the teachers too. (Charlie, student)

One of the leadership personnel also spoke about the importance of the reciprocal component of relationship building and believed that the school culture helped to create a feeling of a two-way partnership:

It is quite a strong culture of - when you come here, you're part of the school and we'll look after you and you will look after us. (Robert, school leader)

These quotes indicated a combined acceptance of personal responsibility for maintaining the school culture from teachers, students and family members. This combined effort helped to support many positive outcomes.

7.4.6 Outcomes

The consistency in perspectives, the lack of tensions and the positive interrelationships between elements within this case study create a set of outcomes that demonstrate many benefits for students arising from the strong commitment to the culture at this school. In this regard, the comments from the students are presented first.

7.4.6.1 Student outcomes

As reported by students, the benefits of the school motto included that it helped their learning, it helped build a collaborative atmosphere for learning and it supported personal development. Victor claimed the school motto helped his learning because it encouraged his friends to help him:

It helps me with my learning because my friends help me. (Victor, student)

Harry also implied there was a cooperative atmosphere where students helped each other:

If people aren't learning I ask them if they want help and they say yes after you've finished. (Harry, student)

Tuku had a similar opinion to that of Harry. Tuku spoke of the collaborative atmosphere between students where one student supports another through difficulties with their school work:

I help them to learn story writing because my friend doesn't know some words so I help him. (Tuku, student)

Penelope thought the school motto helped her learning:

I think it has an influence on our learning. In our class we aren't a normal class. We have choices to be mean to each other but our school motto is looking after each other so let's do that. (Penelope, student)

Tiana focused on her personal growth. She believed that at this school her friendship circle had grown:

I made one new friend then when I got older and bigger I started to make more and more friends and now I have a whole group of friends. (Tiana, student)

Kiri, another student believed the attitudes of family members towards school had an impact on her approach to school. She believed she benefited from the positive thoughts expressed about school from her parents:

They think it's a wonderful school. They like it because I'm making new friends. I have friends who look after me too. (Kiri, student)

There was a common theme in the comments from the students, namely that they felt looked after at this school and in turn, they looked after others; the combination of which they believed helped their learning and their personal well being.

Parents focused more on the personal aspects of their children's development such as relationships with others but many believed that this personal development helped them to enjoy school more. Alex explained:

Because of the atmosphere at that school, she can be an individual and things like that and she's accepted. Her interpersonal relationships have soared and I think it might be because they do all look after each other and her sympathy and empathy of others seems to be keener now that she's there. (Alex, family member)

Naomi believed it was important for her children to enjoy school otherwise barriers may restrict their learning:

I think if people aren't happy socially, well then it sort of puts up a barrier for them to learn. So as long as those issues aren't getting in the way, well, that's fine. (Naomi, family member)

Dean claimed his children were very happy at school and this prompted conversations at home:

They seem very happy. They chat about their day all the time.
(Dean, family member)

Nina claimed all her children loved their school and she believed the culture at the school played a role in this:

They seem to be excelling and everything, and they love their school and the school motto. (Nina, family member)

The role of the school culture also featured in Ranui's comments. She believed that the school culture gave the students a good balance to their approach to school:

I think the school gives a bit of balance. A bit of social and a bit of learning at the same time because it strengthens both, not only my daughter's learning ability but it also strengthens her personality. (Ranui, family member)

James, one of the teachers claimed he could walk into his class and the students could:

Tell you exactly what they're doing, how they're going to do it, why they're doing it and exactly how long it's going to take.
(James, teacher)

The atmosphere in the school was very positive and from my observations, I noted the children seemed to be enjoying their work. Many of the students attributed the school motto to the caring atmosphere in the school, both in the quotes in the previous section (Victor, Harry, Tuku and Penelope) and throughout the quotes reported in the other elements of this study (Tahnee, Matu, Kiri, Charlie, Tiana and Catherine). These statements demonstrated that the school culture, supported by the motto statement, was helping the students to progress well at school socially, emotionally and academically. In terms of student engagement with school, a behavioural indicator of engagement was noted as being involvement with school. The comments from students indicate that there was a sense of involvement and support between students and with learning. Importantly, these comments were supported by family members and teachers.

Lastly, I discuss how the school culture supported communication between families and school.

7.4.5.2 Family outcomes

Fiona, Julie and Frances, three family members, spoke about feeling comfortable to approach the school if they had issues to discuss:

I've always found the teachers really approachable and the office staff and the principal. (Fiona, family member)

I would be comfortable, for me personally I would go to the principal if there was a situation and I would feel comfortable enough to go to him or any one of the teachers if need be. (Julie, family member)

I find it a family orientated school and really focused on the children. I find the teachers very approachable and the office staff and the principal. (Frances, family member)

Further to this, the principal was aware that because of the success of embedding the culture at school, some families were integrating the motto into their homes:

We do have some families now who have adopted that as their rule at home as a consequence. (Principal)

This was a statement supported in a comment from Nick, a family member:

He comes home and tells me about his day and we share ideas about how we can look after each other at home. (Nick, family member)

The use of the motto at home could help deepen the belief of the parents in the meaningfulness and genuineness of the school staff. It was a motto developed with the aim of building a caring community atmosphere at the school and there are indicators throughout this case study that confirm that was the case.

7.4.7 Summary of case study H

My time spent at School H confirmed the school to be a warm, caring place. I experienced much collegiality and good feeling amongst the staff. During my classroom visits, attendance at assembly, and time spent in the playground I was able to confirm there was calmness about the students. I found the students showed the caring attitude they spoke about and seemed very proud to be part of

the school, and proud of themselves for contributing to the caring atmosphere at the school. The positive atmosphere at the school was often attributed by the students and the other subjects to the school culture. The codifying of the culture into a simple motto statement was undoubtedly an important contributing factor to the effectiveness of the well-grounded conceptual tool in use at School H.

The following chapter analyses the findings from each of the case study schools and addresses the two central research questions in relation to these findings

CHAPTER 8: DISCUSSION

8.1 Introduction

The previous chapter detailed findings from three case studies involving deliberate acts of family, student, and school connection and communication. This chapter adopts activity theory analysis methods to inform a discussion of those findings. Wider implications for both educational practice and theory are discussed in the final chapter. I have separated interpretation from implications because, as Yamagata-Lynch (2010) explains, activity theory analysis requires a researcher to begin analysis by being detailed in their description of their case studies in order to establish a reliable unit of analysis, after which the researcher can “begin identifying the relationship between one activity and another to draw out systemic implications” (p. 6). She explains that the complexity of the data in activity theory requires the researcher to “zoom in and out in their analysis” (p. 6). This chapter zooms in to examine tensions and alignments within each case study. The final chapter zooms out to discuss wider implications for educational practice and theory.

It is also important to clarify that not all the findings or all the themes identified in the previous chapter are discussed in this chapter. Yamagata-Lynch (2010) argues that researchers “who engage in investigations using activity systems analyses need to be aware that while this methodology is used to understand real world complex situations, it cannot represent complexities in their entirety” (p. 33). Roth and Lee (2007) agree that the quantity and complexity of the data that arises from qualitative research requires the researcher to take what they term “snapshots” (p. 201). However, when taking snapshots it is important to identify how quality in data analysis is maintained. In this chapter, quality is supported by a systematic approach that involves both consistent activity systems analysis across all three case studies, and relevance to the specific research questions:

1. What tensions and alignments are identified by stakeholders in undertaking deliberate acts of communication and connection between families, students, and school within three low decile New Zealand primary schools?

2. What affordances and limitations are identified by stakeholders relating to tools used in undertaking deliberate acts of communication and connection between families, students, and school within three low decile New Zealand primary schools?

The discussion begins in Section 8.2 by using activity systems frameworks to illuminate where analysis suggests tensions and alignments exist in each case study. Tensions are depicted in the activity systems diagrams as jagged lines between elements. Alignments are depicted as straight lines with an arrow. This discussion addresses the first research question.

Section 8.3 addresses the second research question. It explores how the identification of tensions and alignments has highlighted the affordances and limitations of each tool within the context of the activity in which they are being used. This section forms much of the foundation for the implications for practice and theory discussion in the final chapter.

8.2 Tensions and alignments at the case study schools

8.2.1 Case study W

In this case study, two main issues arose: lack of family and student involvement with the activity, and perceptions of the purpose of the activity that did not align with the aim of enhancing opportunities for communication and connection between families, students, and school. In accordance with the notion that an activity system is “an integrated” set of elements (Kaptelinin & Nardi, 2006, p. 72), the activity systems diagrams below illustrate that both these issues were the outcome of tensions between and within a combination of activity theory elements.

The first issue concerning the minimal involvement of family members and students with the Brag Book programme seems to be one that has endured change and ‘improvement’ to the programme during the many years of its existence. Although acknowledging there was minimal family and student involvement, neither teachers nor school leaders suggested major amendments to the programme they were using as a form of communication and connection with their families. Rather, they described reasons why family members were not taking part in the programme (for example, they were shy, their own educational experiences had not been positive, and many were English second language speakers). This approach left teachers with limited knowledge of the skills and

experiences family members may have otherwise been capable of contributing to their children's education and led teachers to make assumptions about the interest family members had in the programme. The statement made by Mark, one of the teachers, that no one bothers to look at the books at home is an example of such an assumption. This approach has been described as deficit theorising by scholars such as Bishop and Glynn (1999) who refer to deficit approaches as those where the location of the issue and the responsibility for finding solutions to it lies "with the victims" (p. 69). The focus of the teachers was on finding reasons for the limited involvement rather than on seeking solutions that may have enabled family members to contribute to the programme in ways that incorporated their values, beliefs, and lived experiences.

Family members interviewed did not identify their limited involvement as an issue that concerned them, which reinforces the statement made by Meyers (2006) that tensions can be hidden and impact on activity systems in subtle ways. Subtle issues, Meyers explains, are challenging to address because they do not prompt participants in the activity to consider change. In the analysis of the activity system of School W, Subjects were not achieving the Object of enhancing opportunities for communication and connection. This means there was a tension and Figure 9 has identified it as being a tension between Subjects, Division of Labour and Object.

Division of Labour is involved in this tension because within this activity there were many indicators of unequal divisions of power in favour of school personnel, particularly in favour of school leaders. The context of power created by school leaders was an overriding feature and one that influenced the thoughts and actions of all other Subjects and limited their capacities to attain their Object. As Engeström and Sannino (2010) reinforce, tensions involving power cannot be removed from Object because "power is seen mainly as an instrument and an outcome in the pursuit of some object" (p. 18). Decisions made by school leaders to include assessment information and to continue with the Brag Book programme had major impacts on the Outcomes of this programme. Figure 9 depicts this as a tension between Subjects and Division of Labour (A), then from Division of Labour to Object (B). This tension has been interpreted as one that contributed to the Outcome of minimal family and student involvement with the Brag Book programme (and with school in general).

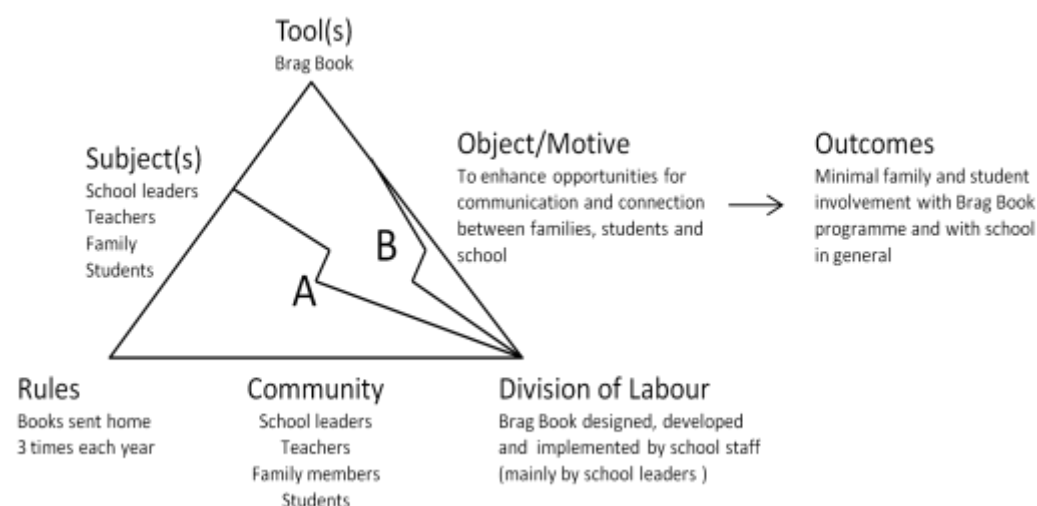


Figure 7: Case study W, Family, students and school activity system displaying tensions A and B

Tensions A and B highlight the need for school leaders and teachers at School W to consider ways of creating greater opportunities for “joint endeavour” (Todd & Higgins, 1998, p. 228). Joint endeavour was a characteristic of healthy school and community relationships identified in the literature in Chapter Four. It involves respecting that each stakeholder has a worthwhile contribution to make to a relationship. Contributions may not always be equal since school personnel usually play a greater role in deciding on school-based activities. However, joint endeavour means finding ways to respect and acknowledge the input all stakeholders have the potential to contribute.

There were minimal opportunities for communication from home arising from the Brag Book programme, and the opportunities that were provided (such as to comment on students’ work) required a shared understanding of the purpose of the programme if the comments were to be meaningful to all stakeholders. Mark, one of the teachers, stated, for example, that he would like to have seen the Brag Books used as an opportunity for parents to praise their children. This was clearly not a purpose for commenting understood by parents as Mark himself recognised. He believed many parents made no comment at all because they were not sure what to write in the books. Jane, another teacher, said some parents wrote messages to her, although she believed their messages should be written to the students. She understood some of the reasons for the lack of parents’ understanding of how to write a message was because English was their second language and the books required a standard of English beyond their

capabilities. Lynn, a school leader agreed the books required a level of understanding that parents with limited English or educational experiences may find challenging.

Given that teachers recognised the Brag Books placed demands on parents that they were not in a position to address, the concern was that the programme continued to include the requirement for parents to respond in written form. The position of authority taken by school leaders has been represented as a tension between Subjects and Division of Labour in Figure 9, but it is also a tension that involves the activity theory element of Tool. The requirement to comment on students' work is an example of the importance of users understanding the purpose of their Tool if they are to be using it in a manner that leads towards attainment of a shared and understood Object. The limited shared understanding of the purpose of the Brag Book activity is displayed in Figure 10 as a tension between Subjects and the Tool (C) and then between the Tool and the Object (D).

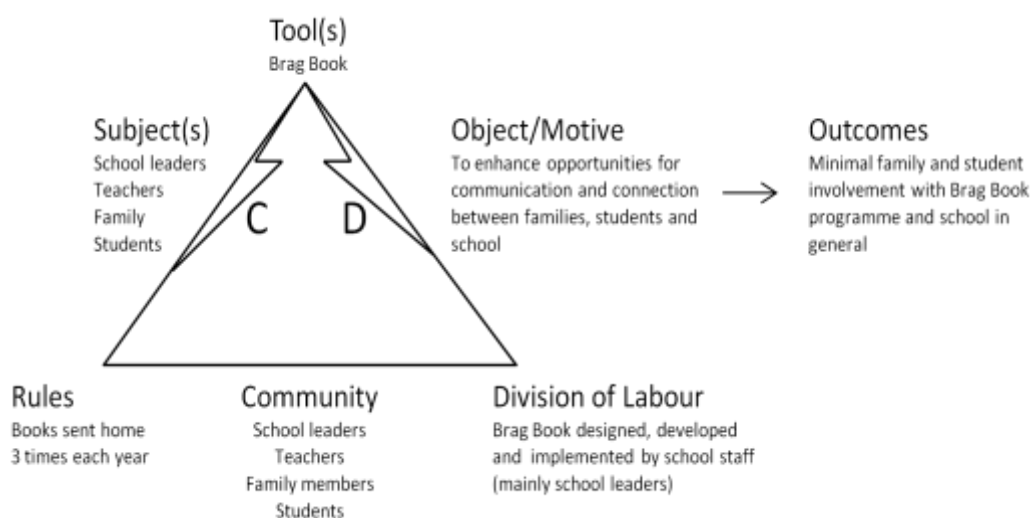


Figure 8: Case study W, Family, students and school's activity system displaying tensions C and D

Further to their being tensions related to the requirement for parents to respond to their children's work samples, the previous chapter highlighted inconsistencies in the way teachers and school leaders believed they should respond to students' work samples. This indicates tensions in the understanding of the activity's

purpose. The following activity systems diagrams focus on different Subjects' perceptions of the purpose (Object) of this activity.

Teachers were reluctant to include assessment information in the students' Brag Books although Diane (a school leader) had initiated this as a rule of the programme. Teachers believed the inclusion of assessment information conflicted with their notion that the Brag Books should provide an ongoing record of student progress. Furthermore, teachers believed that they should include samples that students would be proud to share with their family members and brag about. In Figure 11 this tension has been represented as being between the teachers and the Rules (E) and then between Rules and Object (F).

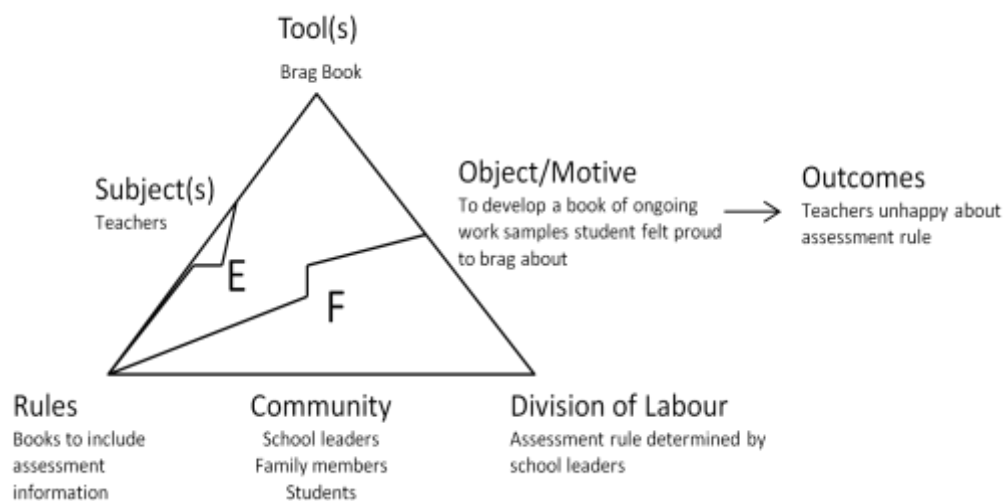


Figure 9: Case study W, Teachers' activity system showing tensions E and F

As the teachers interviewed were in agreement that from their perspective, the Brag Books should include ongoing samples of work and students should feel proud of their book, the tension for teachers was not directly with the Object but with the Rules. The tension related to Object (G) surfaces when the activity system of the teachers is compared with that of the school leaders in Figure 12.

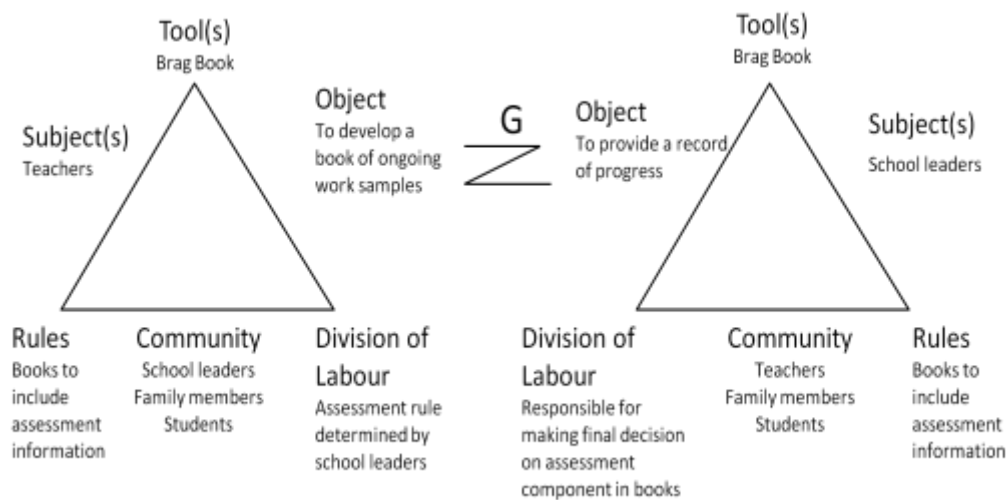


Figure 10: Case study W, Teachers' and school leaders' activity systems showing tension G

A third generation activity systems diagram (as described in Chapter Two) has been used to illustrate there were inconsistencies between the teachers' and the school leaders' views of assessment that were impacted by their overall perception of the purpose of the Brag Book programme. Teachers wanted to develop a book of ongoing work samples while the perspectives of school leaders were reflected in the principal's comment that the book was "by and large reporting". Diane's addition of the assessment component indicates she also wanted the books to include reporting information.

Had the intention of this research been to work together with participants to bring about change to this organisation, the diagram above could have provided a useful framework to guide those discussions. As activity theory has been used as a theoretical framework in this research, the diagrams frame the discussion of tensions and alignments and provide a model for consideration in future studies.

The teachers' wish not to include assessment information in the books despite the requirement for them to do so also reflects their activity system could depict a tension involving the activity theory element of Division of Labour. Possibly teachers were not expressing their concerns with the assessment rule clearly, their concerns were not being listened to, and/or their views were being overridden by the power and authority of the school leaders. Any of these options could create a tension between teachers, Division of Labour and Object. In a similar manner to the tension involving Division of Labour and Object discussed

in Figure 9, the tension related to the assessment rule involves power and impacted upon the capacity of Subjects to attain their Object. Teachers' perceptions of the power of school leaders limited their capacity to express their concerns, a concern noted as tension H in Figure 13. This led to them believing their Object of developing a book of work samples students felt proud to brag about could not be fully realised (tension I).

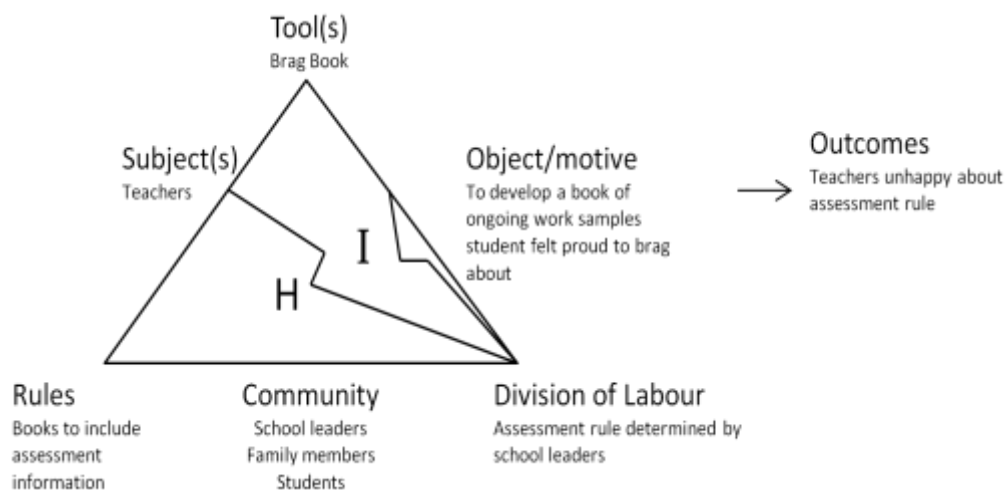


Figure 11: Case study W, Teachers' activity system showing tensions H and I

The notion that the teachers wanted to provide the students with a book they could feel proud of was reinforced in statements they made regarding the pressure they felt to ensure the work in the Brag Books was of a high standard. This pressure, however, was not something family members or students commented on suggesting the pressure felt by teachers may have been reduced had there been a shared understanding of the Object of the activity. This issue is depicted in Figure 14 as a further tension between the teachers, Division of Labour (J) and Object (K). The lack of clarity in Object meant that teachers were unsure whether their role was to help students create a book that included neatly presented work samples or whether it was to encourage students to take more ownership of the book, and therefore present samples students had chosen themselves despite the neatness or quality of those samples.

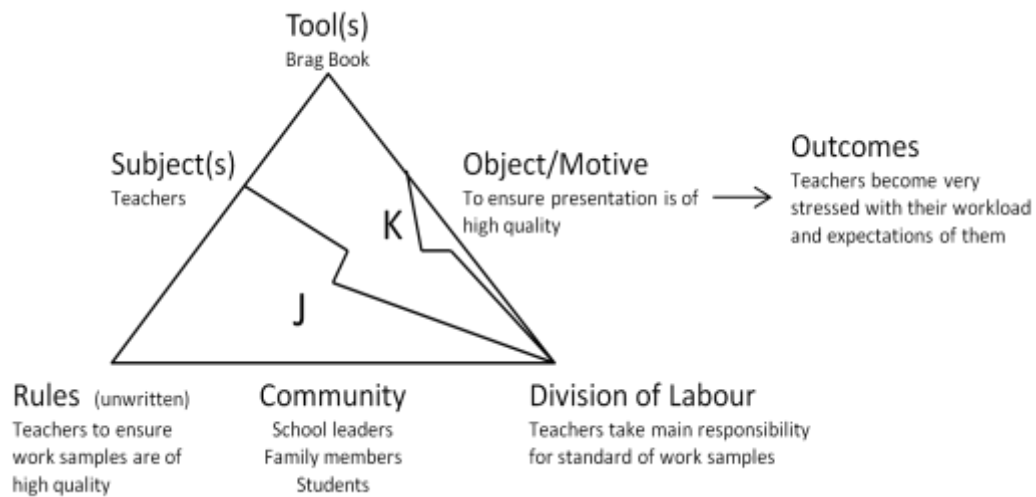


Figure 12: Case study W, Teachers' activity system showing tensions J and K

Further to teachers experiencing tensions associated with Division of Labour, they were challenged also by the requirement to have the books returned to school (and signed). All teachers reported they had to work hard and some even resorted to employing incentives to have the books returned. This is interpreted as a tension between the perceived Object of the activity from the perspective of the teachers and that of family members (L) as shown in Figure 15. As the teachers understood the Brag Books were to include ongoing samples of work, they required the books to be returned back to school. Some family members, however, did not seem clear this was an Object of the activity and therefore did not appreciate the need to have the books returned, thereby creating a tension between teachers and family members.

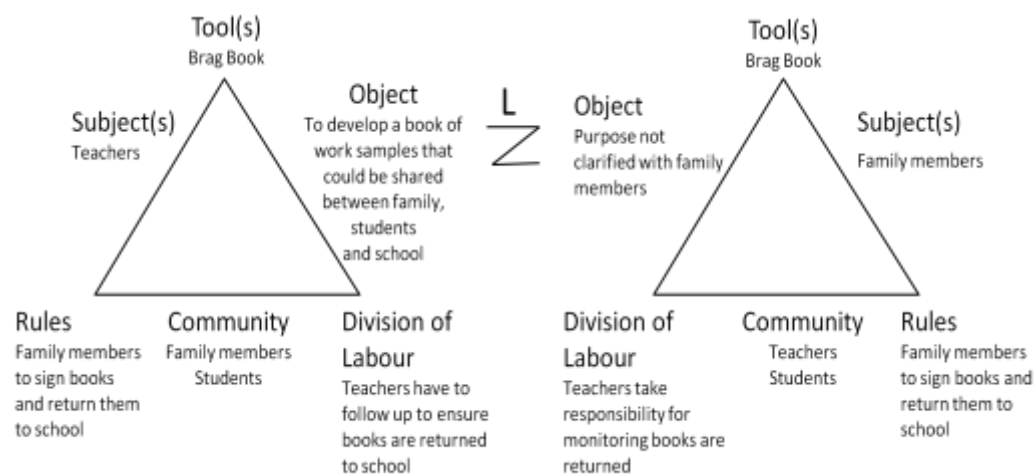


Figure 13: Case study W, Teachers' and family members' activity systems showing tension L

Third generation activity system analysis was used in the diagram above to illustrate tensions between Subjects. The differing perceptions of Object between Subjects resulted in tensions throughout the activity systems of the teachers displayed above.

The family members who were interviewed for this study reported a range of perceptions of the Object of the Brag Book. This is not surprising taking into account that the Object had not been clearly explained to them and that teachers and school leaders had different perceptions of Object. The family members' lack of clarity in Object has been identified in Figure 16 as a further tension in this activity. Although family members did not express concern about not understanding the purpose of the Brag Book programme, their differing views of purpose limited the capacity of Subjects to take actions that would lead to attaining a shared Object. This context supports the claim that tensions have the potential to create disturbances that may benefit the system and "eventually drive the system to change and develop" (Barab et al., 2002, p. 80). Had family members been forthcoming with reasons for not signing or returning Brag Books, for example, or had they indicated their preference of book format, school staff may have been prompted to make changes to the programme that better fitted with the experiences and understandings of family members. Instead, school personnel made assumptions that parents understood what was expected of them when the Brag Books went home. However, statements that many Brag

Books were returned to school without being signed or with comments that were not encouraging indicates that parents did not fully understand their role in the programme. This issue is displayed in Figure 16 as a tension between family members and Object (M).

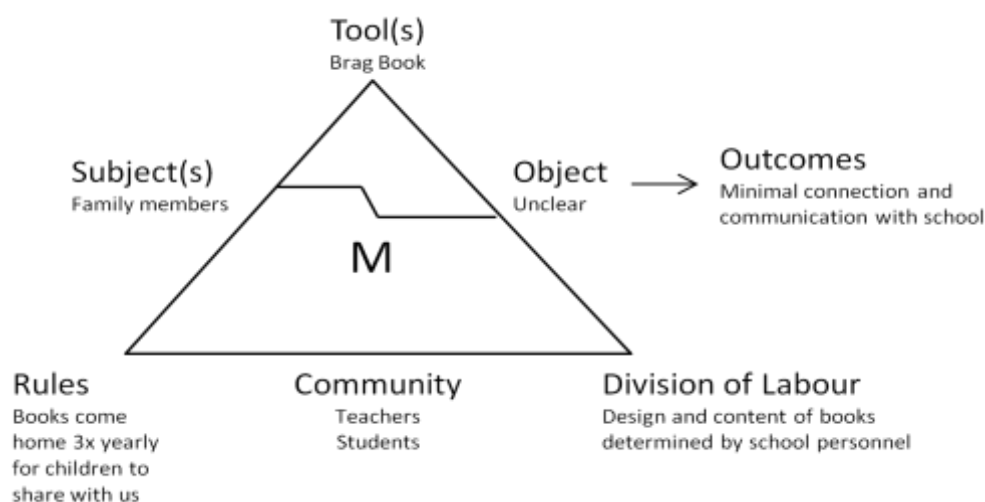


Figure 14: Case study W, Family members' activity system showing tension M

The students interviewed did not raise issues about their Brag Book and all said they liked taking their books home. The teachers, however, reported that students, *other than those interviewed for this study*, were reluctant to take their books home, especially when their work samples showed they were below expected levels of progress. In Figure 17 the perspectives of students interviewed are displayed. The main purpose spoken about which was that the Brag Books allowed them the opportunity to share their work with family members is depicted as an alignment (N) from students to their identified Object for the activity.

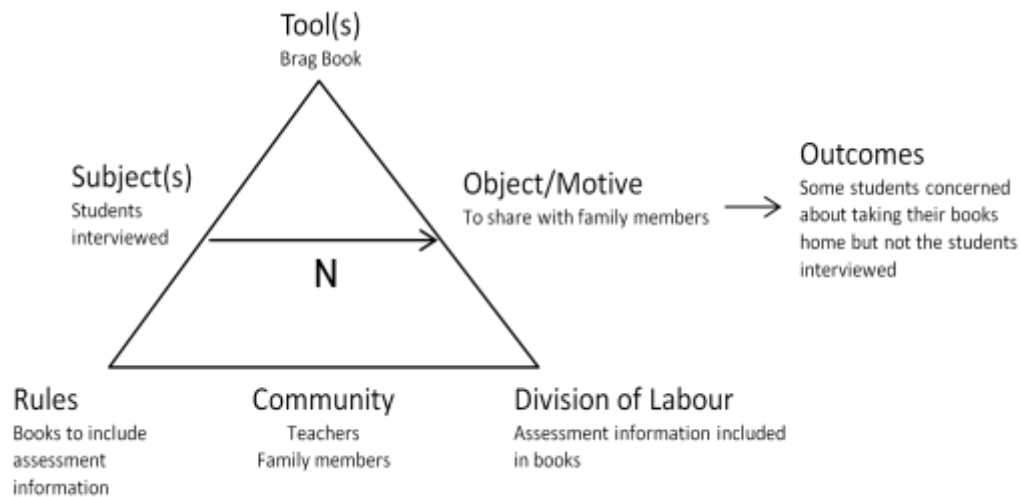


Figure 15: Case study W, Students' activity system showing alignment N

The activity systems diagram in Figure 17 depicts an alignment but reports from teachers indicate there were tensions in the activity system of students not interviewed. Teachers Jane and Mark suggested that some students were participating in the Brag Book programme only because it was a requirement of the school for them to do so. The teachers' perceived Object for these students, therefore, would be to complete their work in order to comply with school rules. That Object would not align with an Object of enhancing opportunities for communicating and connecting between families, students and school. It is, therefore, a further example of tensions in this activity.

In this case study, activity systems analysis has revealed many tensions and many opportunities where improvements to a programme aimed to communicate and connect families, students and school could be made. In-depth analysis zooming in on different Subjects' perspectives of the programme has highlighted that there were different activity systems operating within the wider context of the activity. Often activity systems had an Object that differed from the one originally identified for this investigation. School leaders and teachers focused on school related issues (such as their assessment concerns) and they also focused on reasons for parents' limited involvement with the Brag Book programme. Students and family members had their own purposes for involving or not involving themselves in the activity that did not show close alignment with those of school personnel. If Object is thought of as the motivator or initiator of action as described by Chaiklin (2012), having Objects that are not directing Subjects

towards acts of communication and connection explains why elements of the activity were not aligned with this Object. Elements include Subjects who lacked a common purpose, a Tool that was to be used in a manner not all Subjects had the capacity to comply with, Rules that were creating tensions and roles that did not provide opportunities for joint endeavour. While many tensions have been highlighted in the activity systems of School W, there are few to be discussed within the activity systems of School R.

8.2.2 Case study R

The Findings Chapter described the Object of the activity at School R as being focused on relationship building. The principal stated that the main purpose of their programme was to strengthen relationships with whānau. This focus was supported by teachers (Trish, Anna, Sarah) and parents (Eve, Tania, Claire, Carol) who all commented that relationship building was a prime Object of this activity. There were other Objects spoken about concerning learning and behaviour but participants interviewed suggested that positive relationships helped parents and teachers to work together on learning and behavioural issues through the provision of regular, timely, and reciprocal information. Consequently, no tensions in relation to Object emerged in this case study, rather there were many alignments as displayed in Figures 19 to 21 below.

The main issue arising at School R was associated with the Rules of their programme. This was a tension confined to the activity system of the teachers. Figure 18 displays a tension between the teachers and the programme rules (O).

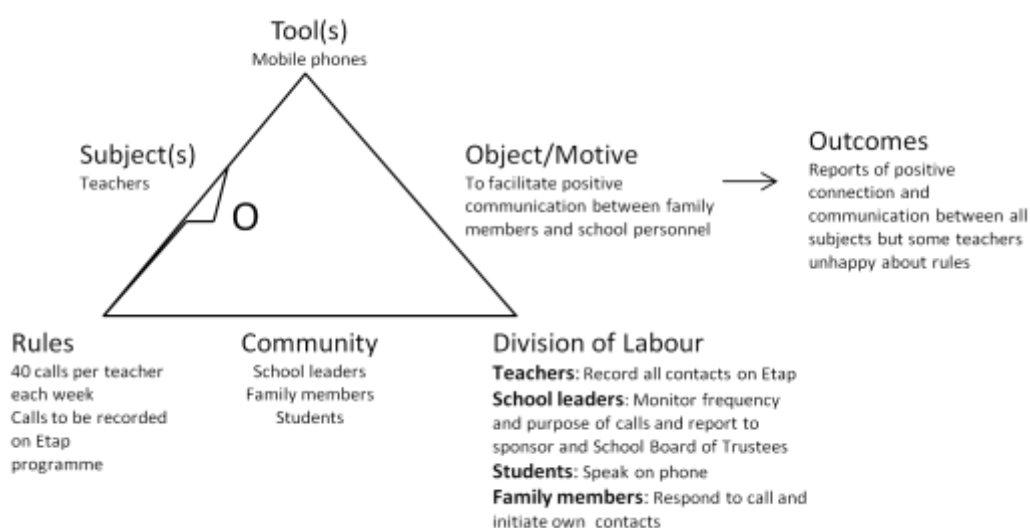


Figure 16: Case study R, Teachers' activity system showing tension O

In case study R, teachers were concerned about the number of calls they had to make each week and the time involved in making and recording those calls. This case study, however, reinforces the notion that tensions can also be a driving force behind change and improvement in an organisation.

All teachers (including those who spoke about their concern with the programme's rules) supported the continued use of the mobile phones. There was agreement between the teachers that the programme had enhanced opportunities for communication and connection between families, students, and school and they wanted the programme to continue. Teachers stated they were looking for ways to address the issues that challenged them rather than adopting a deficit approach that would have placed blame on to other stakeholders, probably school leaders. Hence, as well as interpreting the issue associated with Rules as a tension, this issue is also an alignment because it facilitated thinking about how improvements could be made. Figure 19 depicts this as an alignment along with numerous other alignments identified in this activity.

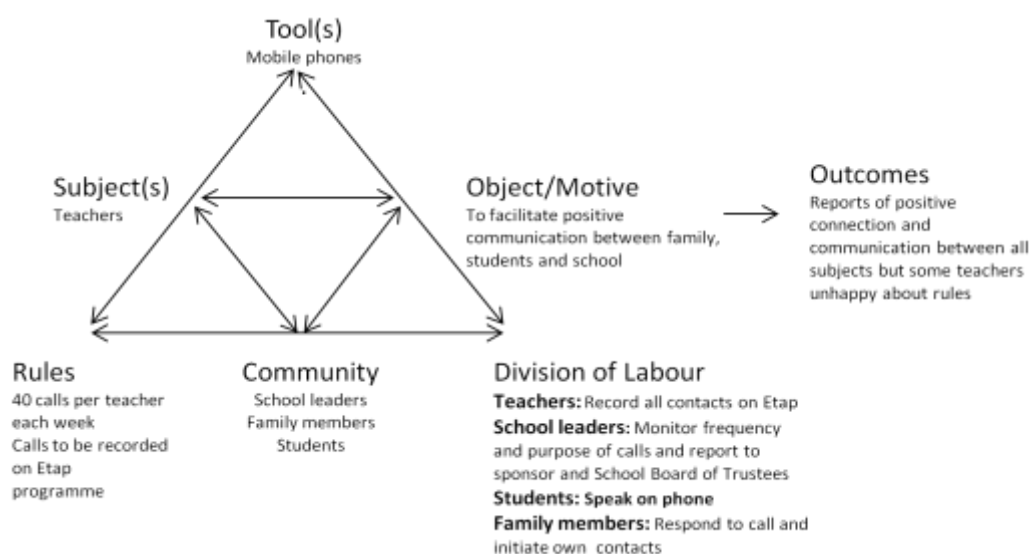


Figure 17: Case study R, Teachers' activity system showing many alignments

Teachers indicated their support for the Object of this activity. They also attributed opportunities for regular, timely, and reciprocal communication to the features afforded to them by the mobile phones. The statements from teachers confirmed they, and other stakeholders, had a clear understanding of their role in

the programme. Teachers and school leaders initiated and recorded calls, students were involved in message transmission and family members responded to the calls and followed up with their children from home.

Family members reported that the mobile phone programme kept them well informed about all aspects of their children's school programme including their children's academic, social, and emotional needs. The perspectives of family members have also been depicted as alignments between activity theory elements as shown in Figure 20.

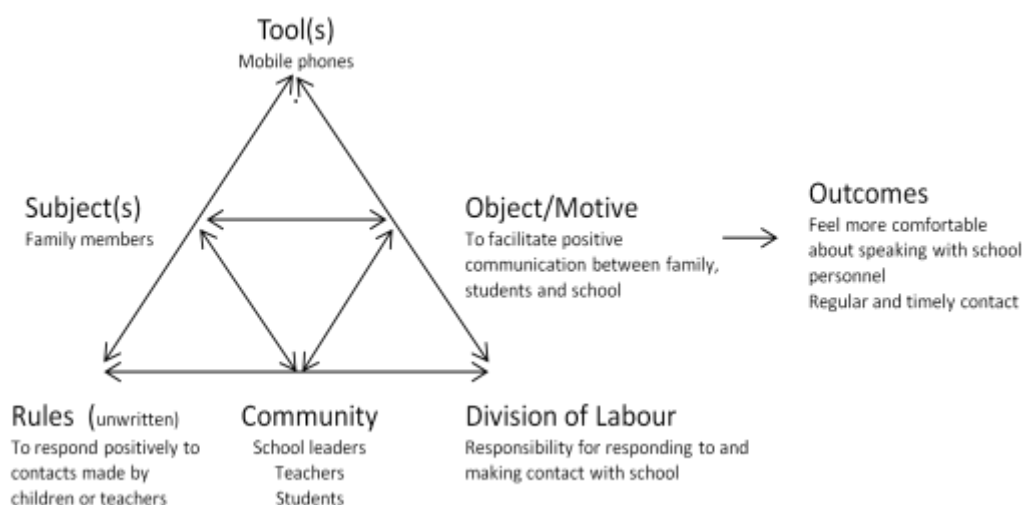


Figure 18: Case study R, Family members' activity system showing alignments between all elements

Family members collaborated in supporting the Object and showed a clear understanding of their role in the programme. They responded to the opportunities provided by mobile phones to both receive and transmit calls to and from school. The encouragement family members gave their children was not a formally specified rule but an outcome of the positive focus of the programme. The enthusiasm of their children prompted parents to respond with encouraging comments both to school personnel and to their children. The physical features of the mobile phone as a Tool also played a large part in the alignments at case study R. Section 8.3 develops this notion further.

Many of the students interviewed reported they believed the phone home programme had helped them to develop positive attitudes to school (Brian, Iosefa, Tane, Hemi, Aroha, and Pania). They clearly understood the role they had in the programme which was to create opportunities to improve their chances of

contacting a family member and sharing their good news. All students interviewed aspired to achieve this aim and school staff and family members affirmed students' eagerness to create opportunities to phone home. These concepts have been interpreted as alignments in the students' activity system in Figure 21.

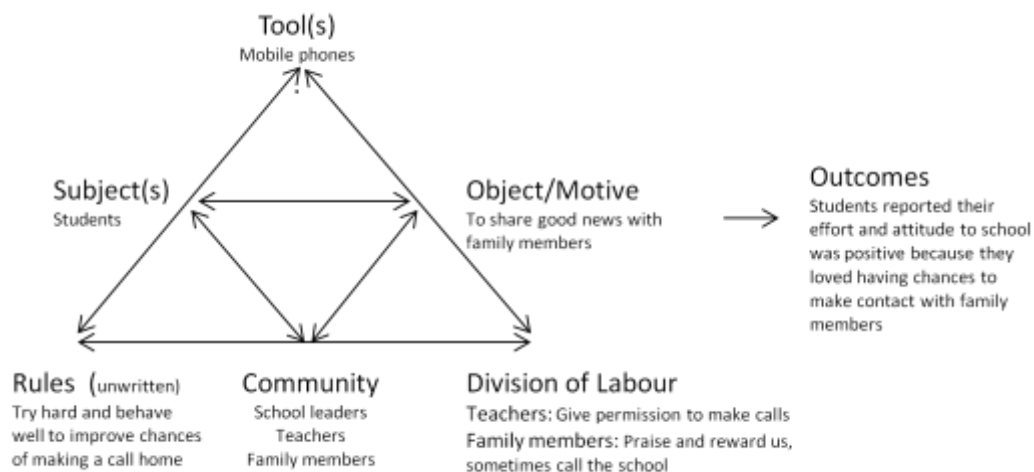


Figure 19: Case study R, Students' activity system showing alignments between all elements

The activity system diagrams of School R illustrate there were many alignments between elements within each Subjects' activity system at this school. It is also important to emphasise that there were alignments between Subjects' activity systems because of the collaborative nature of this case study. Reports from family members, for example, indicated their relationships with school personnel had improved since the introduction of the phone home programme, as had some of the relationships between family members and their children. The inclusion of perspectives from multiple participants contributed to the interpretation that in this case study, many elements were aligning to move the activity towards the Object of enhancing opportunities for communication and connection between families, students and school. Similarly, the findings from the third and final case study (Case study H) depict many alignments both between and within Subjects at this school.

8.2.3 Case study H

There were no tensions but many alignments identified between activity theory elements at School H. These included alignments between all Subjects and the

Object of the activity, a most important alignment due to the significance of the Object to the effective outcomes of an activity. Given that the Object of the activity is the “sense maker” (Kaptelinin, 2005, p. 5), it can support alignments between elements because a shared understanding of Object provides clarity for Subjects around their roles and responsibilities. The Object identified by study participants in this case study was that the school needed to develop a caring culture in order to promote the holistic development of students. The principal believed a caring culture would encourage the involvement of family members with school, while students attributed the caring culture to their feelings of safety and a positive attitude to their work.

From these understandings, a school cultural practice developed that supported Subjects to continuously enact the beliefs they shared. That practice incorporated both psychological and physical components, such as students encouraging and helping each other with their work, and teachers supporting each other during the morning coffee meetings. The statement from the principal that if the social worker position was to be withdrawn, he would return to home visiting reinforced his commitment to maintaining the caring school cultural practice. The most salient physical factor was the codification of the school culture into the motto statement based on the whakatauki ‘we look after each other’. This motto reflected the strong collective understandings of Object in this school. Subjects are combined in the activity system diagram shown in Figure 22.

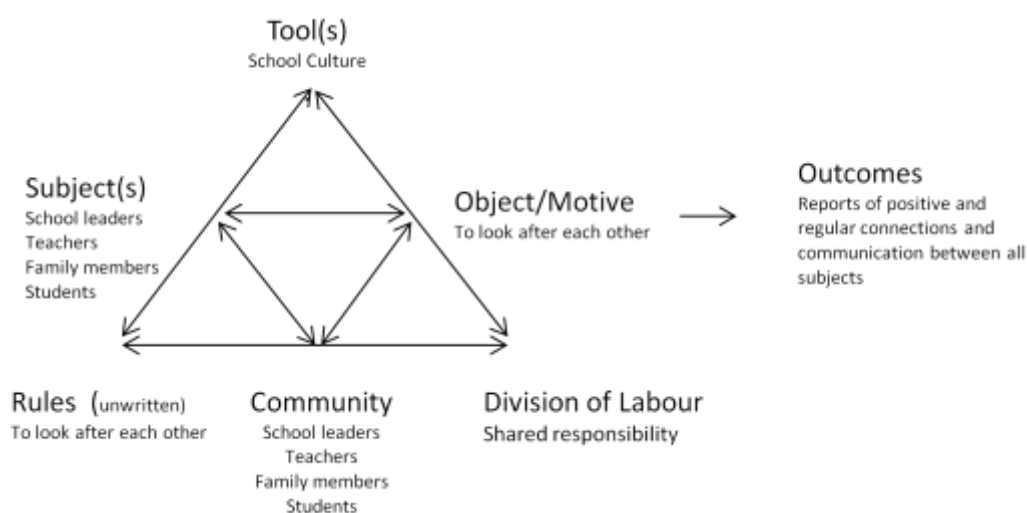


Figure 20: Case study H, showing alignments between all elements

All subjects reported an understanding that the motto statement further reinforced a respectful, caring attitude between stakeholders. This attitude extended to a shared understanding of roles and only one 'rule'. The motto added clarity to the psychological understandings behind the cultural practice. This case study epitomises the value of a carefully chosen Tool (developing a caring culture) with both psychological and physical features as such a Tool can enhance opportunities for family, student, and school communication and connection.

8.3 Tool affordances and limitations

This thesis aimed to investigate tensions and alignments in different family-school activities across three case study schools and discuss how these tensions and alignments impact on the affordances and limitations of the Tool adopted by each school. What has become apparent from the activity theory analysis above is that in two of the family-school activities, it is necessary to discuss reasons for alignments rather than tensions and to consider how the choice of Tool has impacted on, or has been impacted by these alignments. In essence, the alignments came about because in case studies R and H, the Object of the activity had been deliberately identified and clarified from the outset. Subjects were supported towards attainment of that Object through the availability they had to a Tool that afforded regular, timely, and reciprocal communication. Importantly, that Tool was not randomly chosen. It was deliberately selected to afford Subjects opportunities to attain and reinforce the Object. In saying that, the Tool was one element in the activity as a whole, albeit a significant one.

Tools play a vital role in supporting Subjects to work towards achieving the Object of their activity. From a socio-cultural perspective, Tools operate within historical, cultural, and social dimensions. Developing an understanding of these dimensions is integral to understanding how the affordances or limitations of a Tool may be interpreted. Dimensions include the wider educational rhetoric current at the time of the programme, and the influence of cultural and social perspectives on how the Tool is to be implemented. The following section clarifies how each Tool was chosen and then discusses cultural and social factors that may have contributed to the affordances and limitations of each Tool.

8.3.1 The choice of Tool

The Brag Book was a Tool that none of the staff interviewed at School W could recall the origins of, although they had all experienced many changes to the

format and content of the Brag Book programme during their time at the school. Changes to aspects of the book such as whether to include assessment information or how to present work were the focus of the staff interviewed. Various comments confirmed that parents were not involved in decisions.

As the origins of the Brag Book programme were unclear, stakeholders were left to make assumptions as to the purpose of the programme, assumptions based on their individual cultural and social experiences. These experiences differ between stakeholders and create tensions when the purpose does not take account of the issues and barriers that impact on each stakeholder group, such as parents' understanding of English and parents' cultural beliefs. The lack of clarity stemming from the random rather than structured introduction to the Brag Book programme appears to have been a source of many of the tensions in this activity.

In School R, the choice of Tool was made following a staff hui that focused on how to strengthen relationships with the school community. The hui was a very focussed event. Staff wanted to discuss how they could improve opportunities to communicate effectively with the school community. Although the hui included only staff, comments indicated the needs of students and family members were given priority. The principal explained there was a lot of discussion, for example, around how students might benefit if they could make contact with home immediately they were 'caught being good'. Once the idea of using mobile phones as a Tool that could enable regular, timely, and reciprocal communication was suggested, the staff went about discussing whether mobile phones would enable access to all families, and how the school could resource this option. These priorities further reinforce the deliberate planning put into place at the outset of this programme and that school personnel adopted an approach where they tried to find ways to reduce barriers for their community.

In School H, the development of the school cultural practice was an outcome of the principal's strong commitment to his belief in the holistic well being of the students, and his belief that family members should feel comfortable about communicating and connecting with school personnel. His passion for encouraging family involvement cascaded through the school community and evolved into the creation of the motto statement that acted as a codification of a caring school culture. The focus of the caring culture was on relationships as a

first priority. The focus on relationships underpinned the development of cultural practice as the Tool of communication and connection in this case study.

These summaries of how Tools were chosen at each school clarify the historical dimension of each activity and backgrounds the following discussion of the cultural and social factors that contributed to the affordances and limitations of each Tool.

8.3.2 Tools and their use

The affordances and limitations of Tools and their use are impacted by both physical and conceptual factors. The handling and effecter affordances of Tools were described in Chapter Three - handling affordances being more closely related with physical aspects of the Tool and effecter affordances with conceptual factors. To review, handling affordances are the possibilities for acting *with* the Tool and effecter affordances, the possibilities for acting *on* an Object. The analysis of case study W reveals that both the features of pen and paper technology and the understandings Subjects had of the Object of their activity limited the affordances of their Tool.

The suggestion that understandings related to Object impacted on the affordances of the Tool at School W requires clarification because it was an issue that took prominence in the activity systems analysis above and it is one that has implications for practice.

The Object of an activity was described in Chapter Two as the ultimate motive of an activity but something Subjects are not always immediately conscious of (Kaptelinin & Nardi, 2012). However, the argument being put forward is that a lack of understanding of Object impacted on the activity at School W. Therefore, it is pertinent to ask how awareness of Object develops and therefore how it comes to be that the effectiveness of the programme at School W could be impacted by an Object that is not always conscious in the thoughts of Subjects. Nardi's (1998) argument that "consciousness is social" (p. 37) as it is a combination of factors occurring both "beyond and within the individual" (p. 37) goes some way towards addressing this question. She claims that through sharing experiences together, Subjects develop their own thoughts as well as understandings of the thoughts of others. When a programme has been established with a specific motive in mind, many elements combine that direct efforts towards that motive. Tools are one element and the combined (not always

immediately conscious) effort of Subjects another. The development of the school motto at School H provides a clear example. The motto developed through constant attention by many people to the development of a cultural practice that prioritised a caring approach. The motto evolved as the school community consistently put into action the messages they understood from the cultural practice. This example reinforces the value of selecting a Tool with both physical and psychological properties because the Subjects at School H regularly thought about ways they could enact a cultural practice. Although it was something they could not completely explain in words, it was back grounding their thoughts and it had value and meaning to them. The motto also gave them a physical artefact that could reinforce their understandings of the messages of the cultural practice.

Similarly in School R, the consistent use of mobile phones led to the programme being described by the principal as the kaupapa or the guiding principle of the school. Regular short term actions that involved a physical artefact (the mobile phone) and the development of a set of guiding principles supported stakeholders towards achieving longer term motives. As Roth and Lee (2007) explain, people are driven towards action when they have a goal in mind. They explain that “goals and the actions that realize them have an emergent quality as the subjects of activity consciously choose them under the auspices of the overall object or motive to be achieved” (p. 202).

Although an activity that enhanced opportunities for communication and connection was identified as the intention of this research, the analysis has revealed that teachers and school leaders at School W were focused on shorter term goals rather than the longer term motive they had identified at the outset of this research. Their random introduction to the programme would have contributed to this focus.

Another factor that may have contributed to the shorter term goals focus of the school personnel, particularly school leaders at School W was the wider landscape of educational rhetoric current at the time of this investigation. This research was conducted in 2009 and statements from school leaders and teachers at School W suggest that being able to provide assessment information to parents (as was to become a requirement of New Zealand primary schools from 2010) was uppermost in their thinking. Mursu, Luukkonen, Toivanen and Korpela (2007) note that when interpreting data, it is important to consider factors

such as “national strategies, policies and legislation” (p. 10). Stake (2006) agrees that when undertaking case study research “the situation is expected to shape the activity” (p. 2). The findings from case study W indicate that consistent assessment rhetoric had possibly shifted the focus of school leaders from one of communication *with* parents to one of communication *to* parents, and the limitations of that approach have been highlighted.

The approach of school personnel to prioritise relationships from the outset at Schools R and H was another important factor in the consistency of understandings of Object at these two schools. The focus on the importance of relationships adopted by school personnel encouraged them to share their willingness to communicate and connect with all stakeholders.

The effectiveness of both programmes in achieving this aim requires attention because the Literature Review identified the establishment of healthy relationships as an issue that challenges many low decile schools (Adams & Christenson, 2000; Brooking & Roberts, 2007; Dotson-Blake, 2010; Timperley & Robinson, 2002). Other issues identified in the Literature Review as ones that impact on low decile schools were also ones Schools R and H had made a deliberate effort to address in their programmes. These include that stakeholders can have different and often conflicting purposes for involvement and that many barriers limit their capacities to contribute (Harris & Goodall, 2008; Jehl et al., 2001; Lawson, 2003). It was also discussed that family members do not always receive meaningful information (Auerbach, 2007; Barton et al., 2004; Horvat et al., 2003; Taylor-Patel, 2009). A review of why these issues did not emerge as tensions in the activity systems diagrams of School R and School H foregrounds the implications for educational practice reviewed in the following chapter.

8.3.2.1 The development of healthy relationships

Chapter Four described four characteristics of healthy relationships: trust, sensitivity, equality and respect. The chapter also established that it was difficult to develop these qualities in low decile schools where opportunities for communication and connection are limited due to the minimal involvement many family members have with school. However, a strength of the programmes at School R and School H was that they focused on relationships from the outset, and adopted Tools with features that allowed for regular, timely, and reciprocal communication.

According to reports from stakeholders at School R, regular, timely, and reciprocal communication helped improve the understandings family members had of their children's education, and teachers' had of their students' home experiences. There were numerous examples of parents claiming they benefited from opportunities to share information between home and school such as the statement from Shirley who believed the phone home programme provided her with more "in-depth knowledge" about what her children were doing at school which led to informed discussions at home. Tania, another family member, commented she had developed quite "a good rapport" with her child's teacher which made her feel comfortable about communicating with her on a more regular basis. Arihi thought the phone home programme was beneficial to her and to her children "because we keep in contact with the teachers". Natasha, one of the teachers left little further doubt that the mobile phones were an effective means of building healthy relationships when she stated she had no relationship with the "four parents without cell phones" in her class.

The conceptual nature of the Tool in use at School H meant there were no physical barriers to its use and therefore it could also be used regularly and in a timely manner. There were also examples of the school's cultural practice permeating into students' home and the wider community such as in the quote from Kerry who said she believed the school's cultural practice had encouraged students to learn in a collaborative manner from others around them. The comments from school personnel indicated the efforts to support parents to feel welcome at the school had improved their understandings about the backgrounds and needs of their students; and conversely, family members had opportunities to share information with teachers. Many family members interviewed said they felt comfortable about approaching the school (Fiona, Julie, Frances, Kim, and Jocelyn). The school motto reinforced the notion that being responsive to the circumstances of family members, students, and staff members was a priority at the school.

The Tool in use at School W provided limited opportunities for the development of healthy relationships between families, students and school. It was mainly a one-way form of communication (school to home) and the limited involvement of family members meant there were few opportunities for the development of trust, sensitivity, equality and respect. The information was not always timely as the books went home just three times a year and only a limited number of parents

took advantage of opportunities to communicate with school from home (by signing and returning the Brag Books).

8.3.2.2 Different purposes for involvement

In the Literature Review, the notion that family members are interested to learn about the social, emotional, and academic development of their children was discussed (Grolnick & Slowiaczek, 1994; Taylor-Patel, 2009). The literature suggested a need for a programme that provided opportunities for multidimensional involvement (overt and psychological) that could benefit all stakeholders (Farkas & Grolnick, 2010; Hoover-Dempsey & Sandler, 1997; Jaynes, 2005).

According to the School Procedures Statement at School R, the focus of their programme was “to facilitate positive dialogue around student achievement”. This did not mean that only academic information was being communicated as the social and emotional well being of students (as well as their academic progress) was also a priority of the teachers. This is in keeping with the notion that academic progress is a multidimensional concept, impacted by many factors such as attitude and approach (Christenson et al., 2013). Parents reported, for example, behavioural related contacts (Kristina, Sarah, Eve, Tane, Aroha) and there were reports of parents informing teachers about their children’s experiences at home (Natasha). Students themselves played an important role in the exchange of information. They reported the praise and reinforcement they received from home encouraged their academic (Tane, Hemi, Aroha, Brian, Pania), social (Principal) and emotional (Eve, Carey, Iosefa) efforts, in other words contributed to their engagement with school.

School H also tried to develop a programme that could accommodate the different purposes of stakeholders. Their programme deliberately aimed to focus on the holistic development of students where factors such as their social and emotional well being were considered as important as their academic well being. The principal reinforced this emphasis when he stated that the aim of the school was to develop true relationships where people take care of each other and feel listened to. In order to put this caring approach into practice, the principal and school staff focused on encouraging family involvement in many aspects of the students’ education. Actions that were encouraged included family attendance at school events such as at student-teacher conferences and informal discussions before and after school. The school cultural practice and school motto also

encouraged psychological involvement such as reported in examples of emotional support for other members of the school community. Te Pura, a student, offered an example of this when she explained that everybody was nice to each other. Catherine, another student, said she looked after new students, and Charlie explained he looked after the teachers as well as others in the school community.

At School W, it was suggested that the use of the Tool fitted the purposes of school staff more than family members or students. The comments from staff indicated relatively less emphasis on finding out about the interests, experiences and strengths of family members. Rather, the focus was on finding reasons for their non-participation where attention was focused on the deficiencies of family members and their home contexts as limiting opportunities for school and family communication.

8.3.2.3 *Barriers to involvement*

The reasons given by teachers for the limited involvement parents had with the Brag Book programme included: parents were second language speakers, they had previous negative experiences with education and some did not seem to have an interest in their children's Brag Book programme. These are issues related to culture, parental role construction, parental beliefs of self-efficacy for supporting their children, and limited knowledge and skill. These are all issues discussed in the Literature Review as ones that can create barriers to family involvement with school (Auerbach, 2007; Barton et al., 2004; Chrispeels & Rivero, 2001; Green et al., 2007; Grolnick et al., 1997; Gutman & McLoyd, 2000). However, rather than viewing these issues as challenges to be addressed, it seemed a deficit approach that focused on problems within families had been adopted by the staff at School W. This focus left limited opportunities for the activity to grow and change for the benefit of all stakeholders.

In School R, barriers were attributed to teachers' perceptions of the resources they could bring to the programme rather than issues related to the families. This meant school personnel were able to look for solutions within their own resources rather than treating issues as being beyond their control. An example of looking for better ways to accommodate the issues they were facing came in the comment from one of the school leaders, Lesley, who discussed the adoption of a new programme to reduce the workload for teachers, and a teacher, Ella,

who explained she had altered her classroom timetable to allow time for phone calls home.

As has been highlighted on many occasions throughout this thesis, the focus of School H was to welcome the community. The principal made this stance clear in his meaningful comment “it's actually giving them the avenues to get to you rather than the other way around”. The attitude of the staff was also that it was up to the school to make an effort rather than expecting parents to overcome the barriers that could restrict their involvement. This deliberate approach to look within the school for solutions to problems rather than blaming parents was a feature of this case study and also of case study R.

8.3.2.4 Meaningful communication

Each of the Tools investigated provided families with a degree of information about their children's learning but these tools were not the only source of student learning information made available to parents or students. All schools also reported student progress to family members in the form of written reports and parent-teacher conferences. The benefit of the tools in use at Schools R and H were that they facilitated opportunities for communication and connection that opened the way for discussions that could clarify and/or extend the information family members received from other sources. The Literature Review established a need for written reports and parent-teacher conferences to be supported where possible with additional information that allowed parents opportunities to contribute their own resources or ask questions about their children's written reports (Cheatham & Ostrosky, 2011; Fu et al., 2002; Juniewicz, 2003; Power & Clark, 2000; Selwyn et al., 2011; Shayne, 2008; Taylor-Patel, 2009). The activities at Schools R and H were deliberately established to facilitate opportunities for such communication and connection. These programmes supported the dissemination of the kind of information that could add meaning to the information received in mandated requirements such as written reports and parent-teacher conferences.

8.4 Chapter summary

This chapter began by identifying tensions and alignments at each of the case study schools and illustrating through the use of activity systems diagrams that tensions and alignments are an outcome of interrelationships between all elements of a system. Many of the tensions identified linked Subjects with

various elements to a lack of clarity around Object; while conversely, alignments were related to clearer understandings of Object.

Specific focus was given to the Tool in use at each activity and how the features of each Tool contributed to tensions and alignments. While a Tool with features that can facilitate regular, timely, and reciprocal communication allows opportunities for stakeholders to build relationships, it was also highlighted that the approach of stakeholders to the development of the activity both determines and is determined by the choice of Tool. The handling affordances of a Tool offer possibilities for stakeholders to communicate and connect while the effecter affordances are determined by the approach of the Subjects involved. Much of that approach is determined by the understandings Subjects have of the Object of their activity. Understandings underpin actions that may lead towards attainment of the Object. The following chapter reinforces the importance of developing and maintaining a shared Object and summarises other implications for practice and theory.

CHAPTER 9: CONCLUSION

9.1 Introduction

This final chapter concludes the thesis by attending to the research questions and then discussing implications for educational practice and theory. Implications are written with the intention of providing guidelines rather than a set of 'hard and fast' rules. As explained in Section 2.3, the emphasis of this study has been on particularisation rather than generalisation. This stance recognises that contexts differ between schools; although it is also pertinent to also acknowledge that schools have many factors in common. From this standpoint, implications for practice have the potential to benefit a range of schools while accepting that each school will draw from the implications a set of principles they believe best suit their unique context. As an example, the value of a simple school motto statement (whakatauki) that incorporates variables related to the academic, social, and emotional well being of stakeholders is discussed as an implication for educational practice. It is to be expected that schools will differ in their interpretation of how a motto statement that adds value to their school context could be worded and embedded into practice.

The section that discusses implications for practice (Section 9.3) is followed by a section that discusses implications for theory. Section 9.4 focuses on the challenges faced when using activity theory as a theoretical research framework. These include the difficulties associated with coding data into activity theory elements and the difficulty associated with deciding on the Object of the activity. This section also focuses on conceptualisations of the notion of a psychological tool. It is argued that conceptualisations could be extended to incorporate organisational culture as an example of a psychological tool. Limitations of the research are reviewed in Section 9.5 and areas that would benefit from further research are highlighted in Section 9.6. The thesis concludes with a statement emphasising that a school culture or kaupapa where communication and connection between families, students, and school is viewed as 'just the way we do things around here' should be a goal all schools aim towards. However, before attending any of the topics listed above, the research questions are addressed.

9.2 Addressing the research questions

The research questions required attention to tensions and alignments in family-school programmes as well as the affordances and limitations of the tools used to communicate and connect in three family-school programmes.

There were many tensions identified by stakeholders where the purpose of the activity had not been clearly established, and where stakeholders were not aligned in their efforts to work towards a shared purpose. This was particularly evident in case study W where there were multiple conceptions of the purpose of their activity. In contrast, case studies R and H had paid deliberate attention to establishing a purpose for their programmes in the first instance and then selecting or embedding other elements of context to fit with that purpose. Many alignments and few tensions were noted in the activity systems of both case studies R and H. Elements of context were supporting stakeholders to achieve their purpose rather than creating tensions.

The choice of tool played a major role in affording stakeholders opportunities for communication and connection. The handling and effector affordances of the tools in use at each case study have been discussed. The handling affordances of the portfolio in use at School W were limited due to the time and effort taken to communicate with pen and paper technology. The effector affordances of the portfolios in use at School W were also noted as being minimal as there was very little evidence of the portfolios affording stakeholders opportunities to move towards achieving the goal of improving communication and connection between families, students, and school.

The handling affordances of the tool in use at School R included its availability, regularity, timeliness and reciprocal opportunities. Its effector affordances were encapsulated in the approach and attitudes adopted by users of the tool. All stakeholders commented on the positive impact the tool had on opportunities for communication and connection at their school.

Similarly at School H, handling affordances included the ease of use of their tool. Effector affordances again related to the positive impact on stakeholders when they believed opportunities to communicate and connect were enhanced through the continual and frequent use of their tool.

While mobile phones and cultural practice offer stakeholders many possibilities for action, their affordances are greatly influenced by the attitudes and approach

school personnel take to their use of the tool. This holds important implications for educational practice.

9.3 Implications for educational practice

This section related to implications for practice is divided into two parts. Section 9.3.1 summarises the programme characteristics this research suggests can enhance opportunities for communication and connection between families, students, and school. Section 9.3.2 focuses on features of tools that afford stakeholders opportunities for regular, reciprocal, and timely communication.

9.3.1 Development of a school cultural practice

A key feature of this research is the finding that family-school programmes benefit when they become part of the school cultural practice. This occurs when taken-for-granted actions and thoughts become viewed as 'just the way we do things around here'. Under this scenario, family-school activities become fundamental to the daily activities of family members, students, and school personnel rather than add-ons or supplementary practices. The benefits to students when family-school activities become part of their daily school lives is that they receive greater support because they have more people taking an interest in their social, emotional, and academic well being. Examples from this research of benefits for students include reports of students trying harder with their work to improve their chances of making contact with home, and more regular student conversations with family members about their school work. However, the development of a programme that is considered 'just the way we do things around here' is not something that can develop without features such as deliberate planning, student involvement, principal leadership and school staff commitment.

9.3.1.1 Deliberate planning

The activity theory analysis employed in this thesis emphasised that specific issues require attention at the planning stage if communication and connection between family, students, and school is to become part of the school cultural practice. Being clear about the purpose of the activity was a significant theme to emerge as were themes related to the activity theory elements of Rules and Division of Labour.

Analysis of the case studies in this research revealed that Rules can be a major source of tension in family-school activities. For example, if the purpose of an activity is to provide samples of work that will promote school related discussions between students and family members, the requirement to place a grading mark on those samples can limit the motivation of teachers to facilitate the programme, and the motivation of students to take the samples home (particularly when their samples show they are achieving at below expected standards). Similarly, issues associated with Division of Labour can limit the involvement of family members with school when unequal distributions of power leave them feeling inadequate and disinterested, especially when their purposes for involvement in a family-school activity are not recognised.

Tensions in Rules and Division of Labour can be an outcome of limited understanding or support for the Object or purpose of the activity. The purpose of the activity requires attention if stakeholders are to feel motivated to undertake actions that are moving the activity in the direction of achieving its purpose (Kaptelinin, 2005). In this research, the Object was to enhance opportunities for communication and connection between families, students, and school. The activity where Subjects differed in their understandings of Object also surfaced tensions in Rules and Divisions of Labour; the Outcome of which was an activity with limited family and student involvement as well as disappointed staff members.

It is essential that the discussion of a clear purpose takes place at the planning stage and that explicit attention is given to sharing that purpose between all stakeholders. Once the purpose is established, other elements can be considered, such as how the Rules of the programme may affect stakeholders, and how Divisions of Labour can promote what was described in Chapter Four as joint endeavour (Todd & Higgins, 1998). Different stakeholder groups have different capacities to contribute and are limited by barriers that must be acknowledged and addressed. This is a particularly challenging task when barriers are both psychological and contextual. Psychological barriers include perceptions of role and beliefs of self efficacy, while contextual barriers include time and resources. Without deliberate attention to barriers at the planning stage, schools risk making deficit focused assumptions about family members without considering ways to develop programmes that can draw from their strengths. In addition, family members tend to focus on multiple purposes for their involvement such as supporting their children's social and emotional well being

and not just their academic achievement. These purposes are not always appreciated by teachers. It is important that schools find ways to incorporate these multidimensional aspects of family interest into programme design and development in order to account for the complex variables that can support student learning.

Students can provide an effective communication link between home and school that can help schools address barriers and incorporate multidimensional factors into their programmes. Students have the capacity to deliver and receive messages in both contexts and to mediate information in a manner that is meaningful to their family members (such as through use of their home language). Their involvement is a most valuable aspect of a family-school activity.

9.3.1.2 *Student involvement*

Not only can students' actions provide a link between home and school, but this research has shown that their involvement can also be a strong personal motivator for students themselves. Opportunities to share learning and behavioural information with family members, such as in a phone call, can help students to build their confidence, to try harder, and to feel more enthusiastic about attending school. When this communication is regular, reciprocal, and timely it can open further possibilities for conversations at home founded on improved knowledge of school programmes. These conversations can enhance understandings family members have of their children's education and encourage them to keep in touch with school in order to receive learning updates and to clarify issues that are of concern or interest.

As well as mobile phones offering opportunities for student involvement, a motto statement that is understood by students can be developed as a medium for embedding school cultural practices. When the motto statement motivates the school to respect the contributions of family members, their willingness to become engaged in, and involved at school can increase. Students' understandings of their school motto can guide their actions at home and school, and further strengthen their families' understandings and engagement with the values and beliefs of their school as embodied within their school's cultural practice. It is important, therefore, that the motto statement can be understood and enacted by *all* students and that it draws on the principles underpinning the cultural practices of the school, the most important of these being the promotion

of the all-round well being of stakeholders. However, it is important that not only students but also the school principal and staff understand and are willing to consistently acknowledge and enact the school cultural practice.

9.3.1.3 *Commitment of principal and school staff*

The vision and commitment of the principal together with that of the school staff is critical to the effectiveness of a school cultural practice. When the principal leads and reinforces the notion that the involvement of family members is a normalised way of being at the school, others support the notion and are drawn towards acting in a similar manner. The development of a staff that supports and enacts the vision and beliefs of the school can be a challenging task for school leaders to undertake but it is important that the culture is embedded at an entire school level. Teachers' busy programmes can limit their capacity to focus on issues they may view as being less immediate or less directly related to student achievement, such as the effort required to promote a family-school programme. However, this research has consistently reported on the benefits for family, students, and school when stakeholders communicate regularly and in a timely manner. In the long term, the efforts of teachers can reap rewards for all stakeholders and it is important that teachers understand and appreciate that their efforts are worthwhile.

9.3.2 The choice of a tool

The choice of an appropriate tool is a most important element in a family-school programme. One of the challenges in terms of the selection of a tool, however, is not the physical features of the tool but the attitudes and approach taken by tool users. The effecter affordances of a tool, that is, how the tool helps users to make an effect *on* the Object depend to a large degree on users' attitude to the purpose of their activity and their willingness to take responsibility for ensuring the activity is moving towards attainment of its Object. Handling affordances, that is, the possibilities for interacting *with* the physical tool are enhanced in the context of family-school programmes by tools with certain features. This research has offered examples of two tools - the mobile phone and the school cultural practice that include features that afford users opportunities to communicate regularly, reciprocally, and in a timely manner. These features can support the development of trust, sensitivity, equality and respect; in other words, the development of healthy relationships. Regular, reciprocal, and timely

communication can provide family members with meaningful information about their children and conversely, can allow family members opportunities to share information with their children's teachers.

While mobile phones and school cultural practice offer features that afford stakeholders handling affordances, they also have limitations. The limitations of mobile phones are mainly associated with their monetary cost. However, although schools may consider mobile phones a costly option, schools have choices available to them regarding priorities for funding. Seeking solutions from their wider community, such as through sponsorship is an option. The report given to School R (Appendix B), for example, illustrating the positive impacts of the mobile phone programme at their school helped them to secure funding from their sponsor for an extended three year period.

There appear to be few limitations related to the development of a school cultural practice deliberately designed to promote caring, reciprocal relationships within a school community. It is a tool that requires minimal monetary outlay although there may be some costs incurred. The school involved in this research built decks to promote a village-like atmosphere as the principal believed the physical environment was an important component of the caring approach being promoted by the school. It may also be of concern that the conceptual nature of a cultural practice might lead to different interpretations of the purpose of the programme. This proved not to be a limitation of the cultural practice described in this research where the school motto so clearly focused stakeholders' attention on developing shared understandings of the meanings behind their tool.

The effectiveness of the motto statement, as expressed in terms of a whakatauki, was its alignment with the cultural practice which focused on the all-round well being of students and the development of healthy relationships. It is an option for a symbolic tool that other schools may consider. A review of school motto statements online reveals few that align with principles of healthy relationships, but rather often have an academic focus. Examples such as 'Moving forward together', 'Giving children a head start', 'Learn to journey', and Latin phrases such as *Semper digne* (always dignity) and *Sapientia crescimus* (in knowledge we grow) are not uncommon in the literature. It is clear the meaning behind many of these statements will not be obvious to students, family members or school staff. Furthermore, they are statements that are challenging to align with specific actions that could reinforce their meaning. The motto statement

developed by School H 'we look after each other' provided an example of a motto that is meaningful to all stakeholders and one that could easily be actioned through words and behaviours. Furthermore, and most importantly, it was meaningful to the purposes family members, students, and school personnel all viewed as priorities at their school and therefore created an effective alignment between home and school. It emphasised values that focus on multidimensional aspects of student development including their social, emotional and academic well being.

There is, however, an arguable concern that school cultural practice may provide few opportunities for communication that informs students and family members of students' academic progress. A strong counter argument to that is that family members feel more comfortable about attending skill building evenings or asking questions about their children's progress when healthy relationships are being promoted by the school.

Both mobile phones and school cultural practice offer stakeholders effecter and handling affordances that warrant their consideration as tools that can enhance opportunities for communication and connection. However, it must be emphasised that effecter affordances are improved when a culture that respects the value of communication and connection between families, students, and school is embedded throughout the everyday activities of the school or becomes the kaupapa of the school.

9.4 Implications for theory

The concept of a psychological tool has been a feature of this thesis. It was described in Chapter 3 as a tool with symbolic properties (Kozulin, 1998). Examples of psychological tools discussed in the Literature Review included signs, symbols, texts and formulae (Kozulin, 1998). What this thesis has revealed is that there is a valid argument for suggesting organisational culture should be added to that list. The example of organisational culture discussed in this thesis was of a tool with mainly psychological properties but one that also had symbolic features. Primarily, organisational culture is an unseen characteristic in an organisation but features can help embed it. In the case study reviewed in this thesis, the most notable of those features was the motto statement. The outcomes from the interviews indicated the culture of School H had become a most effective psychological tool for their community. The notion of describing organisational culture as a psychological tool is, however, not well developed in

the literature and this thesis suggests this is a topic that could benefit from further attention.

Other implications for theory relate to the use of activity theory as a tool for the analysis of data. One of the challenges faced by researchers adopting an activity theory-based study is that it can be difficult to decide on the way to use activity theory during their analysis as there are many different approaches proposed (Kaptelinin et al., 1999; Mwanza, 2002b; Yamagata-Lynch, 2010). Yamagata-Lynch (2010), for example, suggests beginning with open coding of data, then finding themes but not fitting these themes into activity theory elements until the stage of drafting the activity system diagrams. In this thesis, data were coded into activity theory elements *before* considering the themes rather than after. There are advantages and disadvantages to each approach that researchers need to take into consideration when deciding on a data analysis method.

The advantage of coding into activity elements *before* thematic coding (as used in this research) is that thematic coding is undertaken from a limited range of data rather than the entire data corpus. Data items have already been divided into element categories before thematic coding begins. A possible disadvantage with this approach is that it limits the choice of themes. However, open coding where the choice of themes is not limited by prior coding, as suggested by Yamagata-Lynch (2010) is not without its critics. Cohen, Manion and Morrison (2005) propose that open coding can create categories without necessarily having explanatory principles to support those categories. Silverman (1997) argues that some categories “may be of better quality than others” (p. 20). In this research, although the introduction of activity theory elements at the initial point of coding limited the number of possible themes, a range of themes emerged inductively through the coding process. Deciding on themes was a more manageable task because the data had already been brought together into meaningful units for analysis (activity theory elements).

The plan to separate data into activity theory elements at the initial coding stage was adopted following review of some of the data coding approaches recommended by researchers who have some familiarity with activity theory such as Mwanza (2002a) and Kaptelinin, Nardi and Macauley (1999). Their suggested structure to develop interview questions related to activity theory elements provided a guideline for this thesis. Although the activity theory structure supported the development of interview questions, care was taken to ensure

interviewees were also given opportunities to contribute insights specifically related to the family-school activity they were involved with. This processes resulted in the creation of many themes.

The challenge of coding data and establishing themes impacts upon other researchers using an activity theory framework (Mwanza, 2002b; Yamagata-Lynch, 2010). To attend to this challenge and maintain consistency in the data coding process, data tables were developed. They are included in the Appendices. Appendix J defines themes while Appendix K provides examples of theme coding. Appendices L, M and N clarify the coding of data items that created particular challenges. The development of data tables helped to make coding consistent and easier to follow.

Another concern often raised by researchers using activity theory is that it can be difficult to provide clarity around the Object (González et al., 2009; Hyysalo, 2005; Kaptelinin, 2005; Miettinen & Virkkunen, 2005; Nardi, 2005). The Object of the activity systems analysis in this research, for example, could have been to improve relationships or improve the involvement of family members with school. What evolved was that these two concepts interrelated; that is, where relationships improved, involvement increased. This suggests that clarification of the Object can evolve through the analysis process as the data contribute to the understandings researchers bring to their study.

Another potential Object of this activity systems analysis could have been to improve the engagement of students with school. Ultimately, the aim of family-school activities should be to improve outcomes for students but *directly evaluating* student outcomes from acts of communication and connection was not the primary focus of this research. Rather, student engagement with school was identified as a potential outcome from activities that provided opportunities for communication and connection between families, students, and school.

9.5 Limitations of this research

A number of limitations to this research can be identified relating to the context of the investigation and the research design. First, the research has been undertaken in just three schools. The thesis did not try to generalise across other schools noting the contextual uniqueness of each school site. This approach is one generally consistent with case study research (Cohen et al., 2005; Flyvbjerg, 2011; Gillham, 2000; Stake, 2006). However, as outlined in Section 9.1, this

thesis concluded with implications that may be useful for other schools when making decisions about how to plan for family-school programmes including recommendations for activity design and the choice of tools of mediation.

Second, each school took responsibility for sending the information about the interviews to their families. Because of this, it is not possible to clarify how many parents responded and whether the participant family members represented a cross-section of families from different circumstances. In all schools, however, all the family members and students who did complete and return consent letters were interviewed. No further criteria were used to select the sample group of family members and students interviewed. It appears this limitation impacted particularly on the findings from case study W. In this case study, the comments made by teachers with regard to lack of family interest in the Brag Books did not align with those of some of the family members interviewed. The family members interviewed said they discussed the Brag Books with their children when they brought them home whereas the teachers said many of their families showed little interest in their children's Brag Books. It seems that in case study W, the parents interviewed were more involved in school related activities than some of the other parents at the school.

Third, my use of peer reviewers who were not familiar with activity theory meant the peer review process involved a lot of discussion in order to explain activity theory coding. While this had the advantage of valuable researcher reflectivity, it may have limited the objectivity of the peer review process. Peer review led to review of themes and reduction in the number of themes.

Finally, the time available to me at each case study site was limited. This prevented opportunities to share analysis with participants, a process that could have moved this research from its interpretive foundation to being more interactive and formative where, for example, participants contributed their views of Object thereby enabling a perspective of Object that had been collaboratively agreed upon. This is a strong recommendation for further research in this field.

9.6 Recommendations for further research

The point highlighted above about participants being more involved in the research design is the main recommendation for further research. Using activity systems analysis together with participants has the potential to be a powerful tool for transformative research. This is because participants can share their

perspectives of how data could be interpreted with the researcher, where and why tensions exist, and possibly use these discussions to guide actions that bring about improvements to their activity. The visual representation of the activity theory framework provides a meaningful unit of analysis for discussion during transformative or change oriented research. The difficulty is finding an adequate amount of time to work with school personnel when they operate from within such busy schedules.

Another recommendation for further research is that cultural perceptions of the purpose for family-school activities differ and could benefit from further attention. The Literature Review highlighted some differences in perceptions between different cultural groups but this is a complex area that further research could address in greater detail. In saying this, The New Zealand Education Review Office Report *Parents Voices* (2008b) claimed there were “common themes about what different groups of parents thought about effective engagement between schools and their communities” (p. 11). Although this may be the case, the Report also supported the suggestion that investigating differences between cultural groups would be a valuable topic for further research.

9.7 Concluding statement

Some of the issues raised in this thesis are consistent with those raised by other researchers working in this field such as that stakeholders’ involvement with family-school programmes can be limited by many issues including time, attitude and approach. However, unlike many other studies, this thesis has provided a systematic activity theory-based analysis of the tensions and alignments that presented in the family-school programmes of three low socio-economic primary schools. It used this analysis to underpin a discussion of the implications of these tensions and alignments for practice. In this regard, this thesis has taken a solutions-based approach. Activity theory has supported this approach through the provision of a framework that draws attention to the source of problems rather than a descriptive account of issues. The framework of activity theory also facilitated the clear and concise communication of findings.

The findings indicated that if opportunities for communication and connection between families, students, and school are to be enhanced, activities must become an integral part of a school’s cultural practice. To achieve this, schools must carefully plan their initiatives and most importantly, clarify the purpose of the activity through discussions with stakeholders. The purpose of the activity is a

most important precursor to the selection of a tool to mediate the activity. Tools that provide opportunities for regular, reciprocal and timely communication add value to family-school programmes, particularly when they also enable student involvement, and they are supported by the commitment of the principal and school staff.

The development of a school cultural practice can be enhanced through the adoption of a simple, holistically focused motto statement (or whakatauki) that is meaningful to all stakeholders. The example of 'we look after each other' is one that provides opportunities in multiple contexts for all stakeholders to participate in frequent, respectful and reciprocal acts of communication and connection. The use of mobile technology also has great potential for building healthy and meaningful relationships between home and school. It provides opportunities for regular, timely and reciprocal communication between stakeholders that can support them to focus on the multidimensional elements of student well being such as their academic, social and emotional development. These are attributes of student development that can promote opportunities for them to reach their potential and make positive contributions as members of our society.

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APPENDICES

APPENDIX A: Research report presented to School W

August-September 2009

Brag Book Programme

Background

This study aimed to examine the Brag Book programme currently in use at (this) school. The following report details the outcomes of this research.

In order to undertake this investigation, the researcher interviewed participants involved in the Brag Book Programme and analysed responses with a focus on investigating how perspectives of the programme differed between participants and also the issues that arose during the undertaking of this programme.

The small number of consents received from family members means this report must be understood to incorporate only the perspectives of the personnel interviewed and does not represent the school community in its entirety. The participants involved in the study included: 3 leadership personnel, 5 classroom teachers, 2 support staff, 7 students and 7 family members (including BOT representation).

It was a point of significance noted by many of the participants interviewed that the Brag Books are just one component of the school's communicating with parents programme. Other components include: parent interviews, reports and an open door policy. It is also important to clarify that the Brag Book programme was described as a 'work in progress' as it is constantly being revised and improved. This report recognises the efforts the school is making to review this programme and anticipates this report could form just a small part of the ongoing review.

Findings

All participants: parents, students and school staff had favourable comments to make about the Brag Book programme. A comment from school staff was that they preferred the Brag Books in their current format to the previous portfolio system. The students interviewed said they liked taking their books home to show their parents their work. Some family members were more enthusiastic than others but all were generally positive. Some were unsure of aspects of the content of the books, such as the terms used. However, all family members interviewed made comments that reflected their keenness to be kept up to date with what their children were doing at school. They saw the Brag Books as one of the mediums that provided them with information about their children's progress or activities at school.

Five main topics arose from the interviews. Some of these topics were predetermined by the research questions while others arose through the adoption of a semi-structured interview approach that allowed participants the opportunity to discuss issues or ideas that were relevant to them. The main topics that arose from the interviews were:

- Purpose
- Format
- Content
- Family response
- Regularity

The remaining sections of this report discuss each of these topics.

Purpose

Understandings related to the purpose of this programme differed between participants. The following points on this topic were raised in the interviews and they could provide a framework for future discussions.

School personnel

When asked what they perceived the purpose of the Brag Books to be, all staff commented they provided a useful document for showing parents with 'concrete examples' what their children were doing at school. Most teaching staff also commented they valued the notion of the Brag Books becoming a 'keepsake' for

children and their families. Some school personnel believed the Brag Books should reflect student progress. These school personnel recognised the links between the Brag Books and other school programmes, commenting the books backed up reporting. They also liked the connection the Brag Books had with goal setting as the books could open possibilities for goal setting discussions between teachers, students and/or family members.

While all school personnel were positive about the Brag Book programme, some felt uncomfortable about the recent addition of the below, at, above rating system. This was because they believed that if the purpose of the Brag Book was as a 'keep sake' then the rating system may detract from the students' pride in their Brag Book, particularly if they were in the 'below' category. In order to address this issue, some teachers commented that the purpose of the programme must be clarified.

Those school personnel who supported the rating system believed the Brag Books provided opportunities to show with concrete examples how a student's work aligns with national norms. Student test results were included in the Brag Books together with an analysis of their results from the NZCER website. Some school personnel believed this could provide valuable feed forward information for students and teachers alike. Through inclusion of this information in the Brag Books, it was intended that discussions with family members could be better informed. A summary of the school staff's perceived purposes of the Brag Book programme are detailed in the table below.

- *A 'keepsake'*
- *Communicates progress to parents with 'concrete examples'*
- *A snapshot of progress*
- *Complimentary to reports and parent interviews*
- *Can show testing results*
- *Shares goal setting between students, teachers and family members*
- *A celebration of progress*

Students

The students interviewed commented they liked the Brag Books because they were an effective means of showing their parents what they were doing at school.

One student went on to comment that she found it self-motivating to be able to look back at her maths tests and review her progress.

A summary of the students' perceived purposes of the Brag Book programme are detailed in the table below.

- | |
|---|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none">• <i>To show parents what they are doing at school</i>• <i>To be self-motivating (one student)</i> |
|---|

Family members

Family members believed the Brag Books were a medium for showing them what their children were doing at school – this included their children's art work and/or work samples and test results. One parent added he valued the Brag Books because they gave him an opportunity to share his child's progress together with his child. The value of the Brag Book as a 'keepsake' was mentioned by one family members and the value of it to supplement interviews and reports was noted by two family members.

- | |
|---|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none">• <i>To show parents what their children are doing at school</i>• <i>A means by which parents can share progress together with their children</i>• <i>A reporting programme to work alongside interviews and formal reports</i> |
|---|

Recommendation

For the purpose of the Brag Book programme to be clarified. This discussion may help to elucidate the place of the Brag Book in relation to other reporting programmes and to distinguish its role as an assessment document, or as a keepsake, or both.

Format

There was unanimous agreement between teaching staff, students and parents that they liked the current scrapbook format. Teaching staff commented they believed the presentation of work in the new scrapbook format was to a higher standard than in it had been in the previous portfolio format. Students said that

they liked the scrapbooks and parents commented the scrapbook helped to keep the work together.

Recommendation

That the current scrapbook format be maintained.

Content

This topic was mainly commented on by school staff, although parents did have some suggestions to make. The comments regarding content mainly related to the topics of assessment, flexibility, goal setting, presentation, establishment of systems, work load and student involvement.

Assessment

Again the issue of whether assessment information should be included in the Brag Books was frequently raised by the teachers. They said it could be “a real blow to the kids” if their Brag Book included assessments that were ranked as being ‘below’ expected norms.

Flexibility

School personnel generally liked the flexibility the current format allowed them. They appreciated being treated ‘as professionals’ who can make decisions around the content of their class’s Brag Book. However, it was also suggested that some general guidelines would be helpful; such as how many writing samples to include and whether to include maths assessments.

Goal setting

It was generally agreed that goal setting was a valuable component of the Brag Books but only if the books were made available to the students throughout the term, and could regularly be referred to. Parents also liked the goal setting component of the books.

Presentation

Many teachers commented that presentation was a major issue for them. Some felt it could reflect badly on them if the Brag Books went home in a state they perceived to be less than acceptable. Other teachers suggested the Brag Books should reflect the work of the children ‘just as it is’ and didn’t worry as much about presentation. This is an issue that requires further discussion in order to

clarify between teachers and also students and family members (if possible) what the expectations are for presentation.

Systems

Some teachers said they have put systems in place that help them to maintain regularity in samples produced for the Brag Books. One teacher has a large chart on her classroom wall and students tick when they put samples of different types into their Brag Book. Another incorporates 'Brag Book work' into planning; indicating activities were planned specifically with the Brag Books in mind. Both these options provide systems that help spread the Brag Book workload across each term and therefore alleviate last minute panics just before the Brag Books are due to be sent home.

No extra work

The notion that Brag Book work is specifically planned for was counter to the suggestion made by one of the school personnel that the Brag Book should be no extra work for teachers. The suggestion was made that work samples could be taken off classroom walls and put into the Brag Books, or teachers should suggest to students that a piece of work they are currently completing could be photocopied put into their Brag Book. However, most teachers were not adopting this approach. As suggested in the previous section, most were doing work specifically with the Brag Books in mind. Further clarity around the purpose of the books may help teachers to determine how they select work samples.

Student directed

The students all said that most of the samples included in the Brag Book were included because their teacher said they were to glue them in. This is another issue that requires attention. Most teachers wanted to create better opportunities for student autonomy in the Brag Book processes but were challenged to find ways to incorporate this into their classroom programmes.

The following table summarises the issues related to content of the Brag Books raised by the school personnel interviewed.

- *The assessment issue was raised as requiring discussion*
- *Teachers like some flexibility to choose what goes into the books but also like some guidelines*
- *A goal setting component is helpful if the books are made available to the students throughout the term*
- *Presentation standards require discussion and agreement between all stakeholders*
- *Systems to monitor regularity of samples are helpful to many teachers to avoid last minute panics*
- *The Brag Books are not aimed to be 'extra work' but to be built into classroom programme*
- *Consideration may be given as to how students could take more ownership of the contents of their Brag Book*

Some of the parents interviewed stated they liked to know where their child was placed and they liked to see their child's progress. One parent commented, however, that it was difficult to understand some of the rating systems used such as the word 'stanine'. That parent wanted assessment information to be kept simple. Family members also commented they liked to see consistency in the books which they explained to mean consistency between teachers' comments otherwise they found comments confusing.

- *Keen to be regularly updated on progress*
- *Want to see a simple rating system*
- *Consistency in teacher's comments*

Recommendation

- That the inclusion of assessment information in the Brag Books be discussed
- Maintain current flexibility in content but include some guidelines
- Goal setting helpful if shared regularly with the students
- Discuss the presentation requirements and share this discussion with stakeholders
- Teachers share ideas for systems that may help last minute panics
- Teachers share ideas for building Brag Books into classroom programmes

Family response to Brag Books

School personnel

Most teaching staff commented on the challenges they faced trying to communicate with family members. These challenges were attributed to factors such as family members being from non-English speaking homes and parents being reluctant to come into school due to their negative past experiences with education. All the teachers said they saw very little of most parents. Many were also concerned about the efforts they were required to make to retrieve the books from some homes. Some had to set up a reward system for students to ensure their books were returned. Further to this, it was challenging to have the books returned signed or with a comment. Teachers said that when comments were made, they were generally encouraging such as 'I'm proud of you' or 'well done'. However, some comments were concerning such as 'you could do better'. It was also suggested that the feedback sheet could be challenging for some parents due to their ESOL background which was the reason they did not complete it.

Teachers were not sure family members appreciated the Brag Books as they received such a small amount of feedback about them (usually no feedback at all). Some suggestions were made to address this concern such as combining the Brag Books with parent interviews or teachers doing more 'selling' of the Brag Books with their students so they went home enthusiastic about sharing their books with family members. The table below summarises the comments made by teachers about family responses to the Brag Books.

- *Communication with families can be challenging because many are from non English speaking backgrounds and others are reluctant to come into school regularly*
- *All staff have concerns associated with students returning their Brag Books and parents writing comments in the books.*
- *Most comments affirm the child such as 'well done' and some encourage the child to do better next time*
- *A suggestion made to combine Brag Books with student conferences*

Students

All students interviewed said their family liked the Brag Books. One went on to say a family member picked up on information in the Brag Book as an example of an area that required further effort on that student's behalf. It is important to note that all students interviewed were from homes where it appeared family members took an active interest in their children's schooling. This is probably reflected in the comments from these students.

The table below summarises the comments from the students interviewed.

- *Students report their families like their Brag Book*
- *Some families like to pick up on ideas from the Brag Book that may help their child with their learning*

Family members

Family members believed their children felt proud to bring their Brag Books home. They liked them to be a 'keepsake' for their children. They appreciated, however, that the Brag Books were just one component of the reporting system and they also valued the information they received from other reporting sources, such as reports and interviews. Parents were also keen to explain it was important to them that they felt comfortable that the teachers would contact them if they had concerns about their children at any time.

The table below summarises the responses from family members about the Brag Book programme.

- *Students feel proud to bring their Brag Books home*
- *A nice 'keepsake' for families and students*
- *Brag Books part of reporting programme*
- *Value informal updates on a personal level*

Recommendation

As communication with parents is challenging, it may be worth considering developing the Brag Books into a student/parent/teacher discussion. While there are many ways of achieving this, such as during parent conferences, one example could be to have an 'open evening' in week of each of the terms the

Brag Book went home. Parents could be invited to come in to share their child's Brag Book while in the presence of the teacher. It would be important, however, that the children took a lead role in the discussions. The parents could take the Brag Books home following this session. Students whose parents didn't attend could take their books home the following day. The reason for making this suggestion is that concerns about language used or the purpose behind the inclusion of certain samples could be explained if required. Note that this is just a suggestion that is not intended to add to the teachers' busy workload but one that could help to address some of the issues raised above.

Regularity

The issue of how often the Brag Books should go home was one where there was less consistency between parents and staff members. The books are a lot of work for the staff but the parents interviewed were keen to be able to regularly support their children. One parent suggested they would like to see the Brag Books come home twice a term! Another area of concern seemed to be that the parents weren't clear about when the Brag Books did come home and when the school was conducting parent interviews or sending reports home.

Recommendation

To find ways to clarify the reporting cycle from early in the year and then remind parents when various events are taking place.

Summary

This study provided a means for consultation with students and the school community. It has also provided a means through which school personnel were able to reflect on a programme they give a considerable amount of time and effort to. The outcomes of that consultation has been summarised in boxes within each section of this report and recommendations have been made to provide ideas for further discussion. While it may appear there are a number of recommendations, these should be seen as fine tuning a programme that was generally supported by the staff members, students and family members interviewed.

I thank all participants in this study for their time and hope that this consultation process may be of some benefit to those involved.

APPENDIX B: Research report presented to School R

August-September 2009

Phone Home Good News Programme

Personal note

Researching the Phone Home Good News programme at (this) school has been an enjoyable experience as has been encouraging to experience a programme that is having such a great positive impact mainly on the students involved. The benefits of your programme are attributable to your innovative use of mobile technology and also the approach taken to the programme by all stakeholders.

Building positive relationships between schools and communities is integral to the principles and values of the new curriculum. The curriculum states that one of the principles that should guide practice is that all children should experience a curriculum “that makes connections with their lives and engages the support of their families and communities” (p. 9). The New Zealand Ministry of Education Statement of Intent 2007-2012 confirms this stance. This document states “success in encouraging parents and whānau would include parental confidence in supporting children’s learning and effective home-school links” (Chapter. 2, Parents, Family and Whanau, para.2). The Ministry of Education requirements of schools as outlined in the National Education Guidelines also confirm it is an expectation of schools to involve their community with their children’s education. The Phone Home Programme in place at (this) school has made great strides towards achieving this objective. The following two quotes from family members pay tribute to the positive difference your programme has made to relationship between school and home.

Maybe it's from my day back in the schooling but the teachers had a sense of power about them so I kind of stood back and waited for them to approach me and tell me what's going on but now not so much, I'll stroll up and say 'hi, how's things' and then we'll talk about how my child is going and everything.

I've become closer with the school. It has made me closer with to their teachers and I'm able to feel welcomed when I do go into the school.

Furthermore, family members reported their relationships with their children were befitting also. Often what children do between 9am and 3pm is a mystery to family members but being kept in touch had meant discussions at home were better informed and families felt much more a part of their children's day and their children's learning experiences. Parents also commented the programme had been self motivating to their children. They suggested the positive focus of the programme was encouraging their children to try harder and to behave appropriately. The students responded positively because they valued opportunities to share good news with family members. It was emotional to listen to parents speak about the ways in which the Phone Home programme had improved the attitudes of their children to school and also reflected positively on the home environment. The following are two examples:

I just think it opens up more opportunities for them to lead discussions about what they're doing like you might ask them what they did at school and they just say whatever but if you say 'hey, you called me about that, what's that all about' so you've got more depth of knowledge about what they're doing.

It's made a difference to my relationship with my daughter. It's impacted on my relationship with her in a really positive way because we seem to communicate better.

The programme in place at this school is valued by the school and the community to such a degree that an outcry of disappointment would undoubtedly eventuate should it ever have to be discontinued. The principal is to be congratulated on his commitment and undying passion to the success of this programme.

Background

The Phone Home Good News Programme came about following a hui in 2005. At that hui there were discussions related to how the school could build better relationships with whānau. Staff believed all stakeholders would benefit from a programme that allowed both personal and real time contact between school personnel, students and their families. Communication by mobile phone was

suggested as an option as it addressed all these aims and enabled instant contact with over 90% of families. However, it was recognised that this was an innovative approach and one that would require further investigation, mainly due to the costs involved. The principal followed up on the idea by seeking support from sponsors. When (a sponsor) confirmed their assistance, the aims and outcomes of the programme had then to be considered. These were addressed at various staff discussions and within a very short period of time, the school was able to begin its Phone Home Good News programme with its agreed emphasis on facilitating positive dialogue and communication around student achievement.

The use of mobile phones enabled teachers and family members the capacity to share timely information in a flexible manner. There was the option to use voice, text or photo imaging in order to make contact with family members. Mobile phones also allowed family members the capacity to contact school with messages, encouragement or family news. School guidelines were written to detail the acceptable use of the phones in order to maintain consistency and continuation of the programme within acceptable limitations. These guidelines included the recommendation that staff were to aim towards making at least one positive phone call per child per week plus some 'spur of the moment' calls. This meant 40 contacts per teacher per week was recommended. All contacts were to be recorded on software called Etap and extensive data is available regarding the content and outcomes of all communications.

Since its introduction in 2006, the programme has continued to grow with additional support staff provided with mobile phones in 2008. The continued success of the programme may be attributed to the passionate support of the principal, BOT, school staff, and ongoing sponsorship, as well as regular and just as passionate encouragement from students and their family members.

The aim of this research was to examine the issues that arise in the undertaking of this programme, such as its benefits, differences in its perceived purpose and any recommendations that may arise from these discussions. This project sought to interview the full range of participants involved in the Phone Home Good News programme. 49 interviews were conducted. These included: 2 school leadership personnel, 10 teaching staff, 4 support staff, 19 students and 14 family members including representation from the BOT. The students ranged in age from Y1 to Y8. They were from a range of ethnic groups and included 9 boys and 10 girls. It is important to note that although this research covered all

school staff personnel who were involved in the programme, it was not possible to interview all students or family members. 19 students represent 8.5% of the school roll and 14 family members represent a little over 6%.

Discussion

Student perspective of phone home good news programme

The students were asked if they believe the Phone Home Good News Programme helps them at school.

All students reported they believed the programme benefited their learning, their behaviour or their attitude to school (or a combination of the three).

- *It actually makes you work harder to get it so you can use your time wisely and then you get to phone home.*
- *Lots of kids are starting to act better so they can phone home.*
- *It makes me try harder*
- *I write better so I can phone home*
- *It helps with your learning so that you can get to share it with your whanau what you are doing at school and that builds up your confidence. It makes learning so much more fun. Mum said it will give me the perfect education.*
- *You know what you're going to say on the phone to your mum and dad*
- *Helps our learning because if our parents don't know things, we can tell them and we're smarter than them*
- *Phone helps me to learn how to be good*
- *We try harder so that we can phone home more often*
- *I'm good now because I don't want to keep getting in trouble and doing the dishes. I try harder.*
- *I learn to work better with other people*
- *It helps me to learn because if I've been good I'll learn more about stuff. Behaviour is better at this school because of phoning home*
- *It makes me work harder*
- *It helps me with my learning because I move up and I do different things every time I move up*
- *It's great because I get a chance to learn new things and then share it with my family once I've got really good at it and the teacher's proud of*

me so I get to call my family. I think that everything I learn I've done a great job with and it just feels terrific to share it with my parents.

- *It helps me so I learn and I focus and know not to talk and stuff so I can phone home for positives*

Purpose

When asked what they thought the purpose of the programme was the students reported it was to keep parents informed about their school activities.

- *To let your parents know about behaviour*
- *To let your parents know when you're good*
- *Being good, doing good reading, good work*
- *Because I write well, being good in class*
- *To contact home if they're sick or they've been doing good deeds*
- *So people can share about their learning with their parents and tell them how good they've been*
- *To let parents know if we've been good or bad so they know what we've been doing during school time*
- *So the parents can know how they've been doing in class*
- *To tell our parents what we've been up to, if we've been bad or good in our classes*
- *To tell your parents what good work you've been doing*
- *If you be good you get a phone home*
- *So you're not writing notes and letters, you're just ringing home to say what's happened*
- *So they want to share with the parents about what they've been doing and their good achievements with the school*
- *So the parents know what you've been doing at school*

Family

When the students were asked what they perceived their parents thought of the phone home programme, they all made a positive comment regarding their parents' perspective of the programme. Many made reference to their parents appreciating the regular information they were receiving about their school activities.

It is important to add that some of the younger students had little to say and didn't elaborate on their comments.

1. *Mum and dad think it's really good. My mum's overjoyed when she gets a call*
2. *Mum likes it*
3. *Good*
4. *Good, because it tells her all the things we've been doing at school.*
5. *Likes it because she gets to know what we're doing at school. She likes to know about compatible numbers.*
6. *Yes, they like it*
7. *They think it's good the more we ring home*
8. *Mum likes it because she likes it when I'm good*
9. *My mum thinks it's good so she knows if I've been good or bad and so they know what I've been up to during school time*
10. *Mum likes the good calls*
11. *My mum thinks it's good so she knows if I've been up to mischief at school*
12. *They're proud of me. They like the programme. They tell nanny and poppa.*
13. *My parents think it's a really good school because they can tell you what's happening and whether you've been good or not.*
14. *A good idea*
15. *They like it*
16. *Real neat. She likes us phoning all the time*
17. *My mum thinks it's quite cool because she likes to hear that I've been doing good stuff at school*
18. *They think it's great and they said that they might try to get some of our other cousins into our school because they love hearing everything and they're really proud of hearing their kid telling them what they've been doing.*
19. *They think it's so good so they know what we've been doing at school and how we've been behaving*

Family perspectives of phone home good news programme

The response from the families regarding the Phone Home Good News Programme was unanimously positive. The following is a brief quote from each of the family members interviewed regarding their impressions of the programme:

1. *Very impressed*
2. *A really great thing*
3. *It's a really cool idea*
4. *I'm quite happy*
5. *It's been good*
6. *I think it's brilliant*
7. *It's really good*
8. *It was the best idea we ever came up with (BOT member)*
9. *I wish all schools had this*
10. *I've only had positive experiences*
11. *I find it extremely handy*
12. *I don't worry so much*
13. *It's cool*
14. *I look forward to those phone calls*

The reasons for speaking so positively about the programme were varied but they mainly related to the theme of

- Family members appreciating regular communication so they could support their children

All family members were grateful that the programme could keep them well informed about what their children were doing at school.

They appreciated this for the following reasons:

- They liked to share positive experiences with their children
- They wanted to discuss issues that their children were having in order to seek solutions as soon as possible
- It helped the children to strive for better outcomes as they were in a better position to discuss their issues with people who could support them to seek solutions
- It helped the students to take more responsibility for themselves as they were the ones who made the phone calls

- It helped the parents to support their children with their learning
- Parents were keen to know that their children were 'doing the right thing' at school, particularly with regard to their behaviour
- Parents appreciated reminders about forthcoming school events, homework and class activities

In a lot of homes that's always been a problem that there's that lack of communication between school and home and so with this it allows that involvement from parents and input also into their lives while they're spending six hours there.

Benefits for their children

All family members believed the programme was benefiting their children.

The best way to describe the comments the parents made about the benefits of this programme is to include quotes from the interviews. I include a quote from each one of the parents spoken to as each of them had something to say on this topic:

1. *It's mainly for the kids*
2. *It helps to settle them for learning*
3. *I think the kids strive to achieve more*
4. *It helps her to feel good about herself*
5. *It's good for the kids to know that if they do something good their parents are told about it*
6. *(My son) has to take more responsibility for his actions when he has to admit to them*
7. *I think he thinks it's a great thing and it is*
8. *Trying to make them take more ownership*
9. *My relations ask me about how they could go about getting this into their kids' schools*
10. *The kids get really excited when they ring when they've done something really amazing at school*
11. *He gets a reward or he gets praised and it does make him want to work harder*
12. *My son has to tell me what he's done good or not well, that's the whole purpose of this*

13. *It encourages the children to do better because they get to feel better about themselves when they do ring home and tell the parents how they're doing and I think that's really important because it helps them to build up their self esteem and confidence*
14. *It gives me a boost just knowing that my kids are doing so well at school*

Home-school relationship

This was a topic spoken about or alluded to by all parents. Many commented that the phone home programme had helped them to feel less anxious about coming into school due to the regular communication they were having with school personnel.

Maybe it's from my day back in the schooling but the teachers had a sense of power about them so I kind of stood back and waited for them to approach me and tell me what's going on but now not so much, I'll stroll up and say 'hi, how's things' and then we'll talk about how my child is going and everything.

I've become closer with the school. It has made me closer to their teachers and I'm able to feel welcomed when I do go into the school.

It's keeping us together, like in a partnership.

You feel more of a person than just a parent.

I'm not an extremely forward person so I kind of linger at the back and because of this I find it a lot easier to just stroll up and yarn like she's a friend not like she's the teacher.

Instant messaging

One of the main advantages of this programme is its ability to communicate in 'real time'. This was viewed by many of the parents as being of great significance. They believed there were many benefits associated with being able to praise their children for their efforts as soon as they happened, or discuss issues before they escalated into something more concerning.

It's the there and then, it's being able to deal with it.

I think that it's probably better that we hear more about what's going on instead of waiting till it gets to that point where it's serious and you're coming in and it's trying to get to it early.

When she feels that she's done well she can ring home straight away and let me know and that helps her feel good about herself.

Sometimes they send newsletters out and then you forget but the children ring up that day so it's really good.

Improved relationships between parent and child

A heart warming outcome of this study was the comments from parents that indicated that not only had their home-school relationship improved but so too had their parent-child relationship. This the parents believed was an outcome of being more regularly updated on their child's progress, attitudes, well being and activities.

I just think it opens up more opportunities for them to lead discussions about what they're doing like you might ask them what they did at school and they just say whatever but if you say 'hey, you called me about that, what's that all about' so you've got more depth of knowledge about what they're doing.

It's made a difference to my relationship with my daughter. It's impacted on my relationship with her in a really positive way because we seem to communicate better.

I think it gives the kids a bit of back-up and a bit of support.

Student involvement

Many parents commented that it was important that it was their child who was phoning them. Many believed this supported their children to take ownership of their actions. They also believed it promoted children to initiate discussions around their activities at school as children understood their actions could be reviewed or reported to their parents at any time.

He tends to take more responsibility for his actions when he has to admit to them.

Ownership of their behaviour, regardless of what it is.

Reciprocal

In their extensive synthesis of the literature associated with home-school programmes in New Zealand, Biddulph, Biddulph and Biddulph (2003) concluded with a recommendation that it was important for home-school programmes to provide opportunities for reciprocal communication. However, they found few programmes provided opportunities for reciprocal communication. This Phone Home Good News Programme demonstrates that through the use of mobile technology, there is a medium available that has the capacity to provide opportunities for effective two-way communication.

If I've got any issues I can text her (the teacher) and she answers and I feel like I'm being heard as a parent.

If parents have concerns we can text to the teacher 'can you ring' and they ring us and we are able to sort things out.

I may also text the teacher back and say 'hey, you're doing a great job'.

Positive focus

Many parents referred to having received phone calls from school telling them their children were behaving inappropriately. Others reflected on their own negative schooling experiences. The positive focus of this programme had come as a very refreshing change for many family members. Rather than being apprehensive about receiving a call from school, family members commented they looked forward to receiving the phone calls. They also gave a lot of thought as to ways they could follow up on the phone calls in order to support their children. Some gave rewards at home, others liked to discuss the content of the communication further when their children got home. The information they received from school meant there was a much greater likelihood that student-family discussions would actually take place. They may be initiated by excited children when they came home or by proud parents who wanted to share the good news with their children and encourage them to keep trying their best.

It's good for the kids to know that if they do something good then their parents will be told about it. It used to be that you'd only get a phone call home if you were naughty.

He gets to show that there are positive things at school that's he's involved in, ownership really.

It's nice because its positive and it reinforces things for them.

I know when it did first start a lot of parents were probably thinking 'oh no, what's happened' because usually that's the only time they were contacted. They always thought the negatives and I think it's slowly changed, I think we've done three years and its changed their way of thinking and it's like 'hey, it's not always negative that they're ringing for, its mostly positive'.

Flexibility of voice, text or video contact

The programme allowed for flexibility that respected the differing capacities of those involved.

Voice calls offered family members the opportunity to praise or reinforce their child in real time. Voice calls were also the option adopted when making teacher to parent contact as it was stated in the School Procedures Document that teachers must make voice contact when discussing issues with parents.

Texting was a good option when the parents were not available by phone or did not wish to be disturbed while they were at work. Texting was also useful for communicating the same message with a number of families, such as to send reminders or to contact all the families of students involved in the same group, such as parents of hockey players.

While videoing or photo imaging were not options used regularly, they provided a means by which family members could be provided with visual images of their child's efforts.

The flexibility in options opened opportunities for families to be contacted when otherwise contact may not have been possible. This reinforced opportunities for family members to support their children

It's a bit hard for them to get hold of me but even just receiving the text saying that your daughter's doing really well with this today is really nice to know.

Backed up by student led conferences

The relationship between this programme and student led conferences was noted in the interviews. There was an indication that student involvement at student led conferences complemented their role in the Phone Home Good News Programme.

It's good because they have what they call the student led conferences where the children put you through what they're doing rather than the parent-teacher interviews. The teachers are there but I find it good having the student there doing it rather than just the teacher.

It's good because the kids do it all and you know the teachers are there if need be.

Approach the school with concerns

Although it was noted that parents were positive about the student led conference approach, it was just as significant to note that many parents felt comfortable about coming into school on an informal basis. They liked the fact that their relationship with their children's teachers had benefited from the opportunities that had for regular communication.

I suppose I need to get involved in both but I find the phone calls actually help.

Maybe it's from my day back in the schooling but the teachers had a sense of power about them so I kind of stood back and waited for them to approach me and tell me what's going on but now not so much, I'll stroll up and say 'hi, how's things' and then we'll talk about how my child is going and everything.

I've become closer with the school. It has made me closer with to their teachers and I'm able to feel welcomed when I do go into the school.

Improves learning opportunities

It was encouraging to hear the manner in which many of the parents spoke of the difference this programme had made to their child's attitude to school.

I think the kids strive to achieve more because they know they're going to be able to ring home.

It gives them a goal, encouragement.

Since they've had this system in my kids have been totally focused on their education.

Behaviour

A number of parents spoke about the regular communication helping to keep them informed about their children's behaviour, a feature of the programme they were positive about because they liked to support the efforts of the school in this regard.

With the boys it's been quite extreme (their behaviour) but having this in place I've been able to get on top of whatever mischief they've been getting up to.

Builds child's self esteem

Many parents referred to the programme also having benefitting the personal growth of their children, such as helping to build their confidence and self esteem.

To encourage the children to do better because they feel better about themselves when they do ring home and tell their parents how they're doing. I think that's really important because it helps them to build up their self-esteem and confidence.

Builds parents' self esteem

Some parents spoke of their own personal gain from the calls home.

It's hard to explain for me personally but it means a lot, it really means a lot to me.

It gives me a boost for the day just knowing that my kids are doing well at school.

Sometimes I feel that I'm not doing my job properly as a mother but when you get phone calls like that you know that you must be doing something right for your child.

School staff perspectives of phone home programme

The school staff interviewed included leadership personnel, teaching staff and the support staff members who were directly involved with the Phone Home Good News programme. This included: office staff, the caretaker, librarian and support staff personnel. All school staff expressed support for the Phone Home Good News Programme. They believed being able to share learning with whānau brought benefits to their students. They spoke about the positive difference the programme had made to the students' enthusiasm for learning due to the positive feedback they were receiving from home. Teachers were also grateful for the ability to be more involved with the well being of their students as they believed this helped to further strengthen relationships between home and school. Examples included the capacity to send reminders to parents regarding forthcoming events, homework and personal messages of support or encouragement.

Purpose

When school staff were asked what they perceived the main purpose of the programme was, answers varied but mainly related to the theme of building better relationships.

- *To get whānau to come through the gate and to be part of what is happening at school*
- *To have a partnership to reinforce what's happening in the classroom*
- *For building relationships*
- *A positive means of building relationships with parents*
- *Sharing learning*
- *Parents are more informed about learning programmes*
- *Keeping up communication links with parents*
- *Connection with home and school*
- *Getting parents involved with their children's learning*
- *Communication with parents regarding what their children are doing in class*
- *Letting whānau know about their awesome students*
- *Strengthened liaison between home and school*
- *To give instant feedback in a way that reinforces behaviour and excellence in the classroom*

- *For students to understand that parents and teachers talk to each other*

Whānau response

When asked how they thought whanau were responding to the programme, all staff made positive comments.

- *Positive response from parents*
- *Parents appreciate the opportunity to communicate with the school*
- *More willing to come into school*
- *Very positive response*
- *Very positive*
- *Reciprocal opportunities*
- *Will contact teacher with messages*
- *A lot of parents text back and initiate texts*
- *Much easier to get to know parents*
- *Positive about programme*
- *Parents are very positive*
- *Lots of positive feedback*
- *They enjoy the opportunity to be involved*

Student response

There was unanimous agreement from staff personnel that the students' loved the Phone Home Good News Programme. Many teachers were very enthusiastic about the students' response to the programme.

- *Get excited and love the follow up with home*
- *99% of students seem to like the contact*
- *Helps students to stay on task because they now understand that they are accountable to their whanau as well*
- *They love it, always ask to phone*
- *Very positive*
- *Student responses make the programme worthwhile*
- *Students love it*
- *See children talking on the phone and witness pride on their faces*
- *Children look for opportunities to phone home*

Student outcomes

Teachers not only commented that they believed the programme had improved student behaviour but also student learning.

Definitely helps as talking through their learning helps to reinforce and reaffirm what they have learnt.

The children are engaged in their learning because they have a relationship with their teacher that they respect and value.

They know that by getting on with their learning they're going to be intrinsically in their way rewarded by their family and that's a powerful motivator for any child.

Improved relationships between whānau and their children

As with the parents, school staff believed the programme benefitted parent-child relationships.

Whānau build relationships with their children as some of them spend more time with their tamariki as a consequence of finding out some of the good things they've done at school and then following that up.

Results

One of the aims of this research was to clarify any differences and similarities between different participant groups.

Purpose

While all participants had positive comments to make regarding the impact this programme had on improving communication, when asked specifically about its purpose, there were both differences and similarities between the participants.

Parents had a broad perception of purpose that included factors related to the social development of their children, their children's behaviour, emotional well being such as their self esteem and academic progress.

Students were very keen to make contacts so they could receive positive feedback from home.

School staff viewed relationship building as the main purpose of the programme. More school staff than students and parents also commented that the purpose of the programme was related to achievement.

Issues

The success of the programme depended on some essential features that were valued by the students and their parents, but caused the teachers some concerns. These included the value of instant messaging, the need to be consistent between classes with regard to the regularity of contacts, the importance of maintaining good records of contacts and the need for a database that kept student contact information up to date.

Instant messaging

The students liked to be able to communicate at the time they were caught being good. It was at that time that most parents also liked to hear from their excited children. The teachers, however, found this task challenging within a busy classroom environment. It must be clarified that most teachers viewed the task as a challenge rather than as an obstacle to the success of the programme. Some teachers put systems in place that helped them ensure they could maintain regular phoning times and most teachers appreciated opportunities to share ideas about ways to build phoning time into their class programmes. Taking time away from other children to allow a student phone time was especially difficult for teachers in junior classes because their children are less independent. This challenge was alleviated in a small way, however, due to the eagerness of the students to make a call as they respected that other students also needed a quiet time to phone home.

Number of calls

The regularity and consistency of contact is essential to its success. Students may become discouraged if they move from one class to another and perceive differences in opportunities to phone home between classes. Unless calls are made regularly, the programme loses its momentum and purpose. The rules regarding the number of calls required further agreement and support from all involved.

Recording of calls

This is another issue that most teachers commented added to their workload. Discussions had been held regarding software that may enable messages to

transfer from phone to Etap and this could help reduce the workload but the cost of the software needed to be balanced against its need. Further discussion may be required around this topic also. Again, some teachers had systems in place that assisted with meeting this requirement, such as notes in their day book so it was easier for them to record contacts on Etap at regular intervals.

The workload of this programme in comparison to others must also be considered. Examples of home-school communication used in other schools include individual notebooks or staff home visits, both of which consume reasonable amounts of time. It is also essential to note that the benefits suggested by the participants involved in this programme included improved student learning outcomes, attitudes and relationships and therefore it would be hard to argue that the efforts of staff were not worthwhile. Personalised feedback on how school staff were coping with the recording of calls was appreciated.

Updating information

A school wide database is necessary to maintain up to date changes of phone numbers. It needs to be accessible to all staff members, particularly support staff who may not have regular contact with students but who believed they could be using the programme more effectively if they had current information.

Conclusion

The main purpose of this programme as stated in the *School Cell Phone Acceptable Use Procedures* document (2009) was to facilitate positive dialogue, connection and communication around student achievement.

- It is the overall finding of this research that this purpose is being achieved as all participants commented positively on the impact of this programme on: facilitating positive dialogue, connecting with whānau, improving communication and all the students interviewed believed this programme brought benefits to their attitude to school
- Supporting learning through opportunities to share experiences in real time is empowering for all participants
- It was the finding of this study that all parents interviewed cared about the achievement, behaviour and well being of their children and wanted to support them.

This research has shown that according to the personnel interviewed, this programme was benefiting relationships between families and school. Although there were some differences in perceptions of purpose, benefits to relationships emerged as a common theme. If relationships are improving it is possible more parents would be willing to come through the gate and take part in the other initiatives such as the quarterly Student Led Conferences or the 'open door' policy. There was further evidence in the comments that not only had the programme helped to improve home-school relationships but child-family relationships had also improved.

APPENDIX C: Research report presented to School H

November 2009

We look after each other

Background

This research project was carried out by Karen Pohio, a PhD student at the University of Waikato. The overall context of the research was to examine deliberate acts of connection and communication involving staff, students, and family members in low decile (1-3) New Zealand primary schools. In order to undertake this research, a case study method was adopted. Each of the schools chosen for the case studies was using a different artefact to connect and communicate with their school community. The artefact adopted at this school has some features that distinguish it from the artefacts used at many other schools. The perspectives stakeholders had about the school culture were the focus of this research.

The researcher has 30 years teaching experience and has been part of the leadership team of a decile 1 primary school, hence was able to bring these understandings to the context of the research project. It is intended that the eventual outcome of the project will be the development of a set of principles that may in some way be useful to guiding future practice associated with connection and communication between students, home, and school.

Introduction

This has been a somewhat challenging research project because it has involved examining something many participants described as 'just a feeling' or a 'wairua motuhake' within the school. However, in order to move forward it was necessary to establish some research questions and then to speak with a range of participants regarding their thoughts on the culture of this school. Discussions were held with school staff and students during my time at the school. I was also grateful to be able to take part in some of the daily routines of school personnel such as attending the morning coffee meetings, spending time in the playground with the students, observing in a classroom, attending assembly and staff meetings. Some enlightening experiences arose from those interactions that were extremely positive and affirming to this study. I followed up my time at the school by conducting telephone interviews with family members. This enabled

me to speak with family members at a time and from a place that suited them. Interviews with all groups of participants were one on one and ranged in time from around 5 minutes (mainly the students) to around 30 minutes. In total, the following numbers of participants were involved: 20 students, 15 family members, 3 leadership personnel, 11 teaching staff, 7 support staff and 1 BOT representative. The interviews took a semi structured format and the outcomes led to the following topics arising as issues to be covered in this report:

- What is a school culture and how was the culture at (this) school described?
- What are the significant features of (this) school's culture?
- What are the issues that arose?
- What outcomes were reported?

School culture

The definition of school culture suggested by Roland Barth (2007) is similar to the way the culture was described at this school. Barth describes school culture as being just "the way we do things around here" (pg. 159). There are more complex definitions of culture but to elaborate further would confuse the very essence of how the participants interviewed wanted their school culture to be described. It became clear in the interviews that to most of the school community, the school culture was just the way we do things, our philosophy, and something that has evolved this way.

There are both tangible and intangible elements to culture. The more tangible elements that support the culture here include: the openness of the school grounds without fences or gates, the welcoming nature of the staff (including the office staff who are often the first point of contact), the lack of a visitors book to sign, the fascinating sea life in the foyer, the cleanliness of the grounds thanks to a dedicated caretaker and cleaner, the physical layout of the school with a courtyard and decks, the support programmes and hard working staff who encourage and develop the skills of children with special needs and children with learning difficulties and special abilities, the fabulous IT programme, the essential skills of the family advocate, and of course the hard working teaching staff and leadership team. The intangible elements are just as abundant but are harder to describe. They are felt in the efforts made towards building positive relationships between all members of the school community. All participants involved with this

school clearly believe in each other and support each other through celebrations, through sad times, and to try to achieve the best possible outcomes for the students and their whānau.

The school culture is embedded into your whakatauki “we look after each other”. This guides the principles you embody as part of your daily routines - starting with the expectations made of new five year olds to the longest serving staff members and community personnel. The whakatauki involves relationships between staff personnel, students and whānau. It is a feeling that is evident from the moment anyone enters the school. It is a caring, supportive, welcoming environment that is unquestionably something the school must feel extremely proud of fostering in such an effective manner. Evidence that it is real, it is practised and it is felt was unanimous from the participants interviewed. The following statements provide an insight into the manner by which the culture of this school was described by each of the three groups of participants:

Students

- *It's special*
- *We have this motto because that's what we do in the world*
- *I like it here because everyone looks after each other*
- *Our school is like a big family*
- *We all look after each other and it's a fun school. There's lots of different things to do*
- *It's a nice place because everyone looks after each other*
- *Everyone is just nice to each other*
- *I think it's a really good school because everybody cares*
- *It's very good because there are nice children here and it's a very good school to learn*

Family members

- *They're very willing and helpful*
- *Awesome school, very good with the kids and how they're learning*
- *I've always found it quite a family orientated school*
- *They do a lot of activities which is good to see*
- *It's brilliant, it's a good school*
- *I think it's a great school*
- *All my children, they just love going to school*

- *You know the whole feeling there is just nice, it's hard to describe*
- *It's awesome, it's that we look after each other extends out into the family as well*
- *Everything to do with the school has been really positive*
- *The motto just says what it says and that's what they're doing. They do, they just look after each other*
- *It's very welcoming*
- *They have a philosophy that we look after each other which I always thought was a lovely philosophy as opposed to we will be the best*
- *It's a good whanau orientated school*

School staff

- *There is open communication*
- *School culture also develops through the physical layout of the school such as the decking and courtyards and sharing the grounds with the rugby club*
- *Many visitors coming into the school comment on the welcoming nature of the school and the friendly school atmosphere*
- *The school has an open and friendly atmosphere*
- *Children love coming to school*
- *The motto is a good prompt to use without having to do a lot more discussing*
- *It's like a country feel in the city*
- *A nice family atmosphere*
- *There is a special feeling as soon as you walk up the path*
- *There's a good vibe in the school*
- *Staff treat children as if they were their own*
- *It's the best school I've ever taught in*
- *There's a sort of calm about the kids*
- *Rather than trying to teach a value like: here's honesty and here's respect, all those come through in that one rule 'we look after each other'. It's not what you think it should be, it's how you live that value, that whole community thing*
- *Children can leave what they're bringing with them at the gate and walk in and be proud of the school and that has to be down to school culture because when you come here, we'll look after you and you'll look after us*

The consistency between each of these groups confirms there is a shared understanding of the school whakatauki. Without such consistency, the school whakatauki would be words without meaning or substance in practice. Furthermore, many of the participants commented that 'looking after each other' extended into their home life and therefore had become very much *just the way we do things* in all domains of the daily lives of the school community. The fact that it is a simple phrase is noteworthy because everyone knows it, understands it and uses it but why does that matter?

Significance

The significance of the culture of this school was that it appeared to be affecting participants in a very holistic manner; that is, it seemed to be influencing attitudes, well being, feelings of safety, feelings of being cared about, feelings of comfortable with oneself and a sense of aroha for others. The following statements provide examples of the holistic, caring atmosphere at the school.

Students

- *If we want to be a family we need to look after each other then we won't have problems and we'll be able to talk to people about issues that bother us*
- *It's a really good school especially with my teacher because he's teaching us new and better ways of learning*
- *It's fun learning*
- *It's by far the best school I've been to. You can be who you want to and you don't have to act like the teacher's pet. You can be yourself.*

Family members

- *I'm happy, my daughter's happy and you can't put a price on the fact that she just loves school and because of the atmosphere she can be an individual and she's accepted. Her interpersonal relationships have soared and I think it might be because they do all look after each other. Her sympathy and empathy towards others seems to be keener now that she's there. She really has learnt a lot from them. Every time I go there the kids are all smiling, they're happy and they just seem to be getting on with it. It makes good practical sense and their motto just says it all. I'm*

very thankful for the school. I think it works brilliantly and I think it's a simple motto and I think it's good.

- *I really feel that they develop a good caring environment. I know that the teachers my children have had, they've gone the extra mile*
- *My experiences of the school are that they're happy*
- *I've seen children that have come from this school go to Intermediate and they've still taken those values there with them too, it's good*
- *A lot of the teachers are nurturing as well so if the kids are upset they get that nurturing*
- *It's the relationships that make the school special, between the staff and the students and flowing on into welcoming the families in*

School staff

- *Teachers work hard for the children and the job becomes much wider encompassing than just being a teacher*
- *The school works as a big team and parents feel that too*
- *It's about relationships, it's about being honest, being open, telling people as it is*
- *The secret to teaching is to love children*
- *We do respect our children and we treat them with respect*
- *I don't think there's anyone on the staff here who doesn't want to be here and they really have the children's best interests at heart*
- *It's a very, very inclusive school*

The building of positive relationships between and within all participants was both a key driver and a key outcome of having a positive wairoa with the school community. The importance of positive relationships to a school community is supported in many recent reports, such as the Education Review Office Report *Partners in Learning* (2008) which states that partnerships can “not only enhance the well being, behaviour and achievement of children and young people, but can also persist into adult life and civic participation” (p. 5). Bull Brooking and Campbell (2008) wrote “parental involvement makes a significant difference to educational achievement” (p.1). Alton-Lee (2003) suggested family and community influences account for 40-65% of children's learning.

Staff referred to relationships as being an essential component of the school culture because “everyone is happy working together” and “if you want the best

for your kids and you want to believe in a partnership then you actually have to welcome the families and encourage them to feel they can come in to the school". Further to this, there were passionately held beliefs that clearly guided practice. Staff spoke of an "ultimate respect for the students", "high expectations" and a positive approach. Although staff appreciated that many families faced hardships, there was no evidence of deficit thinking or blame being placed on family members. One staff member described a "yes we can attitude" prevailing at the school where the staff really felt they could make a difference. Another staff member explained "we treat everyone as special which doesn't mean we use fancy terms but we try to individualise learning by treating everyone with fairness and kindness and by making an effort to welcome the community."

The involvement of the students in the school culture was significant because they formed the foundation of the purpose for the development of the culture and were integral to its continuation. They were at the heart of the culture and ultimately it is their attitudes and actions that will determine the effectiveness of the culture in the long term. Every one of the student gave an example of the way they looked after other students and other adults, usually without being prompted by a question because that was clearly just how they behaved. There was no doubt that all students could not only recite the phrase 'we look after each other' but that they understood what it meant to look after others. This reinforces that the simplicity of the phrase was a key element in the effectiveness of the culture. The motto statement was as well understood by younger children as it was by older children. Students made comments such as "I help out new kids who have just started", "we don't pick on people's differences" and "if someone needs a bit of courage I try to be there for them". All these comments portrayed a sense of personal responsibility and respect for the school culture.

The involvement of the students seemed to also help build a bridge to school involvement for family members. This was because family members understood their children believed in the school culture and that meant they were taking ownership of their actions. Family members seemed to want to support this approach because they believed it was benefiting their children. The understanding that everyone looked after each other provided a strong foundation for connection and communication.

The foundation for connection and communication spoken about by staff was that families in general cared deeply about their children. Staff made statements such

as “families are passionate about supporting their children”, “parents have high aspirations for their children”, “the community are there to help, they’re not there to hinder”. This is highly significant because it helps to reinforce the purpose for building positive relationships. If the school approach was not founded on this belief, there would be less reason to make an effort to improve connection and communication.

Another point that was raised by both the family members and school staff was that the school had not carefully selected students to be enrolled who fitted nicely into the mould of well behaved children. It is a school GSE select for placement for some of their difficult students who have been suspended or expelled from their previous school. The success rate of those children in terms of settling down and eventually achieving positive academic and social outcomes was reported as being ‘astonishing’. Many staff commented that it was not only the staff who helped these children but that the students had their own way of interacting and helping, often by using the phrase ‘we don’t do (or say) that here’. The school culture seemed to embrace these students, place them in a caring environment and comfort their need to gain recognition.

Many staff also commented on the terrible traumas that many members of the school community had experienced such as an assault on a pupil, the death of a pupil in a house fire, the death of a staff member, an armed defenders call out, sadness in both staff and community homes, but strongly believed the support from the school community, in whatever form it took, had been greatly valued by these families. The staff commented “the kids just quietly get on with their own business”, “the parents show genuine concern towards other children” (not just their own) such as the parent who put money towards another child’s camp fees because she knew the child’s family would be unable to pay.

Issues

Again, it must be said that this school is quite special because as issues arise they are addressed in a manner that is respectful to all involved. As one of the participants explained, many schools view issues as the family’s problem while this school makes a conscious effort to look inwardly and attempt to remove barriers so all families can be treated with respect. Examples of efforts made to welcome families included: the lack of a visitor’s book, an open door policy, welcoming parents into the classrooms, family events such as the food festival and free BBQ night. In saying this, there were still some hard to reach parents

who found it difficult to enter school. The school was trying different means to reach these families. Teachers phone home and the leadership team visits some of these homes to encourage participation or support or to address issues. The employment of a social worker was also helping to support some of the families the school sees little of.

Outcomes

Having now laid out the foundation of what the school culture at this school looks and feels like and the issues that arose, it is time to address the difficult question of why this matters. Many schools will suggest they have a positive school culture and although many of the participants interviewed at this school said their school was special and unique, the question remains whether there is something about the culture here that significantly influenced outcomes and how do we know?

It is not possible to identify any measurable outcomes but there were many positive benefits reported. Family members commented the benefits of the culture for their children were that they were happy and if they aren't happy, they can't learn. Teachers said that mostly parents wanted to know if their children was safe, making friends, building confidence and happy. For many participants their own family and economic circumstances often took priority over educational matters but they were concerned about education because they didn't want the same outcomes they had experienced to impact on their children. This meant keeping family members regularly informed of their children's social, emotional, and educational progress and well-being.

Just as with the discussion associated with school culture, it may be suggested that student outcomes have both tangible and intangible features. Tangible outcomes are measurable while intangible outcomes incorporate more of an attitude to learning and include the key competencies and values components of the new curriculum. It is difficult to separate the tangible from the intangible because as the curriculum states "successful learners make use of the competencies" (p. 12) and "every decision relating to curriculum and every interaction that takes place in school reflects the values of the individuals involved and the collective value of the institution" (p. 10) As both key competencies and values are detailed in the new curriculum, there is an expectation that they will be addressed, not as standalone competencies but as "the key to learning" (p. 12). Even if learning data could be evaluated in depth,

there are too many variables influencing the student outcomes for it to be possible to attribute outcomes to the school culture from this research. In saying this, however, I would like to include quotes about how the students believed the school culture affected them at school, and hope you may all take great heart from these comments.

Students

- *When I'm doing my work no one will push me around and then I'm able to get on with my work better*
- *I help others to learn in story writing because my friend doesn't know the words so I help him*
- *It makes your brain work when you get older*
- *I can be a nicer person and meet more people when I get older*
- *If people aren't learning, I ask them if they want help*
- *If you don't know what to do other people are always there to help you*
- *If you ask for help, they give you help – teachers and kids*
- *I think it has an influence on our learning. In our class we have choices and we have choices to be mean to each other but our school motto is looking after each other so let's do that*
- *It helps me with my learning because I keep it in my head*
- *It helps me with my learning because my friends help me*
- *It affects me quite big because if people didn't care for each other nobody would help you if you were stuck with your work. If you do something wrong they don't laugh at you and if you ask for help they don't tease you about not knowing that thing. If we don't help each other we don't get passed it and we don't learn and make our way through it.*
- *If I'm stuck with something they will help*

Conclusion

This has been a most worthwhile experience for me as a researcher but ultimately as someone who has a passion for children. You must all take great pride in your efforts, aroha and genuine concern for the students in your care. I thank you all for allowing me the opportunity to spend time in your special place.

APPENDIX D: Principal letter

Dear _____,

Thank you for the opportunity of allowing me to speak with you today.

To summarise, I am enrolled in a PhD programme at Waikato University and my topic is to investigate deliberate acts of communication and connection between families and school in low decile (1-3) New Zealand primary schools. The significance of this research is supported by agencies and reports such as: New Zealand Ministry of Education (Statement of Intent 2007-2013), ERO (Parents' Voices, 2008), Best Evidence Synthesis (Biddulph, Biddulph and Biddulph, 2003) and recent educational conferences (Cheryl Doig, Learning at Schools, Rotorua, 2009).

Gaps in the research show that there is an urgent need for further focus on this topic; particularly in the form of case study research in order to examine some of the day to day activities that low decile schools are involved with.

Your role is to consider and identify an activity your school undertakes that you have deliberately set in place to improve opportunities for connection and communication with your school community. If you believe you would benefit from further research being conducted into this activity, I will follow up by discussing the format that would be required to examine this case study in further detail.

Requirements of the University of Waikato Ethics Committee state that:

- you will have the opportunity to withdraw from this research up until the stage of final transcript
- the identity of all participants will remain confidential
- you will be given details of the time and involvement required
- you will receive progress reports and a final report

The final outcome is intended to provide insights into the development of family-school programmes in order to better support learning opportunities for students.

I will contact you again next week in order to ascertain your interest or you may phone me at any time with your questions or a response.

Kind regards,

Karen Pohio

APPENDIX E: Overview of participants

Appendix E						
Overview of participants						
	School W		School R		School H	
Teacher	Mark		Patricia		Chris	
	Kate		Ruth		Jenny	
	Gaylene		Carol		Gail	
	Jane		Sarah		Kylee	
	Rae		Natasha		Kay	
			Mykala		Penny	
			Trish		Cameron	
			Anna		James	
			Marie		Janice	
			Ella		John	
					Petra	
		5		10		11
School leader	Principal		Principal		Principal	
	Diane		Lesley		Sheryl	
	Lynn				Robert	
		3		2		3
Student	Anna	7 years	Tane	7 years	TePura	6 years
	Natalie	11years	Aroha	7 years	Emma	10years
	Mele	6 years	Pania	8 years	Kiri	8 years
	Mia	8 years	Iosefa	11years	Matu	8 years
	Elizabeth	8 years	Hemi	10years	Tahnee	11years
	Hera	9 years	Brian	11years	Catherine	8 years
			Jamie	5 years	Tiana	7 years
			Aidan	6 years	Charlie	10years
			Te Ara	9 years	Victor	9 years
			Heidi	11years	Harry	9 years
			Oliver	10 years	Tuku	7 years
			Quade	12years	Penelope	5 years
		6		12		12
Family	Mary		Tina		Tony	
	Robyn		Claire		Jade	
	Carlos		Krystal		Kerry	
	Patricia		Carey		Kim	
	Bryce		Shirley		Naomi	
	David		Tania		Fiona	
	Maria		Hannah		Julie	
			Verity		Nina	
			Katherine		Ranui	
			Arihi		Fiona	
			Eve		Frances	
			Michelle		Nick	
			Bex		Dean	
			Dallas			
		7		14		13
Support staff	Amy		Verity		Julia	
	Hayley		Wyona		Sophie	
			Debra		Nicole	
					Lily	
					Stewart	
		2		3		5

APPENDIX F: School participant information letter

Researcher: Karen Pohio, School of Education, University of Waikato
Research Topic: Deliberate acts of communication and connection between family members and school personnel in low decile (1-3) New Zealand primary schools

Thank you for the opportunity of allowing me to explain this research to you.

I am working on a research project at the University of Waikato for my doctorate. The project involves examining the effectiveness of communication between schools and families. The research is being undertaken in the form of case studies with a small number of Waikato schools. It involves each of the case study schools selecting an activity they are involved with that incorporates communication between home and school. The participants involved will include school personnel, families and students. If you volunteer to be part of this research, you will be interviewed for around 30 minutes and your involvement will be anonymous. I will speak with you to arrange the most convenient time and place for the interviews and I will also return transcripts of what you said in case you would like to make some changes to your thoughts. You don't have to answer all the questions in the interview and you can withdraw your involvement if you wish, although once the final transcripts are agreed upon, they are required to complete this work. The outcomes of this study will be incorporated into a report for your school and will be used in my thesis.

I am also intending to interview students as it is important that their thoughts are recorded also. Their interviews would have the same guidelines as above but would be shorter (around 15 minutes long).

As well as conducting the interviews, I would like to spend some time at school observing the activity I am studying and I will keep some notes of what I observe. If you have any concerns around any of these procedures, please contact me so I can take some time to explain to you what is involved. I will be very happy to answer any of your questions. If you have further concerns, you could speak with my supervisor. Our contact details are recorded below. You may also speak with your school principal. Your involvement in this work would be most gratefully appreciated.

Karen Pohio (researcher)

APPENDIX G: Family participant information letter

Researcher: Karen Pohio, School of Education, University of Waikato

Research Topic: Deliberate acts of connection and communication between family members and school personnel in low decile (1-3) New Zealand primary schools

My name is Karen Pohio and I am writing about a research project that I am doing at your school. I am doing this research because I want to help your school to evaluate its _____ programme. The work I do at your school may also help other schools to better understand some of the programmes they are involved with. To be able to complete this project, I need to interview some students, family members and school personnel and to look at some of the work they are doing related to this _____ programme.

Before I can speak with anyone or look at the work you are doing, I need to explain the research to you and ask for your consent.

It is voluntary to be involved and you will be anonymous in the report that I write. I will not use your name at all. I will speak with students at school at a time that suits their teacher, speaking with just one student at a time for around 15 minutes each. I will speak with family members in a place and at a time that suits them (at school, home or by phone). You do not have to answer some of the questions I ask if you don't want to and you can tell me if you want to stop.

It is also important to know that your principal supports this project and is keen for both students and family members to be part of it.

When this research is finished, your school will receive a report about what I have found out and the information will be included in my thesis.

If you have any questions about what this involves, please ring or email me or my supervisor. You could also speak with your principal.

It would be very helpful if you could have the consent form signed and bring it back to your teacher as soon as possible.

Thank you,

Karen Pohio

University of Waikato

0272908448

pohio@ihug.co.nz

Supervisors' name and contact information:

Dr Margaret Franken

University of Waikato

8384466x6360

franken@waikato.ac.nz

APPENDIX H: Participant consent forms

Consent Form for School Participants

I have read the **Participant Information Sheet** for this study and have had the details of the study explained to me. My questions about the study have been answered to my satisfaction, and I understand that I may ask further questions at any time.

I also understand that I am free to withdraw from the study, or to decline to answer any particular questions in the study. I understand I can withdraw any information I have provided up until the researcher has commenced analysis on my data. The researcher will make available to me copies of my interview transcripts in order for me to make any amendments to these that may be necessary. I agree to provide information to the researchers under the conditions of confidentiality set out on the **Participant Information Sheet**.

I agree to participate in this study under the conditions set out in the Participant Information Sheet

Signed: _____

Name: _____

Date: _____

Additional Consent

I agree / do not agree to my responses being tape recorded

I agree/ do not agree to provide relevant documentation

Signed: _____

Name: _____

Date: _____

Researcher's name and contact information:

Karen Pohio
University of Waikato
027 2908448
07 8392799
pohio@ihug.co.nz

Supervisor's name and contact information:

Dr Margaret Franken
University of Waikato
07 8384466x6360
franken@waikato.ac.nz

Concerns may also be discussed with your school principal

Please return to _____ by _____

Consent Form for Family Participants

_____ School is taking part in a research project being undertaken by Karen Pohio, a student at the University of Waikato. The letter accompanying this form gives details of this research. If you are happy to be interviewed by Karen about your thoughts on the _____ programme please complete the details below.

The interviews will be during week ____ of term ____
The interviews will take about 15-30 minutes each.

Note the following points about this research:

- Nobody will be named in the report about this project
- Participation is voluntary and you can withdraw from the project
- Information collected will be used only for the purpose of this project and is strictly confidential to the researcher

I agree to be interviewed by Karen about the _____ programme

Signed: _____

Your name _____

Karen will send a note home with your child in week ____ with a time for this interview. Please indicate whether you'd like the interview to be conducted by phone or at school.

☀ Phone

Your phone number: _____

Time that best suits: morning/afternoon/evening

☀ At school

Time that best suits: _____

I agree / do not agree to responses being tape recorded

Researcher's Name and contact information:

Karen Pohio

University of Waikato

027 2908448

07 8392799

pohio@ihug.co.nz

Concerns may also be discussed with your school principal

Please return this letter to your teacher or to the school office by _____

Consent Form for Student Participants

_____ School is taking part in a research project being undertaken by Karen Pohio, a student at the University of Waikato. The letter accompanying this form gives details of this research. If you are happy for your child to be interviewed by Karen about their thoughts on the _____ programme please complete the details below.

The interviews will be during week ____ of term ____

The interviews will take about 15-30 minutes each.

Note the following points about this research:

- Nobody will be named in the report about this project
- Participation is voluntary and they can withdraw from the project
- Information collected will be used only for the purpose of this project and is strictly confidential to the researcher

I agree for my child to be interviewed by Karen about the _____ programme

Signed: _____

Your name _____

Your child's name: _____ Room number _____

I agree / do not agree to responses being tape recorded

Researcher's Name and contact information:

Karen Pohio
University of Waikato
027 2908448
07 8392799
pohio@ihug.co.nz

Concerns may also be discussed with your school principal

Please return this letter to your teacher or to the school office by _____

APPENDIX I: Interview Questions

School personnel

- Tell me about your experiences with the ____ programme
- What do you think the main purpose of your _____ is?
- How are the community involved with the ____ programme?
- How do you see your role in the ____ programme?
- What are the issues that arise in the undertaking of this programme?
- What is the desired outcome of the programme – for students, for family members?
- Would you recommend any changes to the ____ programme?

Students

- Tell me about how the ____ is used at your school
- Why do you think you use _____ at your school?
- How are you involved in the _____ programme?
- Do you have any problems with the ____ programme at your school?
- What does your family think about the _____ programme?
- Do you think the ____ helps you at school?

Family members

- Tell me about your experiences with the ____ programme
- What do you think the main purpose of your _____ is?
- How do you see your role in the ____ programme?
- What do you perceive are the issues associated with the programme?
- What do you perceive the benefits of the programme are?
- Any other comments?

APPENDIX J: Activity theory and theme coding definitions

Appendix J (1)		
<i>Case study W: Theme Definition</i>		
<u>Activity theory element</u>	<u>Theme</u>	<u>Theme definition</u>
Tool	Format	The physical form of the tool
	Content	Tool content
	Regularity	Frequency with which the tool was used
	Links with other reporting	Relationship between the tool and other reporting requirements
Object	Ongoing record	Object to provide an example of where child was placed at a particular point in time that is added to the following term
	Summative report	Object to provide a summative report of progress
	Share with family	Object to share work with family members
	Uncertainty	Varying perceptions of object
Rules	Assessment	To include information that rates sample as 'above', 'at' or 'below' expected norms
	Return of books	Books to be returned to school
	Parent comment	Feedback sheet to include parent comment and signature
	Barriers to rules	Perceived reasons some parents were not able to comply with the rules
Community	Involvement	Extent and regularity of community involvement
Division of Labour	Assessment	Who implemented the requirement for assessment?
	Student involvement	The role of the students
Outcomes	Student outcomes	Reports of social, emotional and learning outcomes for students
	Family outcomes	Reports of communication and connection opportunities for family members

Appendix J (2)**Case study R: Theme Definition**

<u>Activity theory element</u>	<u>Theme</u>	<u>Theme definition</u>
Tool	Accessible	Accessibility of tool to school community
	Immediate	Features of tool related to immediacy of contact
	Flexible	Features of tool related to flexibility of contact
	Reciprocal	Features of tool related to opportunities for reciprocal contact
	Regular	Features of tool related to regularity of contact
	Issues	Issues related to the use of the tool
Object	Build positive relationships	Object to build positive relationships
	Learning	Object to improve student learning
	Behaviour	Object to improve student behaviour
	Information flow	Object to improve flow of information between home and school
	Students	Students' perceptions of the object
Rules	Recording of contacts	Rule related to the recording of contacts
	Number of contacts	Rule related to regularity of contacts
Community	Involvement	Extent and regularity of community involvement
Division of Labour	Student involvement	The role of the students
	Perceptions of power	Subjects' perceptions of division of power
Outcomes	Student outcomes	Reports of social, emotional and learning outcomes for students
	Family outcomes	Reports of communication and connection opportunities for family members

Appendix J (3)**Case study H: Theme Definition**

<u>Activity theory element</u>	<u>Theme</u>	<u>Theme definition</u>
Tool	Development	How the tool school developed
	Role of principal	How the principal supported the development of the school culture
	Staff support	How staff supported the development of the school culture
	School motto	How the school motto developed
Object	Caring community	Object to build positive relationships and a caring community atmosphere
Rules	Motto	The motto acts as a rule
Community	Wide network	The wide network of community involvement with the school
Division of Labour	Role of principal	Principal's role in the ongoing existence of the school culture
	Co-operative	Roles taken by subjects to enact the culture
Outcomes	Student outcomes	Reports of social, emotional and learning outcomes for students
	Family outcomes	Reports of communication and connection opportunities for family members

APPENDIX K: Activity theory and theme coding descriptions

Appendix K (1)		
<i>Case study W: Theme description including sample data</i>		
AT element	Theme	Sample data
Tool	Format	<p>"I do like the <u>scrapbook</u> because the pieces aren't falling out and the kids can glue them in themselves" (Gaylene, teacher)</p> <p>"I think the <u>scrapbooks</u> are a good idea because you don't lose them (work samples) everything's glued in" (Robyn, family member)</p> <p>"It looks nice in the <u>scrapbook</u> thing" (Anna, student)</p>
	Content	<p>"To make it <u>manageable</u> for me I've just gone – this is a Brag Book piece of work and known right from the beginning in my planning" (Rae, teacher)</p> <p>"We've been reinforcing to staff not to do work specifically for the Brag Book" (Diane, school leader)</p> <p>"I can see what my daughter has learnt but then I don't have the correct gauge" (Carlos, family member)</p>
	Regularity	<p>"I think it was felt it was just too much going out every term" (Mark, teacher)</p> <p>"We've looked at how many times we should be doing it in the year and we're still reviewing that" (Principal)</p> <p>"I actually prefer them to come home a bit more often than once a term" (Patricia, family member)</p>
	Links with other reporting requirements	<p>"I see it as a back-up to <u>parent interviews and reports</u>" (Mary, family member)</p> <p>"It's under the umbrella of reporting to parents and underneath that there is meet the teacher, parent interviews, Brag Books and reports" (Lynn, school leader)</p>
Object	Ongoing record	<p>"To give parents a snapshot of where their children are at" (Rae, teacher)</p> <p>"They're not <u>assessment</u> as such, they're children's <u>best work</u> or just something that they've thoroughly enjoyed" (Kate, teacher)</p>
	Summative report	<p>"I think that they're by and large <u>reporting</u>" (Principal)</p> <p>"For <u>assessment and evaluation</u>" (Diane, school leader)</p>
	Share with family	<p>"So we can show our families our <u>best work</u>" (Mele, student)</p>
	Uncertainty	<p>"I think there is a little bit of <u>confusion</u> for families" (Gaylene, teacher)</p>
Rules	Assessment	<p>"You've got to put this <u>assessment</u> sheet on it now and that marks them and gives them below, at, or above. That's what it's got to have on it now and I don't like that" (Gaylene, teacher)</p>
	Return of books	<p>"I've had them go home and they get lost and don't come back" (Mark, teacher)</p> <p>"They are having to chase back quite a number of them" (Principal)</p>
	Parent comment	<p>"There was a place for a parent comment and I expected to see a parent <u>comment</u>" (Mark, teacher)</p>
	Barriers to rules	<p>"I think they're a bit shy to write something" (Rae, teacher)</p> <p>"I think a lot of the ESOL parents don't actually <u>understand</u> it, like sometimes they write a message to me" (Jane, teacher)</p>
Community	Involvement	<p>"Very little, I had one mother phone me" (Mark, teacher)</p> <p>"We never see the <u>parents</u>" (Gaylene, teacher)</p> <p>"I'm intrigued to know what <u>parents think</u>" (Principal)</p>
Division of Labour	Assessment	<p>"I just did them cause I had to" (Rae, teacher)</p> <p>"We try to have a reflective cycle" (Principal)</p>
	Student involvement	<p>"The <u>children</u> have the opportunity to choose work that they're most proud of" (Diane, school leader)</p> <p>"Our <u>teacher</u> only chooses the work that is best" (Mele, student)</p>
Outcomes	Student outcomes	<p>"When they set their <u>goals</u> I find that really motivates them for a week or two" (Rae, teacher)</p> <p>"When we do a maths test and then we do a maths test again we can see how much we have <u>achieved</u>" (Natalie, student)</p> <p>"My son is really proud of his efforts" (Bryce, family member)</p> <p>"She's really keen to bring them home and show us" (Robyn, family member)</p>
	Family outcomes	<p>"They hadn't even seen it (the Brag Book)" (Jane, teacher)</p> <p>"I have never had any verbal <u>feedback</u>, no – never, ever, ever (Jane, teacher)</p> <p>"There are students who don't really want to take their Brag Books home" (Jane, teacher)</p>

Appendix K (2)		
Case study R: Theme description including sample data		
AT element	Theme	Sample data
Tool	Accessible	<p>"For it to be successful, it's got to continue being whole school. It can't be isolated in one class or another" (Principal)</p> <p>"To ensure contact happens, the child (without mobile contact at home) rings a person from the leadership team" (Patricia, teacher)</p>
	Immediate	<p>"If we're caught being good, actually something will happen. It won't just be a certificate at assembly on Friday" (Principal)</p> <p>"It's <u>there and then</u> and its being able to deal with it" (Carol, teacher)</p> <p>"I think it's probably better that we hear more about what's going on instead of waiting till it gets to the point where it's serious" (Krystal, family member)</p> <p>"Great to have ability for <u>instant</u> messaging, much more effective" (Sarah, teacher)</p>
	Flexible	<p>"It's good to have <u>both</u> (voice and text) so that it's not just one or the other all the time" (Carey, family member)</p> <p>"Depending on what they've done, they'll pick who they want to ring" (Shirley, family member)</p>
	Reciprocal	<p>"Lots of parents text back and initiate texts themselves" (Natasha, teacher)</p> <p>"If I've got any issues I can text her (teacher) and she answers and I feel like I'm being heard as a parent" (Tania, family member)</p>
	Regular	<p>"The <u>regularity</u> of contact is important for relationship building" (Natasha, teacher)</p>
	Issues	<p>"Had to teach children how to talk on the phones" (Patricia, teacher)</p>
Object	Build positive relationships	<p>"The main <u>purpose</u> of the programme is to develop and strengthen positive relationships with the whanau of the students" (Principal)</p> <p>"To build relationships with whanau" (Trish, teacher)</p> <p>"A positive means of building partnerships with parents" (Sarah, teacher)</p>
	Learning	<p>"Informing parents about what's happening with their children's <u>learning</u>" (Marie, teacher)</p> <p>"Getting families involved in their children's <u>learning</u>" (Marie, teacher)</p>
	Behaviour	<p>"When they're <u>good</u>, they get to, you know that's their reward, ringing home" (Carol, teacher)</p>
	Information flow	<p>"Its keeping us together and all <u>informed</u>. It makes me feel a part of the schooling system" (Tania, family member)</p> <p>"The whole purpose of this phoning calling home thing is a lot of people and a lot of parents knowing what's <u>going on</u> in the school" (Eve, family member)</p>
	Students	<p>"So people can share their learning with their <u>parents</u> and tell them how good they've been" (Aroha, student)</p>
Rules	Recording of calls	<p>"Looking at adding more tools to enable the programme to be more user friendly, such as to avoid doubling up on having to rewrite text" (Lesley, school leader)</p>
	Number of calls	<p>"Finding the requirement for the <u>number of</u> calls challenging" (Anna, teacher)</p> <p>"The requirement as to the <u>number of</u> messages is a challenge" (Sarah, teacher)</p>
Community	Involvement	<p>"The children get to choose who they want to call" (Michelle, family member)</p> <p>"The school <u>involvement</u> (in the phone home programme) has grown to have a national profile" (Principal)</p>
Division of Labour	Student involvement	<p>"It just feels terrific to share it with my parents" (Iosefa, student)</p> <p>"They actually quite like that they can ring home" (Eve, family member)</p>
	Perceptions of power	<p>"Maybe it's from my day back in the schooling but the teachers had a sense of <u>power</u> about them" (Tania, family member)</p> <p>"Broken down lots of <u>barriers</u> because many parents were shy about coming into school" (Patricia, teacher)</p>
Outcomes	Student outcomes	<p>"It helps me <u>learn</u> because if I've been good I'll learn more" (Aroha, student)</p> <p>"It actually makes you <u>work harder</u> to get it so you can use your time wisely" (Hemi, student)</p> <p>"Get excited and <u>love</u> the follow-up with home" (Lesley, school leader)</p> <p>"They <u>love</u> it and always ask to phone home" Anna, teacher)</p>
	Family outcomes	<p>"There are four <u>parents</u> without phones in my class and it is those parents that are unknown to me as no <u>relationship</u> has been formed" (Natasha, teacher)</p> <p>"Helps <u>communication</u> build between <u>students</u> and their <u>parents</u>" (Verity, support staff)</p>

Appendix K (3)

Case study H: Theme description including sample data

<u>AT element</u>	<u>Theme</u>	<u>Sample data</u>
Tool	Holistic support	"Children have an educational programme which develops their intellectual, <u>social</u> , <u>emotional</u> and creative areas" (School H, Parent Information Book, 2010)
	Development	"It's not just one thing we've tried to do before. It's not one thing you can put your finger on that makes it the way it is" (Chris, teacher) "It does just <u>evolve</u> well and truly" (Sheryl, school leader) "It's giving them (parents) the avenues to get to you rather than the other way around" (Principal)
	Role of principal	"We've done it in lots of ways" (Principal) "It's weird here because people come in with a concern and they're apologising and I say, no, that's my job" (Principal)
	Staff support	"I think it's from the staff (feeling of the school culture), led by the boss and management team but just that group of very passionate teachers" (Kylee, teacher)
	School motto	"The we <u>look after each other</u> is helpful and verbalised often" (Jenny, teacher) "I think that they do <u>look after each other</u> " (Tony, family member) "It teaches you how to <u>look after each other</u> " (Emma, student)
Object	Caring community	"The whole thing is built around <u>relationships</u> " (Principal) "When I'm doing my work no one will push me around then I'm able to get on with my work better" (Kiri, student) "If they learn together they get a lot further than just on their own" (Kerry, family member)
Rules	Motto	"We've done it around the whakatauki or around the thing of we <u>look after each other</u> " (Principal)
Community	Wide network	"Her role was to go in and identify the members of the whole family and do an IEP (Individual Education Plan) on the whole lot" (Principal) "There's been a lot of work around the children seeing people moving forward" (Kylee, teacher)
Division of labour	Role of principal	"It is actually taking the time to go and say hello to a parent" (Principal)
	Co-operative	"All the staff work very hard and there's a great deal of trust among the staff" (Kylee, teacher) "People figure out what their strengths are and then they work to their strengths" (James, teacher) "It's about a 'yes we can' <u>attitude</u> " (Kylee, teacher) "Expect that they will do well" (Cameron, teacher) "We tend to adapt to suit the needs of the family or the child" (Penny, teacher)
Outcomes	Student outcomes	"If people aren't <u>learning</u> I ask them if they want help" (Harry, student) "I think it has influence on our <u>learning</u> " (Penelope, student) "The children are taking ownership of their own <u>learning</u> " (Justine, family member) "They do all <u>look after each other</u> " (Jade, family member)
	Family outcomes	"I wouldn't hesitate (to come into school) if I had any issues" (Jade, family member) "I've always found the teachers really approachable and the office staff and the principal" (Fiona, family member) "We do have some families now who have adopted it as their rule at home" (Principal)

**APPENDIX L: How decisions were made to code data that could have
been multi-coded in Case study W**

Appendix L (1)			
<i>Community involvement with the Brag Books</i>			
<u>Possible activity theory category:</u>	<u>Tool</u>	<u>Rules</u>	<u>Community</u>
How coding decisions were made:	What is the community involvement with the Brag Book?	What are the barriers faced by the community to the rules of the programme?	How does the community respond to the programme?
Sample data:	"We've had meetings about how we could improve it within the school" (Kate, teacher)	"I think a lot of ESOL parents don't understand it" (Jane, teacher)	"I've had one mother phone me" (Mark, teacher)

Appendix L (2)			
<i>Inclusion of assessment information in the Brag Books</i>			
<u>Possible activity theory category:</u>	<u>Object</u>	<u>Rules</u>	<u>Division of Labour</u>
How coding decisions were made:	Why was it included?	What is the requirement?	Who implements the requirement?
Sample data:	"I think they're [Brag Books] by and large reporting" (Principal)	"You've got to put this assessment sheet on it now that marks them and gives them below, at, or above" (Gaylene, teacher)	"I just did them cause I had to" (Rae, teacher)

Appendix L (3)		
<i>Selection of work samples for the Brag Books</i>		
<u>Possible activity theory category:</u>	<u>Tool</u>	<u>Division of Labour</u>
How coding decisions were made:	What samples should be included?	Who chooses the samples?
Sample data:	"Not to do work specifically for the Brag Books" (Diane, school leader)	"The teacher chooses" (Hera, student)

**APPENDIX M: How decisions were made to code data that could have
been multi-coded in Case study R**

Appendix M (1)		
<i>Issues with the mobile phone programme</i>		
<u>Possible activity theory element:</u>	<u>Tool</u>	<u>Rules</u>
How coding decisions were made:	What the general concerns involve	What the concern with the rule involves
Sample data:	"Had to teach children how to talk on the phone" (Patricia, teacher)	"Finding the requirement as to the number of calls challenging" (Anna, teacher)

APPENDIX N: How decisions were made to code data that could have been multi-coded in Case study H

Appendix N (1)			
<i>School culture</i>			
<u>Possible activity theory category:</u>	<u>Tools</u>	<u>Object</u>	<u>Division of Labour</u>
How coding decisions were made:	How was the culture developed?	Why was the culture developed?	Who implements the culture?
Sample data:	"We've done it in lots of ways" (Principal)	"When I'm doing my work no one will push me around then I'm able to get on with my work better" (Kiri, student)	"We tend to adapt to suit the needs of the family or the child" (Penny, teacher)

Appendix N (2)			
<i>School motto</i>			
<u>Possible activity theory category:</u>	<u>Tools</u>	<u>Object</u>	<u>Division of Labour</u>
How coding decisions were made:	How was the motto developed?	Why was the motto developed?	Who implements the motto?
Sample data:	"We brought it in over that time period, over about a year or so when we started to look at the concept of looking after each other and it evolved almost by accident" (Principal)	"The whole school is built around 'we look after each other'" (Principal)	"Everyone looks after each other" (Tiana, student)

Appendix N (3)		
<i>Principal's role</i>		
<u>Possible activity theory element:</u>	<u>Tool</u>	<u>Division of Labour</u>
How coding decisions were made:	How was the principal's role in the development of the school culture described?	How was the principal's role in the ongoing existence of the school culture described?
Sample data:	"I've overspent on those decks out there but it's important . . . to make it like a village" (Principal)	"It is actually taking the time to go and say hello to a parent" (Principal)

