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**Dancing to the Music of Your Heart:
Home Schooling the School-Resistant Child**

A Constructionist Account of School Refusal

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ABSTRACT

School resistance is usually understood as a pathological behaviour or condition indicative of underlying mental disorder for which therapy is 'indicated' and home schooling is 'contraindicated'. However, I argue that the psychiatric/psychological classifications commonly used to identify school resistance (i.e. 'school phobia' and 'school refusal') are socio-historical constructs that function to socially and discursively position school-resistant children as 'abnormal', 'irrational', 'dysfunctional' and 'sick' individuals whose problems are likely to be compounded by school withdrawal. Assuming that school resistance and home schooling can be constructed in multiple and competing ways, I explore the perspectives of seven school-resistant children who are being (or have been) home schooled, their mothers, and nine practitioners working with children. I argue that by applying a different set of assumptions to school resistance, the meaning of this phenomenon can be radically transformed and so too can the experiences of school resisters and their families. This research suggests that for some mothers and their school-resistant children, home schooling can provide an acceptable and effective solution to the problems raised by school resistance.

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INTRODUCTION

The school refuser is generally defined as a child or adolescent who dislikes and fears school (or aspects of school) and persistently refuses to attend or attends very unwillingly. S/he often exhibits somatic (physical) symptoms on school days (e.g. nausea, vomiting, headaches, fatigue) but generally recovers or improves on weekends, during school holidays and when permitted to stay home from school. This individual is also known as a 'school phobic' within the psy¹ literature. The school refuser and his or her family are understood as 'at risk' for a variety of personal and social ills and as requiring the guidance, support and intervention of qualified professionals.

School resistance is predominantly researched, discussed and treated as pathological. It may be understood as a disorder in itself (i.e. school phobia or school refusal) that can (with care) be differentiated and distinguished from other similar problems (such as truancy), or it may be considered symptomatic of a range of possible underlying or associated psychiatric conditions, for example, social phobia, depression or separation anxiety disorder. I will argue that such a conception of school resistance as indicating psychological and/or biological disorder located within children's brains is profoundly misleading. This thesis is intended to contribute to the literature a perspective that explores school phobia and school refusal as discursive constructions. An analysis of school phobia/school refusal as constructs arising out of discourse reveals multiple possibilities for 'storying' children's school resistance.

By arguing that school refusal is socially constructed, I am questioning the transformation of school resistance into the psychiatric/psychological, the pathologisation of this phenomenon as 'disorder' and the legitimating of subjugating practices on the basis of a dominant assumption that children who resist school are 'at risk' for psychiatric, educational, social and developmental problems. Hence, while I deny the reality of school refusal as a problem located within children, I do not deny that the psychiatric/psychological construction of school resistance as 'school refusal' has real effects on the children that fall into this category (and their families) and that it may *become* their reality. Children diagnosed with

¹ I am using the generic term 'psy' to refer to psychiatry, psychology and all of their affiliates within the human sciences.

school refusal may really suffer, but I shall argue that a considerable part of that suffering is the effect of diagnostic, management and treatment practices within and outside the school. From this perspective, all human distress, including the distress that school resisters experience at school or when they fail to attend school, is mediated and constructed. My concern is to examine that mediation and ask what interests are being served by the current construction of children's school resistance as 'school refusal' (and 'school phobia'). I would argue that dominant understandings of the school refuser and its family have functioned to negate, obscure and de-value other ways of constituting and responding to children who find school aversive and resist attending.

I believe that there is a need within the psy literature on school phobia/school refusal for a text that challenges hegemonic theories and practices and opens up new possibilities for school resisters and their families. A major concern of this thesis is with addressing the problem of how school resistance can be constructed in a way that allows space for home schooling to position itself as a legitimate and acceptable alternative to school return. Within the dominant system of meanings, home schooling a school-resistant child who has been identified as a 'school refuser' is generally understood as a temporary measure or 'last resort' when all attempts to return the child to school have failed. This is a very different understanding of home education from that associated with the 'normal' home schooler. When a child is a 'normal' home schooler, home schooling is often seen as a legitimate option and a lifestyle choice or religious/spiritual duty. School refusal and home schooling, while both involving a child who is at home rather than at school, have very different histories, fields of knowledge and regimes of truth attached to them. It is the purpose of this study to explore how the discourses surrounding school resistance and home schooling produce different subject positions which, when taken up by individuals, have implications for subjectivity and experience. I explore the ways mothers who educate their school-resistant children at home understand their educational practices, and examine the wider politics and philosophies of home schooling to consider how these can contribute to our understanding of the ways school resistance is/can be known and managed in New Zealand.

School resisters and their parents produce their own reality and their own alternative domains of truth and knowledge in the process of rejecting the ways that institutions and individuals attempt to define, know and control them. There is a gap in the literature, I

believe, in the area of understanding the ways that individuals discursively construct school resistance. Within the discursive field of school phobia/school refusal, the stories of parents and children are often written out or written over by psychological authorities (describing, interpreting and sharing their clinical experiences). For mainstream mental health professionals, persistent school resistance is associated with social and emotional problems, a lack of educational credentials, unemployment and poor prospects in general.

As individuals who are understood as ‘at risk’, school refusers (and school phobics) have been discursively constructed in ways that allow their interpretations and perceptions to be de-valued. School refusers’ claims that school is an unpleasant or dangerous place, that they feel too sick to attend, or that they should not *have* to attend school, are generally dismissed by researchers, health and educational professionals as ‘false’ knowledge (i.e. irrational, irrelevant, exaggerated and untrue). Similarly, the knowledge that parents of school phobics and school refusers have about their child is often ignored, contradicted or treated with suspicion. In chapter one I discuss how, when school resistance is understood as ‘school phobia’ or ‘school refusal’, parents (especially mothers) are often constructed as ‘neurotic’, ‘colluding’ and in need of psychological treatment or training alongside their children.

This thesis draws upon interview data obtained from six mothers, five children (seven children in total were included in the study), eight educational professionals and one psychologist. Families were included in the study if a parent indicated that their child or children had experienced on-going anxiety about school and had resisted attending or stopped attending prior to home schooling. As I approach school refusal as a social construct rather than as a medical or psychological reality, I did not attempt to use established clinical or behavioural definitions to ‘scientifically’ select participants. The children presented with a variety of diagnosed disorders but in six out of seven cases had *not* been formally identified as having ‘school refusal’ or ‘school phobia’. So although my child participants all demonstrated the behaviours typically associated with school phobia and school refusal in the psy literature, and would likely be classified as ‘school refusers’ or as displaying ‘school refusal behaviour’ by many contemporary researchers, they were not necessarily understood in this way by parents or professionals. Rather, the problematic behaviours of these children relating to school attendance were understood in multiple and often contradictory ways.

These competing ways of ‘storying’ school resistance experiences, and the implications raised for educational and therapeutic practice, are central to my thesis.

If we accept that children who find school aversive and resist attending are understood in multiple and contradictory ways, then it does not make sense to refer to all of these children as ‘school refusers’. A ‘school refuser’ (or ‘school phobic’) is a specific type of subject that arises out of psychiatric and psychological discourses. That is, these constructs are historically and culturally contingent products of the psy disciplines. However, the terms ‘school phobia’ and ‘school refusal’ now appear in other (marginal) discourses as well, where they may take on slightly or radically different meanings from the dominant ones. This makes the analysis and discussion of school phobia and school refusal within discourse an interesting but often imprecise and messy process.

In this text I frequently refer to children who dislike and avoid school as ‘school resisters’. I find this term useful because it does not appear in the dominant literature and consequently does not imply medical or psychological meanings (e.g. of individual dysfunction). Hence, it allows me to talk about specific types of school non-attendance while at the same time approaching school phobia and school refusal as constructed phenomena. I use the terms ‘school phobia’ and ‘school refusal’ with an awareness of their historic, discursive, social and political contexts and meanings. I should also point out my recognition that the term ‘school resistance’ may be neither politically neutral nor value-free.

As mentioned above, in this project I interviewed six mothers with school-resistant children. The literature on/about school phobia/school refusal has traditionally focused on the mother’s role in causing or perpetuating pathological school behaviour. This is, in itself, perhaps not a very good reason for my focus on mothers (along with children) in this study, but it does highlight a certain tension and conflict surrounding the mother-child dyad with regards to school resistance that seems to be absent in the case of fathers. I discuss my reasons for concentrating on mothers, to the exclusion of fathers, in more detail in chapter three. In this study, I have attempted to identify, examine and question the common assumptions surrounding the mother-child relationship in cases where children’s school attendance becomes seriously problematic, and in chapter seven consider other possibilities for discursively positioning mothers experiencing this problem. The mothers in this study had decided to withdraw their distressed and resistant children from school and to home

school them, as opposed to initiating or persisting with conventional psychotherapeutic treatments. These were the families I was targeting for this research as I am interested in both the unique knowledge and self-understandings of mothers and children who home school due to school resistance, and the discursive framings that make these views, and the practices attached to them, possible (or inevitable).

The mothers I spoke with may have been atypical home schoolers in that they had started home schooling because of their child's problems at school and not as a lifestyle choice or for religious reasons. Baldwin (1993), a postgraduate student who has conducted a sociological analysis of New Zealand home schooling, suggests that while home schoolers in New Zealand are not a monolithic group they can be broadly divided into two categories. The first group, labeled the "libertarian-deschoolers" (p.16) by Baldwin, home school their children for pedagogical and philosophical reasons. They believe that schools are largely incompetent and fail to value children's independence and creativity. The second group holds beliefs that are conservative, often Christian, and are concerned with promoting social order, traditional family values and/or individual excellence. This group is identified by Baldwin as "home schoolers of the New Right" (p.16). It is possible however that many children who are purportedly home schooled for lifestyle or religious reasons may also have experienced problems at school that would, within the context of this study, make them school resisters and could, within dominant meaning systems, identify them as school refusers. Home schoolers, like all individuals, can be positioned and understood in a variety of competing ways.

The question of how home schooling can become recognised as a legitimate option for children who resist school, rather than being ruled out through a diagnosis of 'school phobia' or 'school refusal', is closely tied to practitioners' perspectives on home schooling and school resistance. Educational and health professionals are often the first and/or only sources of 'help' and/or advice for parents with children whose school attendance is problematic. This being the case, the kind of advice/help received will depend on (to some extent) the practitioner's perspective. The dominant literature that constructs school resistance as school phobia/school refusal almost always advocates returning children who dislike and resist school back to school as quickly as possible. Such literature either makes no

mention of home schooling as an option or suggests that home schooling will *compound* the problem.

It seems reasonable to assume that the majority of psychiatrists and psychologists working with school-resistant children will conduct their practice within the dominant system of meanings available to them. Hence, I considered it unnecessary to interview this group. Their perspectives have been well documented (to the exclusion of other views). One registered psychologist was interviewed for this study because of his crucial role in determining who has access to the Correspondence School of New Zealand Te Kura-a-Tuhi on 'psychological' or 'psychosocial' grounds. He was an 'atypical' psychologist in that his work frequently brought him into contact with both children who resisted school (some of whom had already been diagnosed with 'school refusal' or 'school phobia') as well as children being educated outside of the school setting i.e. being home schooled or learning through the Correspondence School.

The first point of contact for families with a child who starts resisting school is often not the psychiatrist or psychologist but the principal, teacher or family doctor. This led me to wonder how these latter 'front-line' professionals understand school resistance and home schooling. If school staff and health practitioners have a dominant understanding of school resistance as indicative of individual and familial pathology, and/or have an unfavourable view of home schooling in general, then they may not consider home schooling as a viable option for most (or any) children who resist school. Instead, they may focus all efforts on returning the child to 'normal' schooling. Obviously, for home schooling to be a real option for school-resistant children (however they might be defined), their parents must be informed about it in a way that constructs this choice as legal, legitimate, socially and medically acceptable.

In this study, owing to limited time and resources, I examined the perspectives of a very small group of practitioners. Eight of the nine practitioners interviewed were working in schools or preschools. While medical practitioners' views on school resistance and home schooling are important, I felt that my background in education better facilitated access to educational settings and personnel. By interviewing New Zealand principals and teachers about their thoughts and attitudes regarding school resistance and home schooling, I was able to identify the meaning systems within which they were operating, and thus better understand

how certain knowledges inform and limit their interactions with children whose school attendance is problematic.

This research undoubtedly springs out of my own history. I resisted school doggedly for many years with mixed reactions from my parents, teachers and peers. I was determined not to return to school but as a ‘school-aged’ child seemed to have no options for constructing a healthy, productive or socially acceptable lifestyle outside of school. While I was absent from school for many years, I was never officially diagnosed as a ‘school refuser’ (to my knowledge). I have however been retrospectively labelled as having suffered from ‘school phobia’ by a London psychiatrist who was treating me for depression as an adult. The psychiatrist’s framing of my ‘school problems’ in letters to other mental health professionals illustrates a simple and central tenet of this thesis: school resistance can be ‘storied’ in a variety of competing ways. In one account of my history, the psychiatrist attributes the fact that I disliked school to my feeling “very insecure there” and concludes that I probably “suffered from school phobia”. At the same time, he understands my school resistance during adolescence as stemming from “depression”. In another account, the psychiatrist makes no mention of school phobia or depression and simply states that I “hated school”, attributing my lack of high school attendance to health problems.

This study is political in nature, in that all research has implications for the distribution of power in society. I am interested in undermining dominant psychological realities and raising critical consciousness regarding the plurality of possible meanings that can be given to school resistance. But this study is also very personal. My experiences as a ‘subject’ and ‘object’ of medical and psychotherapeutic practices necessarily inform the approach I have taken to understanding the management of children’s school resistance. In chapter six I explore in some detail one school resister’s journey through the therapeutic as a school phobic/school refuser.

I will end this introduction by sharing three short stories of my own ‘therapeutic journey’. These stories may indicate the approach I am taking to understanding the psychotherapeutic, further elaborated in chapter five, as a domain where power is exercised, negotiated and struggled over by individuals (‘therapists’ and ‘patients’), and where the ‘patient’ becomes highly motivated and actively involved in creating, accepting and rejecting the various versions of themselves that are brought forth within therapy.

Account 1

When I ask to see my mental health file, I am only shown selected documents. These have been assessed and edited for content that I might find ‘disturbing’. I am not allowed to take the documents away or to copy them. I have to view these documents in the clinic, with the psychotherapist present. There is a clear expectation that I will find the documents disturbing. The psychotherapist asks repeatedly why I want to view my file. His reluctance only fuels my determination (and need) to see what ‘they’ have written about me. I have turned up on several occasions expecting to view the documents only to be told that were not ready (adequately assessed, processed and prepared?). A great therapeutic ritual surrounds the release of this information— the information is obviously potentially dangerous (dangerously true?). After much build-up and many arguments an appointment is finally scheduled for me to view the documents—it is an extra long appointment—the psychotherapist does not want the viewing to interfere with our ‘work’—I must wait fifty minutes till the end of our session. The psychiatrist is standing by in case I get ‘upset’. I read these official documents about me with intense interest. My heart is pounding hard, I feel dizzy and unreal. I become hyperaware that I am an object under observation, I feel threatened—but also I am too excited; feel almost manic, the attention is intoxicating. I ask questions, I try to memorise every sentence—it is poetry about me. The psychotherapist says that I am upset and agitated. He wants to get the psychiatrist. He says if I won’t look at him and talk to him he will get the psychiatrist. He thinks that I am upset by what the documents ‘reveal’ about my mental state—but I revel in it, claim it as my own almost immediately. My diagnosis is a prize, I earned it, I show it off to my friends.

Account 2

We are sitting in a dark, shabby office at the community mental health centre. The duty therapist assumes that I suffer from ‘low self-esteem’ and I am insulted by the implication that my problem is so commonplace. I can have no respect for a therapist

who fails to see the extraordinary quality of my psychopathology. She states, “You’re very special. Don’t you feel that you’re very special?” I reply that I don’t see that I’m any more or less ‘special’ than anyone else. She says, “No, everyone’s special”. I say, “Well if everyone’s special then doesn’t that mean that no one’s special”. This is obviously not the way she expected the conversation to go. She panics. “Well, I think I’m special” she says defensively. I am openly scornful—I know I’m being cruel.

Account 3

I am in the waiting room of a huge gothic hospital. It reminds me of Wuthering Heights, which is also the book I am currently reading. I have a conversation with an irate patient in a wheelchair. A group of students enter the room. They are talking animatedly about lectures, assignments and the weekend. I find myself listening in to their conversation, identifying with them, reliving my very recent student days. I am called into the psychiatrist’s office. I realise that the students are there to observe me and the sharp shift from ‘student’ to ‘psychiatric patient’ stuns me. I sheepishly take my place. They are seated in a row to one side and slightly behind me so that they are just outside my field of vision. I notice this and shift my position to look at them briefly. They smile condescendingly. I am not one of them.

CHAPTER ONE

The Construction of School Resistance as an Object of the Psy Disciplines

Within contemporary Western societies there has been both a marked growth in recognised forms of psychopathology and an expansion in the therapeutic industries that treat them. While, historically, labels of mental illness were reserved for those individuals who exhibited extremely strange, incomprehensible or disruptive behaviour, now a wide range of emotional responses, learning difficulties and problem behaviours are understood as symptoms of clinical conditions previously unheard of (Horwitz, 2002; Tausig, Michello & Subedi, 2004). In other words, much of social life has become ‘medicalised’ and ‘psychologised’; evaluated through the ‘gaze’ of medical personnel and psychologists, and understood in terms of potential health effects. Everyday events such as marriage, childbirth, house purchase and divorce are interpreted as potentially pathological spaces where individuals are likely to encounter problems of coping and adjustment, possibly resulting in stress and dysfunction, and accordingly needing to be analysed, understood and managed by professionals (Rose, 1999). The observation that modern individuals’ understandings of themselves and their social relations are increasingly conceptualised in medical or psychological terms has led to suggestions that we live in a “therapy culture” (Furedi, 2003, title) or “psychological society” (Kvale, 1992, p.43).

Widespread provision of counselling and other therapeutic services may appear to be a humane and necessary response to the ever expanding array of psychological disorders and syndromes which afflict modern society. However, it is possible to view the therapy industry as implicated in creating (not just treating) mental health problems through the production, categorisation, distribution and utilisation of psychological knowledge. Mental health professionals can be seen to construct psychopathology through employing vocabularies that point to disorder (Parker, 1995). One cannot identify and categorise someone as ‘school phobic’ or ‘separation anxious’ unless we have access to these terms and know what they mean. Mental illness is not prediscursive—it does not exist inside the patient prior to its articulation within medical or psychological discourses. Rather, the process of recording ‘symptoms’ and matching them with clinical criteria is a constructive activity that produces a

diagnosis, an illness that the patient is now said to suffer from. The presence of illness then requires the imposition of specialised treatments which only the professional can provide, thus sustaining the privileged position of the mental health sector in the management of human distress.

In this chapter I argue that school phobia and school refusal can be understood as socially constructed and discursively produced phenomena. As explained in the introduction, I am drawing a distinction between the generic concept of school resistance (avoiding school because one finds it aversive) and the socio-historic constructs ‘school phobia’ and ‘school refusal’, that have arisen out of the psy disciplines and constitute school non-attendance in specific ways. My approach is informed by the work of the poststructuralist Michel Foucault, who connected the development of discourses which describe and prescribe forms of rationality, responsibility and pathology with ideological and political interests, i.e. power. This chapter is primarily concerned with how school phobia and school refusal are brought forth within dominant psychiatric and psychological discourses and practices. The first section of the chapter outlines the ‘medical’ approach to understanding school resistance that constructs an aversion to school as ‘sickness’, specifically, anxiety associated with mental disorder. Then, in contrast to this approach, I consider social constructionism as potentially providing an alternative epistemological perspective on school resistance, and indicate my ‘place’ within this field. In the second section of this chapter, I consider how competing theories have pathologised the meaning of school resistance and determined the treatment of those displaying it. Section three examines how the methods and means of classifying children who resist school within the psy disciplines have changed over time. The final section of this chapter looks at changes in the language used by researches and practitioners to talk about and label school resistance and considers the implications of these changes.

The Dominant Medical Model

The vast majority of authors currently contributing within the field of school phobia and school refusal understand school resistance within a framework consistent with the ‘medical model’. By medical model I am referring to biological and psychological explanations for phenomena classified as mental illness that assume some identifiable cause

such as faulty genes, unbalanced brain chemicals, trauma or abusive relationships. For example, Read (2000), co-founder of the Phobic Trust of New Zealand, employs this model when she states that “today we know that [having an anxiety disorder] is no different from having diabetes or any other type of illness” (p.12). Within this model, school resistance is generally constructed as ‘school refusal’, a maladaptive and heterogeneously determined childhood/adolescent behaviour which requires corrective attention through therapy (e.g. see Heyne, Rollings, King & Tonge, 2004; Kearney, 2001). Typically, the problem is discursively linked to certain psychiatric disorders such as separation anxiety disorder and depression (Egger, Costello & Angold, 2003). School refusal (and the pathology underlying it) is said to stem from the interaction between innate characteristics, environmental stressors (e.g. family dysfunction or crisis, bullying, moving house) and learned responses.

The dominant approach to understanding and treating school resistance is well illustrated in a recent article (De Silva, 2006) in Australian newspaper, *The Age*. In this article, De Silva interviews Amanda Dudley, a psychologist and researcher who treats school refusers at the Monash University-affiliated Centre for Developmental Psychiatry and Psychology at Monash Medical Centre in Australia, and Pat Boyhan, a psychologist and family therapist with Centacare Catholic Family Services in Melbourne, who provide specialist school refusal services for children, families and teachers. The subtitle to this article states that “Children who are stay-home ‘refusers’ may have deep emotional problems” (p.4). School refusers are described by De Silva as “children who feel emotional distress at the thought of fronting up to the classroom” (p.4). In the article, Dudley suggests that there are many reasons for school refusal, including separation anxiety (in younger children), social and academic difficulties, and bullying. De Silva discusses the case of ‘Jack’, a seventeen-year-old who resisted school for several years and was considered by the school to be “misbehaving” (p.4). Jack was eventually diagnosed with school refusal by a school counsellor and had been receiving treatment for social phobia from Dudley for five months. Boyhan states that left untreated “school refusers are at risk of long term mental health problems” and suggests that “early intervention” with a specialist service is imperative for “getting children back to school” (p.4).

Most researchers and clinicians in the field of school phobia and school refusal work in America, Australia, Britain and Japan within the disciplines of counselling, psychology

and psychiatry and, like Dudley and Boyhan quoted above, are affiliated with university departments and/or treatment clinics. They generally adopt a positivist philosophy and methodological approach that emphasises empiricism and objectivity. This approach assumes that school-refusal pathology is real, that school refusers possess certain traits and commonalities, and that by understanding these traits we can understand the ‘causes’ of school refusal. Determining cause and effect is considered important for social control and maintaining norms that protect society and are enacted for the common good. Positivist approaches tend to ignore the subjective experience of the school resister (and school refuser) and the meanings that school resistance has for the individual child. They uncritically accept that school-resistant behaviour is detrimental and must be understood, explained and controlled. In addition, this approach assumes that researcher objectivity is possible and does not recognise that reporting ‘factual’ information about school phobia and school refusal is an activity enmeshed in ideology and politics.

Psychiatry and other clinical approaches concerned with treating mental distress comprise one of the networks of institutions which serve to individualise problems. The pathologisation and psychologisation of human existence involves interpreting our experiences as problematic within medical and psychological frameworks and therefore predominantly understanding them as individual problems. The result is that issues like crime, child abuse and truancy are increasingly interpreted through the language of psychiatry and psychology “as personal inadequacies, guilt feelings, anxieties, conflicts and neuroses” (Beck, quoted in Furedi, 2003, p.25). For psychiatrists, those thoughts and behaviours that are categorised as pathological are generally understood as symptoms of distinct biomedical diseases (Horwitz, 2002). Psychologists may not utilise biological explanations for mental health problems, but they still see the ultimate cause of psychological disorder as an individualistic process stemming from the client’s unique biography (Tausig et al., 2004).

Human beings tend not to fit into a neat array of diagnostic pigeonholes. Instead, human experience may present as messy, contradictory and varied, defying professional attempts to pin in down with one or more labels. Psychiatrists operating within a strict medical model may approach this problem by emphasising the specificity of the patient’s symptoms, while more humanist-oriented therapists frequently focus on their client’s

individuality and personality. However, both strict medical and humanist approaches to treating problems are implicated in the process of individualising and decontextualising distress (Kvale, 1992). The rhetoric of individuality draws attention away from social and political contexts that necessarily inform individual experience. Locating problems in the individual ‘self’ removes responsibility from society and makes the individual accountable for the ‘problem’ and hence the prime target for intervention and rehabilitation. This approach is implicitly reductionist, emphasising individual attributes, reducing the social to the interpersonal and failing to locate mental disorders within the broader realms of history, culture and politics.

School Refusal as a Social Construction

The dominant medical model of mental illness has not existed uncontested. Sociologists, for example, generally make very different assumptions about the causes of disorder and responsibility for illness from psychiatrists and psychologists. Sociology is not a clinical science but is interested in collective behaviour and the social structures that determine it. That is, sociologists are generally less interested in individual experience and more concerned with the social conditions which determine why experiences like mental illness are common to different people and vary between groups according to characteristics such as gender, age and race/ethnicity (Tausig et al., 2004).

From a sociological perspective, mental illness can be understood as the “medicalization of deviant behavior” (Tausig et al., 2004, p.149). This process involves classifying some deviant behaviour (i.e. behaviour that violates norms and role expectations) as illness and attempting to manage and correct it through therapeutic treatment rather than punishment. Within this framework, the medicalisation of deviance can be understood as a form of social control that has both benefits and drawbacks. Genuinely sick individuals are not blamed or punished for their behaviour if their actions are seen to be the result of a disorder that is attributed to biological processes beyond their control. On the other hand, when the medical system is used as an instrument for controlling deviant behaviour, mental disorder is understood as an individual phenomenon and the social causes of psychological problems, which are of central importance for sociologists, may be ignored (Tausig et al.,

2004). ‘Labelling theory’ (Goffman, 1961; Rosenhan, 1973; Scheff, 1966) takes a negative view of the medical system’s role in social control, arguing that the process of social labelling (i.e. diagnosis) *produces* mental illness and keeps people ‘sick’ through isolation, social stigmatisation and the actions of professionals who reward behaviour that seems to confirm the diagnosis and punish the patient’s attempts to deny or escape the label.

In the 1960s and 1970s the anti-psychiatry movement provided a radical voice of opposition to psychiatric authority and the medical model of mental illness. The anti-psychiatrists problematised psychiatric knowledge and treatment protocols (Odgen, 2002). One pioneer of the movement was Szasz (1961) who accepted the existence of physical disease but argued that mental illness was a product of labelling, social norms and a psychiatric ideology focused on social control (Ogden, 2002). Because Szasz denied the medical reality of psychiatric illness, he required the individual to take full responsibility (including financial responsibility) for any treatment sought.

Sociological and anti-psychiatry accounts of mental disorder contrast with medical and psychological explanations because they understand mental illness as (to some degree) ‘socially constructed’. By saying that something is socially constructed, I mean that an idea which may appear to be natural and obvious is in reality a social or cultural invention or artifact. That is, it is determined by humans (their perceptions, choices, desires) not by ‘divine will’ or ‘nature’. The social construction of reality is an ongoing, dynamic process whereby reality is reproduced by individuals and groups acting on their interpretations and knowledge of it. The constructionist perspective that I am taking involves looking at the ways that social phenomena are created, institutionalised and made into tradition/convention by humans. From this perspective, there are multiple ways of constructing school resistance that have developed from various ideological and political interests. School resistance can be understood as ‘truancy’ (which may be defined as a behavioural disorder associated with delinquency), as ‘school phobia’ (traditionally understood as a form of separation anxiety), as ‘school refusal’ (sometimes constructed as an anxious behaviour symptomatic of emotional disorder), or it may be seen as a profound rejection of compulsory institutionalisation. As a plural, uncertain and fluid phenomenon, school resistance can be re-interpreted and its social meaning contested.

To say that school refusal is socially constructed is different from having a social theory about school refusal. Sociologists and social psychologists frequently argue that certain ‘social factors’ influence an entity called mental illness. Such an approach diverts attention from the socially constructed nature of psychiatric/psychological disorders and of human distress in general by focusing on questions of causation rather than asking how and why certain human conditions and problems come to be understood and treated as pathological in the first place (Parker, 1995). Social constructionism has a relativist epistemology that repudiates the doctrine of realism, that is, rejects the idea that mental diseases (or disorders) exist as natural and stable entities regardless of the social meanings attached to them. I am not (only) arguing that the behaviour of so-called ‘school refusers’ can be explained by social variables like aggression in schools or pressure to succeed, but that school refusal itself is a social construct.

The social construction of the school refuser is accomplished through the pathologisation and psychologisation of children’s resistance to the social and cultural imperative to attend school. This is evident for example in the New Zealand Correspondence School’s enrolment policy where school resisters are categorised as having “psychological or psychosocial needs” that must be assessed by a Ministry of Education (MOE) Group Special Education psychologist and “appropriately managed and addressed” (MOE, 2006). Eligibility for Correspondence on psychological/psychosocial grounds is dependent upon an understanding that “the psychological grounds...reside within the individual student” (MOE, 2006). According to Kate Ford, acting principal of the Correspondence School in 2003, the psychological/psychosocial category contains within it “the bullied, the bullies, the abused, the depressed and all kinds of students who cannot or will not attend their local school” (personal communication, July 22, 2003). As a deviant behaviour (i.e. a behaviour that violates social norms and role expectations) school resistance is an activity that society seeks to control, in part, by defining it as an individual psychological problem and attempting to correct it therapeutically.

The psychiatric/psychological category ‘school refusal’ has been developed, defined and defended by experts according to value-laden definitions of normality. Research and clinical practices do not simply describe what is already out there in school resisters’ minds and bodies, they actively construct a version of both ‘normal’ and ‘abnormal’ feelings and

behaviour with regards to school, which provide a framework for classifying children's behaviour as pathological (and for self-classification). Abnormality is powerfully defined with reference to supposedly 'normal' behaviour and relationships even within purportedly 'liberal' societies (Parker, 1995). The medical and psychological vocabularies used in research and clinical work constitute and maintain school resistance as 'school refusal' (a pathological phenomenon) as they seek to explain and treat it. At the same time, the psy disciplines deny both the constitutive role of language (assuming its neutrality and transparency as a means of describing objective reality) and their own partiality (presenting their version of reality as the 'truth').

From a constructionist perspective, psychiatric and psychological theories that constitute school resistance in terms of intrapsychic or intrafamilial pathology can be seen as ideologically and politically motivated. Diagnostic labels like 'depression' and 'social phobia', which are frequently attached to children who resist school, locate the source of the school resister's unhappiness and anxiety within, by blaming such things as bio-chemistry or distorted cognitions rather than the things that children have been subjected to emotionally, physically and socially at school. When school resistance is defined as a 'personal' rather than a 'social' problem, this affects both the kinds of therapeutic interventions likely to be utilised and what counts as a desirable prognosis, i.e. interventions are likely to be medical and psychological, aimed at school return, rather than aimed at reforming the education system. By failing to critically address the sociocultural environment in which school resisters live, individualistic explanations confirm and reproduce the idea that attending school is 'normal' and 'healthy' while its reverse, school non-attendance, is 'abnormal' and 'unhealthy'. Thus, one effect of the construction of school resistance as 'school refusal' through professional diagnosis, is to police a firm distinction between what is 'normal' and what is 'pathological'.

A Discursive Approach to Social Constructionism

Beyond understanding school phobia and school refusal as constructed rather than 'natural' entities, it is possible to emphasise the discursive evolution and contingency of these classifications. I have argued that representations of school resistance are not uniform;

rather they are fragmented and varied. It is therefore necessary to give an account of both dominant cultural representations of school resistance as ‘school phobia’ and ‘school refusal’ and more subjugated representations, and to consider the way these representations both serve to fulfil certain political interests. A number of authors have questioned the assumption that school resistance is caused by pathology inherent in the individual, pointing instead to problems within the school system (e.g. Fortune-Wood, 2000; Knox, 1990). These perspectives can be broadly categorised as sociological in that they argue that it is the way the education system is organised, rather than just biological or psychological characteristics of individuals, that must be considered when children resist attending school. While these theorists, whom I discuss in detail in chapter two, recognise (to varying degrees) that school phobia and school refusal are in some sense socially constructed or culturally contingent, they rarely extend their critique to analysing these constructs as products of discourse and remain entrenched in arguments of causation.

Social constructionism can go beyond the question of causation and transcend a simple individual/social dualism through examining the conditions under which experiences like not wanting to be at school themselves become constructed as ‘problems’. I am suggesting that the etiology of school phobia and school refusal cannot be traced within the individual or within the social environment of the school, or even within a simple interaction between the two, but must be uncovered through the analysis of discourses. The term ‘discourse’ appears within a variety of disciplines and therefore has several meanings. My interest in discourse is at the more macro level. That is, I am not interested in the individual words spoken by people but in the language used to construct and give meaning to aspects of the world—although the division between micro- and macro- level discourses is arguably an artificial one as macro discourses can be seen to permeate and create micro-level discourses (Ogden, 2002). Parker (1992) has defined discourse as “*a system of statements which constructs an object*” (p.5). My use of the term is informed by Parker’s definition. Discourse allows an object to be defined and spoken about and at the same time produces the object it describes by constructing perceptions and formulating understanding. From this perspective, discourses are powerful structures with political consequences. They effectively construct, regulate and control knowledge (including scholarship and research), social relations and institutions. This definition of discourse also includes what Foucault has called ‘discursive

practices’—behaviours and actions attached to speech and written texts that are embedded with representation and meaning, e.g. medical practices like prescribing.

I have indicated that this research is located within a social constructionist frame. This framing is a broad one, and the term ‘social construction’ incorporates a diverse array of theories and beliefs and has numerous approaches to research and data interpretation associated with it. Within the broader framework of social constructionism my work brings a range of views and meanings to the topic of children’s resistance to school. This means that my text is characterised by a sometimes unruly mix of discourses. The critical language of ‘emancipation’, the post-structuralist language of ‘discourse’ and ‘subjectivity’, and the liberal language of ‘empowerment’ jostle together in my attempts to draw a rich and nuanced picture of the ways that school resistance is and can be understood. I am not intending to produce a new ‘truth’ about children’s school resistance. At the same time, I break this rule to conclude that home schooling may constitute an acceptable and effective solution to the problem of school resistance for some families. I have chosen this ‘pastiche’ approach to analysing and discussing school resistance deliberately—accepting its theoretical incoherence—in order to write a constructionist account of school resistance which is complex, multifaceted and multileveled.

While the account of school refusal that I have produced draws on the work of Foucault and Foucauldian scholars such as Parker (1992, 1995) and Rose (1999), I am not carrying out a strictly Foucauldian analysis of school refusal or trying to suggest that Foucauldian perspectives and social constructionism are cognate. Rather, I am using insights from Foucault’s work on discourse, subjectivity and power/knowledge, as well as concepts from Rose (in particular ‘the self’) to extend and deepen my constructionist approach.

The links that Foucault draws between language and subjectivity have been particularly useful for me in understanding how children who resist school are constituted within discourse and the implications of these discursive positionings for the school resister’s self-perceptions, identity, behaviour, understanding and experience of the world. When an individual is ‘positioned’ by a discourse (or positions him- or herself within a discourse), a place is marked out for them and a set of behaviours and experiences is defined for them (Parker, 1995). The availability of different versions of the ‘self’ suggested by a discourse depends on the social status and power attached to the discourse in question (Weedon, 1997).

A History of the Pathologisation of School-Resistant Behaviour

For Foucault, the exercise of power and the generation of knowledge are inseparable. Foucault (1979) states: “there is no power relation without the correlative constitution of a field of knowledge, nor any knowledge that does not presuppose and constitute at the same time power relations” (p.106). It is within the disciplines (such as psychology and education) and within disciplinary blocks (such as schools, prisons and hospitals) that power/knowledge has developed. By ‘disciplines’ Foucault means both fields of knowledge, study or expertise *and* their associated professions and professionals. Those in positions of power (like medical practitioners) seek to gain control over the policing of discourse in order to maintain their access to material advantages. Popular representations of school resistance as school refusal are organised in material structures of power as *practices*. That is, they have strong institutional roots, informing and sustaining educational and clinical work by providing the dense fabric of spoken, written and symbolic texts that comprise institutional life (e.g. policies, reports, forms *and* classroom interactions, therapeutic talk). An examination of the various dominant cultural representations of school resistance within discourse places the pathologisation of this phenomenon into a broader historical analysis of cultural change and social control.

This history of the pathologisation of school resistance begins with Freud. At the turn of the nineteenth century, Sigmund Freud revolutionised thinking about the nature of mental illness. Freud’s theory of psychoanalysis expanded the field of psychiatry to take in a broad range of neurotic conditions rather than the small number of psychotic conditions that had been treated in specialised asylums since the end of the seventeenth century (Horwitz, 2002). One of these ‘neurotic’ conditions was school phobia, a disorder characterised by anxiety and school absenteeism that arose out of the discourses of psychoanalysis in 1941. Prior to this time school phobia did not exist. That is, while children undoubtedly resisted school for a variety of reasons including anxiety, school resistance was not understood as a mental disorder that required identification and psychological treatment.

I began this chapter by arguing that the language used by mental health professionals makes new realities thinkable and practicable with regards to mental life and psychopathology. This is, of course, not my argument but has been put forth and elaborated

by a number of authors including Parker (1995) who states: “Psychiatric cases are... ‘brought forth’ by an availability of the language to describe them in ways that differentiate them from similar cases” (p.59). Broadwin (1932) was the first to suggest that a proportion of school resisters (then commonly called truants) appeared to exhibit deep-seated neurosis. This suggestion made new ways of thinking and talking about school resistance as mental illness possible. Redefining school resistance as a medical issue brought it into the domain of psychiatrists and other mental health professionals. American authors Johnson, Falstein, Szurek & Svendsen developed Broadwin’s idea in 1941, coining the term ‘school phobia’ to label a type of school resistance that was caused by the child’s and mother’s separation anxieties. The term ‘school phobia’ clearly marked out anxious school resistance as a mental illness, distinct from the concept of truancy (school resistance without anxiety), and requiring therapeutic rather than punitive intervention.

Following Johnson et al.’s pivotal article in 1941, the meaning of school resistance became temporarily fixed as a form of separation anxiety (called ‘school phobia’) and this development had important social implications for children diagnosed as school phobic and for their families. Psychoanalytic practitioners understood their clients’ manifest symptoms as chameleon-like disguises for deep intrapsychic pathology caused by a few fundamental mechanisms (Horwitz, 2002). In the case of school phobia, one of the main mechanisms underlying children’s symptomology was said to be ‘displacement’ of anxiety from its original source (mother or separating from mother) to a substitute object (school or some aspect of school) (Waldfogel, Coolidge & Hahn, 1957). The mother-child relationship was thus projected into the foreground in school phobia and became the focus of clinical examination and manipulation (see Coolidge, Hahn & Peck, 1957; Coolidge, Tessman, Waldfogel & Willer, 1962; Coolidge, Willer, Tessman & Waldfogel, 1960; Klein, 1945; Talbot, 1957; Waldfogel et al., 1957).

Within a psychoanalytic framework personality is not biologically determined but, rather, different forms of subjectivity are produced within the family and wider culture (Parker, 1995). Psychoanalysts of the 1940s, 50s and 60s believed that school phobics were created by a pathological family constellation and in particular they turned to “the mother’s history, personality and life events” (Coolidge et al., 1957, p.303) to explain the personality structure of these children. School-phobic children were characterised as excessively

dependent, immature, fearful, manipulative and (at an unconscious level) hostile towards their mothers. Mothers with school-phobic children were described as overprotective, inconsistent, highly anxious, ambivalent about their child, and abnormally dependent on their own parents. Hence, the 'internal' gaze of the psychoanalytic discourse constructed school-resistant children as victims of their own unhealthy impulses and positioned mothers as centrally implicated in (and responsible for) their children's school problems.

For the first time, a professional knowledge about the meaning of school resistance and the nature of 'anxious' school non-attenders and their families evolved, and was disseminated via articles, conferences and clinical work. School phobia acquired the status of 'fact' through intense clinical and academic work; it did (and does) not represent a pre-existing, external reality but was brought into existence and maintained through the practices of professionals and institutions. For psychoanalysts and other professionals working with school-phobic children, the idea of school resistance stemming from separation anxiety appeared logical and undeniable. This is demonstrated, for example, by Coolidge et al. (1957), psychoanalysts at the Judge Baker Guidance Center in Boston, who claimed that the concepts and etiological factors relating to school phobia that had been identified and described by psychoanalysts should "rest as basic scientific principles" (p. 309). At this time, psychoanalysts enjoyed a monopoly over the 'anxious' portion of school resisters whom they had carefully carved out and constructed as objects of psychoanalytic enquiry, interpretation and therapeutic intervention. This situation was to change with the rise of behaviourism that began following World War II.

By the 1970s, behaviourism (or learning theory) had become a major contender for influence within the discursive field of school phobia/school refusal (Kelly, 1973; Pritchard, King, Tonge, Heyne & Lancaster, 1998). From the behaviourist perspective, school resistance is a learned response in which the individual becomes conditioned to behave in the school environment in a manner that does not correspond with socially normative expectations. The behaviourists believed that by taking a positivist approach to managing school resistance based on scientific empiricism, factors that prevented children from attending school could be identified, determined and controlled without recourse to lengthy and subjective interpretive processes. The deviant behaviour of school refusers could be managed back to 'normality' through an expertly designed programme employing a variety

of behaviour re-shaping techniques that were highly practical and transferable. The child's treatment could extend beyond the clinic and into every area of its life, making rehabilitation constant (and presumably more effective) rather than dependent on the physical presence of the therapist.

While behaviourists have a very different philosophical and methodological orientation to psychoanalysts, behaviour therapies share with psychoanalysis a narrow focus on the individual and his or her immediate environment. Behaviourism centres on individuals as the carriers of disorder and the objects of treatment. The school refuser's family constellation is important to the extent that it models, reinforces and punishes the child's actions around various stimuli associated with the school problem. However, wider sociocultural factors that could potentially impact on school-resistant behaviour are ignored within this system of understanding.

Garvey and Hegreves (1966) exemplify early proponents of the behaviourist perspective, suggesting that the school-phobic child becomes verbally conditioned to equate school attendance with losing mother. This fear is said to result from comments about leaving made by the (allegedly disturbed) mother such as, "One of these days when you get home from school I won't be here" (Garvey & Hegreves, 1966, p.150). For Garvey and Hegreves, as for many contemporary researchers and clinicians, staying home from school was considered reinforcing in that it reduced the child's anxiety and provided access to toys, television and parental attention. The reader will note that in the account given by Garvey and Hegreves, as with psychoanalytic theories, the child's school resistance is attributed to anxiety about separating from mother stemming from maladaptive mother-child interaction patterns, although the proposed mechanisms underlying the formation of this anxiety are vastly different.

While the role of conditioned separation fears may have been emphasised in some early behaviourist research, later authors writing from this perspective broadened their scope to include the school-phobic child's fear of aversive aspects of school (e.g. scolding, bullying, failure or social embarrassment). In a paper entitled "School-Related Fears of Children and Adolescents", King, Ollendick and Gullone (1990) suggest that behaviourally-oriented therapists favour a fear-of-school hypothesis for school phobia, while psychodynamically-oriented counsellors prefer a separation-anxiety explanation, presumably

because their theoretical orientation and clinical practice have their roots in psychoanalysis. Theorists and clinicians operating within a behaviourist paradigm understand aspects of school life as potentially aversive for some individuals and hence construct school as a possible source of fear (albeit irrational). Hence, the construct ‘school phobia’ remained in clinical usage (after psychoanalytic interpretations had themselves lost popularity) although its meaning, once considered synonymous with separation anxiety, had evolved (with the rise of behaviourism) to include irrational fears of school itself.

Behaviourism has differed from psychoanalysis in its overt and sometimes forceful approach to returning children to school (i.e. rapid return). Children who find school aversive and resist attending are not only discursively positioned as the ‘sick’ subjects of therapeutic discourses but also undergo interventions explicitly aimed at physically positioning them back in school. While behaviour techniques may appear highly manipulative and controlling, some (e.g. Szasz) have argued that they are free from (more sinister) political power mechanisms by virtue of being transparent, transferable and directly aimed at the ‘problem’ behaviour itself. However, all therapeutic discourses have ideological and political effects. By focusing on ‘erroneous conditioning’ and ‘faulty learning’ as the processes behind children’s school resistance, behaviourists both ignore and obscure problems relating to school itself.

The manipulative, mechanistic and sometimes (especially in institutions) punitive nature of many behaviour therapies led some therapists to turn away from ‘pure’ behaviourism. The welding of cognition onto well-established behavioural therapies was politically useful in the United Kingdom in the 1970s—a time when clinical psychology was struggling to create an autonomous identity separate from psychiatry (Parker, 1995). Psychologists have argued that Cognitive Behavioural Therapy provides an alternative to medication that is practical, effective and relatively painless (i.e. avoids the physical side-effects of medication and the emotional side-effects of introspection) and for these reasons elicits client compliance. The cognitive-behavioural approach has exerted a powerful influence in the area of school-phobia/school-refusal intervention and now appears to be the preferred approach to treating school refusers in New Zealand² (and other Western countries). Most contemporary Western practitioners believe that cognitions and attributes

² See, for example, Read (2000).

are important factors in the occurrence and maintenance of school-refusal behaviour. Heyne et al. (2004), who treat children at the Monash Medical Centre School Refusal Clinic in Australia, understand 'anxious' school refusal as partly maintained by 'distorted' and 'maladaptive' thinking:

In our experience, a vital aspect of intervention with school refusers is a focus on the child's cognitions. Anxious school refusers are likely to process information in a distorted manner and engage in maladaptive self-talk, perpetuating their anxiety. (p.19)

Cognitive psychology assumes that individuals who resist school and are identified as school refusers are suffering from the effects of distorted, exaggerated, mistaken, or unrealistic ideas (cognitions) about school and the way that the world works. Cognitive-behavioural therapists Heyne et al. (2004) state that "Typical cognitive distortions [displayed by school refusers] may include: overestimation of the probability of unpleasant events occurring...underestimation of one's ability to cope with unpleasant events...a perception of unpleasant events as catastrophic...negative self-evaluations...interpretation of ambiguous information as threatening" (p.19). The assumption that school attendance is 'normal', 'rational' behaviour and therefore school resistance must stem from 'irrational' thinking seems to be rarely questioned by contemporary practitioners.

By the 1980s, individual and dyadic theories that saw school resistance as a problem growing out of personal dysfunction (e.g. faulty cognitions) or stemming from a pathological mother-child relationship were being contested by an approach to explaining school resistance that sought to avoid individualisation and a "simplistic" focus on mother-child separation issues (Hsia, 1984, p.361) by stressing the interpersonal and systemic context of the problem. Family systems theory locates all the symptoms of a 'psychopathology' such as school phobia in the family unit rather than in the 'sick' individual, and looks at the particular interaction patterns which bind families together.

While the family systems approach supposedly avoids individualisation by shifting the 'therapeutic gaze' from the child or mother-child dyad to the whole family, it does so without questioning the notion of school-refusal pathology. This approach shares with most of the previously discussed theories an emphasis on inadequate or inappropriate parenting and parental dysfunction as central to children's school problems. While the school context is considered relevant, this is not because school is perceived as a potentially aversive environment but because school is understood as a crucial part of the 'normal' child's social

world. Family therapy may serve to reinforce the dominant understanding of school resistance as a problem of individual family dysfunction rather than as a societal problem relating to how we educate and socialise children. The systems and sub-systems that the therapist concentrates on identifying are assumed to operate regardless of social context. But by decontextualising the family we may fail to recognise how the social context imposes on the structure and interactions of individual families.

An example of the family systems perspective (and the pathologising assumptions inherent in it) is provided by Japanese researchers Kameguchi and Murphy-Shigematsu (2001) who construct school resistance as stemming from children's confusion over unbalanced and unclear boundaries in family relations. Kameguchi and Murphy-Shigematsu discuss in some detail (and appear to endorse) a theory of school refusal that sees the "mother-centered family" (para 13) as fundamental to the problem. This theory suggests that Japanese men devote their energies to work, leaving highly-educated Japanese women as full-time child-rearers, who are overly involved and invested in their children's academic success. These mothers are said to place extreme pressure on their children to succeed, and derive much of their emotional fulfillment from intense mother-child relationships in an attempt to fill the void that the absent husband leaves. They are described as insecure and ambivalent in their role as mothers and unable to meet the 'needs' of their children.

From this particular Japanese family systems perspective, children's school resistance is constructed as an attempt to defy and 'get back' at their controlling mothers and the "great mother" of the "maternal, fatherless society", located in the Japanese psyche (Kameguchi & Murphy-Shigematsu, 2001, para 23). While Kameguchi and Murphy-Shigematsu claim that it is "wrong to blame only the mothers", just as it is "too simplistic to blame only the schools" (para 24), they appear fundamentally committed to a construction of school resistance that implicates mothers. They state, for instance, that children placed in day-care centres may show less evidence of school refusal because they have been "freed from their mother's control early in life" (para 26). The construct 'school phobia' was birthed out of a theory of maternal neurosis and separation anxiety, and these ideas have persisted and endured over time and well outside of the field of psychoanalysis.

Although some discourses appear to have acquired a secure foothold internationally, this is not to say that the meaning of school resistance has become transcultural. In fact the

Japanese context differs from the Western in a number of ways and we should not assume that school non-attendance and the language used to talk about it has the same meaning in Japan as it does in the West³. Japan features quite prominently in the literature about school phobia/school refusal. Tōkōkyōhi (school refusal) is perceived as a major social problem within Japanese society and this belief has given rise to and is perpetuated by a large body of knowledge about ‘Japan’s school-refusal problem’. Yoneyama (1999) argues that in Japan there are two dominant discourses that construct tōkōkyōhi as either stemming from mental illness or from laziness. She refers to these as the “psychiatric discourse” and the “behavioural discourse” (p.191).

Shoko Yoneyama lectures in Asian studies at the University of Adelaide in Australia. Her book, *The Japanese High School: Silence and Resistance* (1999), stems from PhD research conducted in 1984. Yoneyama argues that tōkōkyōhi is a structural problem and a by-product of the intensely regimented and alienating Japanese education system. Her work is of particular interest to me as it offers dramatically different insights into school resistance from others in the field. Yoneyama understands tōkōkyōhi as a construct brought forth within various competing discourses, each containing ideological assumptions (about school and children) that are politically charged and socially powerful. Hence, her analysis draws attention to the discursive underpinnings of school phobia/school refusal and their implications for institutional and social life.

I am concerned in this section with mapping out a (selective and partial) history of school phobia and school refusal as psychiatric/psychological constructs produced by ideas that have competed and changed (and sometimes shown remarkable endurance). A brief examination of the Japanese situation will further illustrate the contingent nature of school phobia/school refusal as products of society and culture. The meanings of words are specific to languages and thus words cannot be translated without a potential shift in meaning; however, some attempt at translation seems necessary for a thesis with a largely English-speaking audience. Consequently, I have borrowed the Japanese terms and English translations used by Yoneyama (1999). Yoneyama states that in Japan the psychiatric discourse expresses itself in the terms tōkōkyōhi-shō (school-refusal syndrome) and

³ We should also take care not to homogenise the West. My purpose here is primarily to draw some comparisons between Japan and other (Western) countries discussed in the literature about school phobia/school refusal.

mukiryoku-shō (apathy syndrome) (p.193). Within this framework, tōkōkyōhi is explained as “a kind of social maladjustment which includes a specific pathology” (Inamura, quoted in Yoneyama, 1999, p.193). This seems similar to the dominant Western view that constructs school resistance as ‘school refusal’, a maladaptive-behaviour problem stemming from an underlying psychiatric disorder (discussed on pages 11-12).

The psychiatric discourse has its roots in psychoanalytic explanations of school resistance as a type of separation anxiety called gakkō-kyōfu-shō (school phobia) (Yoneyama, 1999, p. 193), which emerged in Japan around the 1950s, about ten years after Johnson et al. (1941) first wrote about school phobia in the *American Journal of Orthopsychiatry*. Yoneyama argues that the psychiatric discourse has strong institutional roots and exerts a powerful influence over the lives of tōkōkyōhi students. She states that the leading advocate of the psychiatric discourse is Inamura Hiroshi (quoted above), a former professor at Hitotsubashi University who has written widely on tōkōkyōhi and other youth ‘adjustment problems’. Inamura Hiroshi is also the vice-president of the Youth Health Centre, a large treatment facility that has ten clinics and counselling rooms around Tokyo (Yoneyama, 1999).

In Japan, as in Western societies, the treatment of school resistance within the psychiatric paradigm focuses on rehabilitating the individual while leaving the school environment fundamentally intact. While school factors are frequently the focus of a tōkōkyōhi child’s complaints, the focus of psychiatric assessment is usually the student and their family (Yoneyama, 1999). Yoneyama suggests that many tōkōkyōhi students visit mental clinics or are put into mental hospitals where they receive medication and are subject to strict rules and punishments. She argues that Japanese mental hospitals often function as a sub-system of school, correcting the behaviour of tōkōkyōhi children. However, unlike at school, ‘correction’ is medicalised and carried out in the name of ‘treatment’. Hence, from Yoneyama’s perspective, the treatment of tōkōkyōhi children in mental hospitals is not about ‘caring’ for vulnerable and distressed individuals but can be understood as the medicalisation of deviance for the purposes of social control.

Researchers within and outside Japan have identified elements of the Japanese educational system (such as extreme academic pressure, excessive rigidity, widespread bullying and exam-oriented curricula) as problematic. Japanese researcher-clinicians

Iwamoto and Yoshida (1997), for example, state that “The stressful and competitive atmosphere in Japanese schools is widely considered to play a part in the increasing incidence of school refusal” (p.317). Yoneyama (1999) states that *tōkōkyōhi* was officially recognised as a ‘structural problem’ rather than an ‘individual problem’ in 1990 when Monbushō (Japan’s Ministry of Education) proclaimed that *tōkōkyōhi* “can happen to anyone” (Monbushō, quoted in Yoneyama, 1999, p.187). In a social commentary published in *The New York Times*, Pollack (1996) states that in 1992 the Ministry of Education in Japan “changed its guidelines to admit that the school system itself, not only defects in the child’s character” (para 7) could be contributing to the problem of *tōkōkyōhi*. This was quite a radical shift in position as Monbushō had previously attributed *tōkōkyōhi* to the personal attributes of students, that is, character flaws or family problems (Pollack, 1996; Yoneyama, 1999).

Pollack (1996) suggests that the shift in policy towards recognising the possible contribution of school experiences to *tōkōkyōhi* resulted from protests made by the parents of *tōkōkyōhi* students (see para 8). Japanese parents with children officially and unofficially recognised as doing *tōkōkyōhi* appear to be significantly more politically motivated and organised than parents of Western school resisters. This may be because school non-attendance is so harshly condemned in Japan by the general populace (Yoneyama, 1999). According to Ishikida (n.d.)⁴, a Concerned Society for School Refusal Syndrome was established by Japanese parents in 1984, and this developed in 1990 into a nationwide organisation called the Network for Parents Who Have a Child with School Refusal Syndrome. In 1988 there was a national symposium organised to contest the dominant discourses of *tōkōkyōhi*, especially the psychiatric discourse (Yoneyama, 1999). Yoneyama states that the major point argued by this group of concerned parents, students and professionals was that *tōkōkyōhi* is not an illness or a problem of individual maladjustment to school but reflects problems with the school system. This understanding of *tōkōkyōhi* is identified by Yoneyama as the “citizens’ discourse” (p.211), a label which reflects its ‘grass-roots’ origins.

⁴ An author for the Center for US-Japan Comparative Social Studies, an internet-based nonprofit organisation founded in 2000 to (among other things) provide the public with information about Japanese education, society and culture in English.

The Ministerial move away from a narrow focus on the child towards a wider sociological perspective that considered the role of Japanese schooling in causing tōkōkyōhi, may have reflected mounting concerns within Japan about problems afflicting Japanese students. Schoppa (1991), author of a chapter in *Windows on Japanese Education*, states that despite boasting an internationally-acclaimed education system, the 1980s were a time of “educational crisis” (para 6) in Japan. Concerns initially centred on increases in school violence and delinquency, with media attention and social concern shifting to the rise in bullying, suicides and school refusal after 1983 (when the reported incidence of school violence declined). While the levels of school violence, bullying, youth suicide and school refusal did not necessarily surpass that found in other countries, these issues received intense national attention in Japan and shattered the popular public image of school being a safe and orderly place (Schoppa, 1991). This sense of ‘educational crisis’ may still be prevalent in twenty-first century Japan. According to Yoneyama (2002), at the end of the twentieth century Japan’s government considered educational reform to be a top priority. This is evident in the preamble of the December 2000 ‘Final Report’ of the National Commission on Education Reform⁵:

The devastating state of education at the beginning of the twenty-first century should not be overlooked. As indicated by bullying, school non-attendance, the collapse of classroom order, the frequent occurrence of atrocious crimes committed by the young, the current state of education is grave. We are faced with the crisis that society will cease to function if these situations are left as they are... (quoted in Yoneyama, 2002, p.193)

The 1990 Monbushō statement that tōkōkyōhi “can happen to anyone” (quoted in Yoneyama, 1999, p.187), and the more recent governmental emphasis on educational reform, would appear to indicate a departure from the dominant Western understanding of school non-attendance as a pathological disorder located in the individual. However, it seems that there has now been a retrograde move among some clinician-researchers in Japan away from understanding school resistance as a social problem towards once again framing it in terms of individual pathology and/or family dysfunction. Iwamoto and Yoshida (1997), for instance, advocate for the use of well-established (in the West) diagnostic criteria and formal classification systems for school refusal in Japan. They conducted a clinical study of fifty school resisters using the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* 4th Edition

⁵ The National Commission on Education Reform was established by Prime Minister Obuchi in March 2000 to advise him on the matter of education reform for the twenty-first century (see Yoneyama, 2002).

(American Psychiatric Association, 1994) to allocate the children to a number of diagnostic categories including separation anxiety, adjustment disorder and personality disorder.

Iwamoto and Yoshida believe that an emphasis on social and school factors obscures the “many and various” (p.319) causes for school non-attendance:

Those who consider school refusal as a purely social problem tend not to use clinical classifications with the result that the different causes, pathogenesis, treatment and prognosis remain obscure...but it is important not to lose the aetiological, treatment and prognostic information provided by formal classification systems... (p.319)

Every school resister in the Iwamoto and Yoshida (1997) study was diagnosed with either a psychiatric disorder or a relational problem. These findings would suggest that Iwamoto and Yoshida, while acknowledging the probable negative effects of excessive stress and competition in Japanese schools, are operating within the dominant framework that understands school resistance as individual pathology and downplays school factors. Specifically, their theoretical stance appears compatible with the psychiatric discourse on *tōkōkyōhi* (identified by Yoneyama, 1999). Kameguchi and Murphy-Shigematsu (2001) similarly construct the move in Japan away from “a narrow focus on the schools” (para 12) as progressive. From their family systems perspective, the shift away from focusing on school resistance as a desire to escape from a bad school situation allows for a stronger focus on the family and brings the Japanese view more in line with the Western literature on school refusal which “has long emphasised a family perspective” (para 11).

Holding a dominant cultural position alongside the psychiatric discourse in the Japanese understanding of school resistance, according to Yoneyama (1999), the behavioural discourse constructs school resistance as laziness (rather than illness). Yoneyama suggests that this is a perspective widely held by people with little personal experience of *tōkōkyōhi* and constitutes the view of many teachers within Japan. Within this paradigm, the solution to *tōkōkyōhi* is generally sought in increasing the pressure on children to attend school and through providing appropriate routines and behavioural training, e.g. rewarding and punishing behaviour (Yoneyama, 1999). Yoneyama states that *tōkōkyōhi* students can be placed in reformatories or detention homes where they are locked up, carefully monitored and receive harsh punishments for rule-breaking. The harsh behavioural treatments experienced by some *tōkōkyōhi* students serve to illustrate how culturally dominant

assumptions, philosophical systems and ideological imperatives feed into institutional practices and determine the experiences of those individuals subject to them.

Yoneyama (1999) argues that both psychiatric and behavioural discourses are founded upon the same assumption, and whether tōkōkyōhi students are sent to mental institutions or reformatories, their treatment tends to be very similar. Tōkōkyōhi is understood as a maladaptive social adjustment problem stemming from personal pathology or deficiency. The focus is on controlling, closely monitoring, regulating and punishing behaviour. In this way, both hospitals and reformatories reinforce and perpetuate the dominant ideology concerning school and society (Yoneyama, 1999). This contrasts with the situation in New Zealand where a clear discursive distinction is usually drawn between school resisters who are ‘sick’ and those who are being ‘naughty’. At a philosophical level at least, most professionals working with school-resistant children believe that ‘genuinely anxious’ and ‘emotionally fragile’ children should be treated with sensitivity and understanding. While school resisters exhibiting a ‘behaviour problem’ or ‘being naughty’ may be pressured, punished and forced into attending school (i.e. receive behaviour modification), those understood as suffering from an ‘anxiety disorder’ are more likely to receive medication and counselling (i.e. therapy). Of course, in practice it is not always clear which classification is most appropriate and many school resisters receive both ‘treatment’ and ‘training’ (this is discussed later—see chapter four).

From Syndrome to Symptom: Classification and Treatment Issues

Within the literature on school phobia/school refusal the dominant understanding of school resistance has changed from a diffuse ‘neurotic’ syndrome with a single underlying cause (i.e. separation anxiety), to an aspect of behaviour in a range of discrete clinical disorders (e.g. simple phobia, social phobia and major depressive disorder). The beginning of this shift in meaning saw the term ‘school phobia’ come to encompass school non-attendance due to both a specific fear of school (i.e. a simple or social phobia) and to separation anxiety (disorder) (e.g. Last, Francis, Hersen, Kazdin & Strauss, 1987). This move recognised both psychoanalytic and behaviourist assumptions regarding school phobia/school refusal etiology. The shift to understanding school phobia/school refusal as a symptom of a

heterogeneous range of psychiatric disorders is reflected in institutional policies for classifying school resisters. For example, Kate Ford, acting principal of the Correspondence School in 2003, states that the Correspondence School no longer has “a separate category for students with ‘school phobia’” but rather places these students in the generic category ‘psychological/psychosocial’, indicating that they are suffering from a problem that has a variety of psychological and social (e.g. family) causes that need to be assessed by a psychologist (personal communication, July 22, 2003).

Diagnostic classification of school resisters as certain ‘types’ of school refuser is now a widely accepted and utilised practice. Martin, Cabrol, Bouvard, Lepine & Mouren-Simeoni (1999), for instance, examine anxiety and depressive disorders in the parents of children diagnosed with school refusal related to separation anxiety disorder and those suffering from phobic-disorder-based school refusal. King and Bernstein (2001) suggest that there appears to be support for three primary, distinguishable clinical subgroups of school refusers: phobic, separation-anxious and anxious-depressed. The move towards constructing school refusal as a behaviour indicative of disorder rather than as a disorder in itself allowed practitioners to diagnose those children identified as school refusers with a variety of recognised psychiatric illnesses that had established treatment protocols. This move was thought to be an appropriate response to the complex psychological dynamics believed to underlie school resistance, allowing a wider range of prescriptive treatment strategies to be utilised with this population.

The desire for comprehensive and uniform classifications of school refusal symptomology may appear on the surface to be a necessary and positive first step in helping children who find school aversive. However, the focus on diagnostic categories reifies school refusal as a discrete, stable (if heterogeneous) clinical entity that has an identifiable etiology and causes the fear and misery that school-resistant children often demonstrate. This acts to deny the broader socio-cultural and discursive context within which school-resistant behaviour becomes school refusal. While researchers and clinicians are happy to acknowledge the importance of psychological and/or familial etiological factors, and may even expand their analysis to consider aspects of schooling such as peer relations and academic performance, they rarely include any mention of the historic or cultural *construction* of school phobia and school refusal. I have argued throughout this chapter that

the diagnoses attached to school resisters are not simply descriptive of reality ‘out there’ but rather are *constitutive*. Such an approach allows us to avoid realist and determinist assumptions about school resistance and pathology by self-consciously stressing the discursive nature of diagnosis.

A recent development in the field of school refusal has seen school resisters classified according to the *function* of their problematic school behaviour (e.g. Evans, 2000). Within this taxonomic system, it is the underlying motives for school non-attendance and not the ‘form’ of school refusal that are important. ‘Truants’, for example, are re-defined as youth who refuse school in order to pursue tangible reinforcement outside school (e.g. shopping or drug use). This classification system can be seen as somewhat in tension with diagnostic classification, although some clinicians advocate using both systems during clinical assessment (e.g. Kearney & Albano, 2004). Proponents of the functional approach have argued that diagnostic classification has questionable validity, is not empirically based and lacks “treatment utility” (Kearney & Silverman, 1993)⁶. These researchers avoid classifying school non-attenders under diagnostic labels, believing that by mobilising a strictly descriptive definition of school resistance as “school refusal behavior” (Kearney & Albano, 2004, p.147) they can free themselves from traditional assumptions about etiology and psychopathology. This is in part a reaction against long-established conceptions of school refusal that presuppose etiology (i.e. separation fears or phobias) and exclude certain non-attenders (i.e. truants) based on the assumption that they are ‘delinquent’ rather than ‘psychologically disturbed’ (although there has never been consensus over this distinction).

The functional approach has sought to de-emphasise psychiatric diagnosis as a means of classifying school resisters as school-refuser ‘types’. Yet, surprisingly, American psychologist and leading functionalist Kearney and his colleague Albano (2004) have recently attempted to identify the specific forms of behaviour (primary and co-morbid diagnostic categories) that comprise each functional condition. This shift in tactic was purportedly a response to the continued popularity of diagnostic classification among clinicians. Kearney and Albano are hoping to facilitate the clinical use of functional

⁶ Functionalism—a psychological approach that studies the relationship between the environment and the response of the organism to the environment—was actually the forerunner of behaviourism and is not a new theory. However, the functionalist approach to understanding school resistance as ‘school refusal behaviour’ proposed by Kearney and colleagues is a relatively recent development.

conditions by making diagnostic categories across functions available to practitioners who are using the diagnostic classification system. These authors appear to be advocating for an assessment approach that considers *both* the forms and functions of school refusal. This research serves to reinforce the status of diagnostic categories *and* functional conditions as discrete clinical entities that describe a pre-determined reality and by being discursively linked (or found to 'co-relate') seem to reify each other as psychological truth.

It could be argued that contemporary psychological approaches to school resistance are more objective, pragmatic and collaborative than early approaches which were based on what Kearney (2001) calls "antiquated concepts" (p.4). But it is one aim of this thesis to dispute the common perception that contemporary therapeutic treatments of school phobia/school refusal reflect a 'better' or more scientifically 'correct' understanding of school resistance than previous ones, and provide treatment strategies that are noncoercive and value-free.

I would suggest that contemporary approaches to classifying and treating school resistance (e.g. as 'school refusal behaviour') perpetuate a positivist determinism, reinforce ingrained assumptions about school resisters and their families, and account for and justify the appropriateness of the social status quo. They operate through attempting to re-train and re-form the child in a way that will insure s/he voluntarily submits to the regulations and norms of the school. School resisters and other deviants are social irritants. They disrupt the smooth running of the modern institutional apparatus and are frequently construed as 'at risk' of becoming less useful to society (through being 'uneducated', 'less employable', 'antisocial' and 'prone to mental illness' in adulthood). Modern psychotherapeutic treatments aimed at school resisters, are not (simply) well-meaning attempts to help and serve 'at risk' children and their families but are part of a wider system of social control concerned with the governance of human conduct that operates through the mental health system.

From School Phobia to School Refusal: Labelling School Resistance

I have argued that the categories we use to describe and construct school resistance (as school phobia, school refusal, truancy, etc.) are historically and culturally contingent. This is no longer a very radical assertion. Most psychiatrists and psychologists recognise that

the language and categories we use to understand and talk about problematic behaviour are socially specific. For instance, contemporary Western practitioners rarely talk about their patients being 'mad'. Such terms now seem obsolete, unscientific, judgmental and emotive. The category of 'madness' has been replaced with the term 'abnormal psychology'. Similarly, within neo-liberal psychological discourses 'patients' are frequently redefined as 'users' or 'consumers' of mental health services. However, simply changing the labels we use to talk about deviancy and mental illness (or even avoiding labels altogether) does little to question the notion of pathology or of expert professional knowledge and may in fact serve to obscure the continuing influence of the medical model within the domain of psychotherapeutics (Parker, 1995).

The words we use to name school resistance are only part of the problem, but they are an important part. In most histories of school phobia/school refusal, even though different terms are used to denote school resistance, the meaning is held to be the same. The choice of terms such as 'school phobia' and 'school refusal' is often considered unproblematic—an issue of personal preference, historic convention or professional tradition. Such views ignore the fact that school resistance is situated in wider cultural and political contexts, and that different labels construct school-resistant children in distinct ways. Generally speaking, school refusal has not been considered synonymous with separation anxiety (whereas school phobia has), although separation anxiety disorder is certainly seen to be one common form of psychopathology associated with school refusal. The term 'school refusal' is often used when an author is wishing to indicate that school non-attendance is not due to anxiety. Hsia (1984), for instance, uses this term to nominate a wilful stubborn resistance to school stemming from problems in the family (not anxiety). For the majority of researchers and clinicians, school refusal has a broad range of causal factors associated with the individual, the family and, to a lesser extent, the school. That is, the dominant meaning of school refusal is in line with more recent, non-psychoanalytic understandings of school phobia as a heterogeneously determined behaviour. This probably reflects the fact that the term 'school refusal' only came into popular usage (especially in America) after psychoanalytic explanations of school resistance as a form of separation anxiety called 'school phobia' had already been brought into question.

The rise of the term ‘school refusal’ is also closely linked to the shift in understanding among researchers and theorists that saw school resistance redefined as a disorder with a diverse and complex etiology, rather than as necessarily stemming from separation fears (discussed on pages 32-35). The term ‘school refusal’ is often seen as more comprehensive than ‘school phobia’, reflecting “the multiplicity of explanations for the etiology of the condition” (Brand & O’Conner, 2004, para 6). When school refusal is used as a descriptive rather than diagnostic term, all school non-attenders (who are not physically sick) can be said to exhibit ‘school refusal behaviour’. Some researchers avoid using the term ‘school phobia’ because they believe it implies that the attendance problem is associated with specific stimuli located within the school (Heyne et al., 2004). This, it is argued, removes the focus from important causative factors within the child and family such as mental illness, family stress, separation fears and social immaturity. However, concerns that intrapsychic and intrafamilial pathology may not receive its due attention seem grossly misplaced considering the history of school phobia. Since its inception the term ‘school phobia’ has always been strongly associated with individual and family dysfunction to the exclusion of other factors (especially in the West).

The term ‘school refusal’ is often considered to be descriptive and is thought to merely *reflect* historical changes in the conceptualisation of school resistance. School refusal is considered a less negatively loaded term—it describes behaviour but does not judge, assume or negatively identify the child. But the term ‘school refusal’ has arisen out of psychiatric/psychological discourses and stays closely tied to dominant meanings. While for most people the word ‘refusal’ may not imply mental illness in the same way that ‘phobia’ does, school refusal is nevertheless implicitly linked to mental illness, dysfunction and to being an ‘at risk’ child. In this way, the label retains its power to produce meaning and prescribe treatments while its discursive power remains unrecognised and unacknowledged by mental health professionals—and by the majority of those who critique the dominant medical model.

The terms that describe school resisters are loaded with assumptions, and these assumptions are reproduced moment by moment in the practice of psychiatrists, clinical psychologists, school counsellors and social workers struggling to make sense of children who find school aversive and resist attending. The terms used to identify, categorise and

discuss school resistance do not simply denote a phenomenon but are used with differing connotations and reflect various ideological assumptions about school and children that are historically, socially and culturally contingent. These connotations—of pathology, incapacity, vulnerability, deviancy or lack—funnel into the scientific constructions of school resistance that are circulating in textbooks, journals, training programmes and medical manuals. When the categories are activated, they become charged with a social and emotional force which has far-reaching consequences for those children who are labelled. That is, the labels are not simply innocent tags available to the psychiatrist or clinical psychologist to attach to a case and point to an appropriate remedy (Parker, 1995). Children who are identified as ‘school phobic’, ‘school refusers’, ‘anxiety disorder’, ‘separation anxious’, ‘tōkōkyōhi’ and the like, are pathologised, individualised and normalised by the diagnostic classification itself and by the therapeutic practices that the classification implies. In this way, the notion of school aversion as pathology and of school resisters as maladjusted children suffering from mental disorders is held in place by the language and institutions associated with modern psychiatry/psychology.

Summary

In this chapter I have argued that school resistance need not be understood as a pathological disorder located in the minds, bodies and histories of ‘maladjusted’ children. Instead, I have proposed an alternative conceptualisation of school phobia and school refusal as discursively produced constructs arising out of the psy discourses, and attempted to plot a (partial) history of the evolution of these classifications. If we can step back from school refusal as a clinical ‘fact’ and discrete observable behaviour and consider the work that this construct does in fixing the meaning of school resistance as ‘abnormal’ and ‘pathological’ and therefore the proper domain of mental health professionals, we may be able to consider other ways of framing school resistance that imply different responses from parents, teachers and other concerned adults. These responses may allow school resisters to occupy subject positions and social positions that have more positive implications for their subjectivity and experience. The next chapter explores critical responses to the dominant construction of school resistance as school phobia and school refusal, and considers some radically different

ways of understanding, talking about and responding to children who dislike and avoid school.

CHAPTER TWO

Critical Responses to the Pathologisation of School Resistance

...school phobia is justified...kids who hate school, they hate school for a very good reason! They're just showing a normal response...they're exhibiting a *normal human response*.
(Elizabeth—home schooling mother)

The above quote expresses a view that is fundamentally in tension with the dominant approach to what I have been calling 'school resistance'. This parent's view is a marginalised perspective associated with a fragmented body of work that critiques and challenges dominant social representations of, and responses to, school resistance⁷. Individuals associated with this work approach the problem of school resistance from a very different direction from mental health professionals. The recognition of such 'critical' perspectives on school resistance, that posit an aversion to school as 'normal' for instance, indicates how school non-attendance can be constructed in various and contradictory ways.

The critical discourses⁸ frequently utilise the same terms as the psy discourses (discussed in chapter one) to describe and explain school resistance (e.g. 'school phobia', 'school refusal' and 'tōkōkyōhi'), while at the same time altering or rejecting aspects of the dominant meanings of these concepts. In this chapter I suggest that this appropriation and subversion of psychiatric/psychological vocabulary and categories can be understood as a form of resistance. Such resistance can be problematic, however, in that when critical theorists are not self-conscious or careful about their use of language and categories that are embedded within certain dominant regimes of meaning and have implications for understanding and practice, they can end up perpetuating meanings that may ultimately disempower school resisters and their families. In addition, like the dominant psychological discourses, the discourses that offer critical perspectives on school resistance usually fail to acknowledge or even recognise their own partiality and present their take on school and

⁷ The critical discourses express marginal and marginalised views on school resistance. There is, in my experience, very little research or published material that explores or expresses these views and I have of necessity had to draw on some unpublished and older texts.

⁸ My use of the term 'discourse' is discussed on p.18.

school non-attendance as the ‘truth’, appealing to various authorities including medical science, radical educational thought and lived experience for proof.

Critical discourses offer alternative ways of reading school resistance—which are largely ignored, unexamined and ruled-out by mainstream society. I am identifying this group of divergent discourses as ‘critical’ (in a broad sense) because the individuals who take them up have a specific practical purpose—critiquing and changing society, specifically aspects of schooling, medical practice and psychotherapeutics, which they consider to be oppressive and detrimental for school-resistant children. It could be argued that critical responses to school resistance discussed in the literature are largely ‘liberal’⁹ rather than ‘radical’ in orientation in that some authors appear to basically accept the existing form of education and call for changes (e.g. more individual choice, tighter controls on bullying) within it. However, some of these ‘liberal’ perspectives also explicitly concern themselves with the transformation of unjust social structures, as is apparent in their ‘radical’ educational practices, for example, the rejection of hierarchies of authority in ‘free’ schools. It is evident that many possible areas of social enquiry are not addressed by critical theorists, including issues of how class, ethnicity and gender relate to school refusal; however, it is not my intention to identify or remedy these gaps here. I am concerned with contributing to the literature a perspective on school refusal that highlights its constructed and discursive nature, while not discounting the contribution of social factors (like bullying and competition) to some children’s aversion to school.

The first critical approach to understanding school resistance that I discuss in this chapter also appears to be the most prevalent, circulating internationally amongst libertarians, alternative educators, home schoolers, school refusers, parents, and others. Within this discourse, school resistance is constructed as a reasonable response to institutionalised schooling that does not always meet the ‘needs’ of the individual child. From this perspective the child’s needs are considered paramount and are usually thought to include such things as the ‘need’ to be taken seriously by adults, the ‘need’ to have their individual learning style recognised, the ‘need’ for compassion, and the ‘need’ to feel safe (at school). In Japan, this approach (which I will simply refer to as the ‘alternative approach’) takes the form of the

⁹ I am aware of the complexity and contested nature of the terms ‘liberal’ and ‘radical’ but, for the sake of the point I am making here, consider further substantial comment to be unnecessary.

‘citizens’ discourse’ (Yoneyama, 1999, p.211), constructing school resistance as a problem stemming from the autocratic, highly-disciplined and competitive structure of Japan’s schools. Yoneyama indicates that proponents of the citizens’ discourse include both lay and professional people who are unhappy with traditional *tōkōkyōhi* treatments.

The Japanese literature has much to offer to a critical consideration of school resistance because, as discussed in chapter one, school non-attendance is a highly controversial topic in Japan and has generated much debate. I have previously discussed the two dominant approaches to school resistance in Japan identified by Yoneyama (1999): the psychiatric discourse and the behavioural discourse. These discourses construct school resistance as ‘*tōkōkyōhi*’, understood as mental illness within the psychiatric discourse and laziness within the behavioural discourse. While Yoneyama does not problematise her own use of the term ‘*tōkōkyōhi*’, she does approach the various accounts of *tōkōkyōhi* as discourses representing certain political, social and ideological interests. Hence, she provides a unique perspective on *tōkōkyōhi* which is useful to me because I am interested in the possible ways of understanding school resistance—and the implications for children, schools and parents of these conflicting perspectives¹⁰. For this reason, the second critical approach that I consider in this chapter is Yoneyama’s account of the *tōkōkyōhi* process. Her reading of student views attributes *tōkōkyōhi* to the highly demanding and alienating nature of Japanese schooling. She suggests that *tōkōkyōhi* can be understood as a “process in which students who burn out...try to empower themselves in their search for subjectivity” (Yoneyama, 2000, p.77). In constructing *tōkōkyōhi* as an experience that can promote personal growth and positive social change, Yoneyama’s “student discourse” (2000, p.77) radically departs from other critical approaches to understanding school resistance and critiquing dominant knowledges.

¹⁰ Yoneyama’s work is also particularly useful to me because it discusses ‘Japan’s school refusal problem’ in English. Most accounts of *tōkōkyōhi*, including critical accounts, are (not surprisingly) written in Japanese and hence are not highly accessible to an English-speaking researcher.

The Alternative Approach

Conception of the Problem

The alternative approach to understanding school resistance questions the pre-supposition that a child who displays an aversion to school and is labelled a ‘school refuser’ is demonstrating inappropriate behaviour which needs modifying. It suggests that children who resist school and may be called ‘school refusers’ are responding rationally to an environment that is unsuitable for them. This discourse allows for the possibility that conventional schooling will not suit all children and refutes the idea that ‘normal’ school attendance should always be the goal. For example, American researchers Pilkington and Piersel (1991), claim that school refusal is a “normal avoidance reaction” (p.291) to a situation perceived by the child to be unpleasant or threatening. Similarly, the citizens’ discourse argues that *tōkōkyōhi* is a healthy defence response displayed by children trying to protect themselves from self-destruction within a dehumanising, oppressive and alienating education system (Yoneyama, 1999). Yoneyama discusses the views of one of the main supporters of the citizens’ discourse, Watanabe Takashi, the former Head of the Department of Child Psychiatry at the National Kōnodai Hospital in Tokyo. She indicates that Watanabe understands *tōkōkyōhi* as an instinctive, subconscious and natural reaction to the destructive Japanese education system:

Not to attend school because of *tōkōkyōhi* is like having nausea and diarrhoea caused by unknowingly eating rotten food. Nausea and diarrhoea which occur when poison enters the body are an instinctive defence mechanism to avoid dangerous things which might threaten the life and existence of the individual. The response is neither pathological nor abnormal. Rather, it is a healthy response which protects the individual. (Watanabe, quoted in Yoneyama, 1999, p.214)

Although critical perspectives on school resistance never blame children for not wanting to be at school, the contribution of individual factors to school problems is not completely dismissed. Knox (1990), a British educational researcher, outlines her approach to school resistance in the book *Troubled Children: A Fresh Look at School Phobia*. This approach is based on personal experience (her daughter resisted school) and her case study research. Knox understands school resistant-children as suffering from “acute school induced anxiety” (p.20), which she equates with school phobia and school refusal (although she is

critical of both these terms—see later). She suggests that some children who resist school are shy and timid individuals who internalise their sufferings (as opposed to running from them like truants), and that mental illness is often the result. Knox understands these children as an “unfortunate, vulnerable and highly sensitive” (p.37) minority, who are in ‘crisis’ and require adult help and understanding.

Yoneyama (1999) discusses the views of Watanabe who similarly sees tōkōkyōhi children as vulnerable, misunderstood and in need of special care. He suggests that they may be unable (due to immaturity, social pressure or fear) to express their real feelings about school. By doing tōkōkyōhi they send a clear message to society that their “very existence and subjectivity are threatened” (Watanabe, quoted in Yoneyama, 1999, p.214). This Japanese psychiatrist, according to Yoneyama, understands his role as providing a ‘voice’ for tōkōkyōhi children who have been ‘silenced’, translating the child’s physiological and psychological symptoms into words that adults can understand.

One of the main tenets of critical theories about school resistance is the assertion that not wanting to go to school can be a ‘natural’ and even ‘adaptive’ avoidance response. In *A Sense of Self: Listening to the Voices of Homeschooled Adolescent Girls*, Sheffer (1995) discusses her research with 50 home-schooled teenage girls. Although this research is more than ten years old, it illustrates well how the meanings that are attached to behaviours such as school resistance are not fixed, self-evident and undisputable (as the dominant discourses would suggest). Sheffer interprets her data within a ‘critical’ rather than psychiatric/psychological framework. This means that behaviour that appears from a psychological perspective to constitute a clear case of school refusal is understood within this text as healthy self-assertion based on intuitive self-knowledge.

The girls in the Sheffer (1995) study were between eleven and sixteen years old and had all been out of school for at least two full years. Sheffer describes a case where one of her participants, ‘Tina’, had agreed (or been persuaded) to try school. On the first day of school, Tina refused to even go into her classroom, became upset and left the school grounds. Tina’s behaviour could certainly identify her as a school refuser, however Sheffer interprets Tina’s resistance to school as Tina taking control over her own life rather than conforming to social pressures to attend school. Tina’s non-compliance is for Sheffer evidence that she is listening to her ‘self’, not to external (parental) voices:

...from Tina's story, it appears that she had doubts about going to school from the moment she agreed to the idea, but she only began to resist the pressures firmly at that final moment...Tina right away frames the decision not only in terms of the pros and cons of school itself but in terms of her 'own self' versus other people's ideas about what she needed...Tina decided in that moment to listen to "the biggest part of [her]," and she told her parents she wasn't going to go...Though Tina says she was very scared at the time, and not sure whether she was doing the right thing, she laughs when she says that her parents quickly got over being angry..."A lot of people probably would have gone just so as not to cause problems, but I've never been like that. I've always been like, nope, I don't want to do it. This is me, not you." Once Tina saw the choice that way, she was able to gather the strength to act on her own feelings, and as she retells the story she seems to gather the same kind of steam, leaning back in her chair and laughing as she lays the issue out: "...this is me, not you. That's the point". (p.118)

In another case, Sheffer (1995) discusses 'Kendra', a conscientious and capable student who suddenly stopped attending school. A 'Kendra' would normally be referred for psychological evaluation and treatment to help her return to school. However, Sheffer does not see Kendra's behaviour as indicating a need for psychological intervention but as stemming from a conscious, thoughtful decision based on her critique of the schooling system:

While giving the appearance of being an obedient student, Kendra was quietly developing a critique of the classroom environment and gathering strength to resist it. A student with a different temperament might have turned this critique into belligerence and outward rebellion. Kendra continued to play by the rules and to get good grades until the day she came home and told her mother she couldn't go back to school. Her mother let her stay home for a while but didn't take Kendra's request for more than a temporary vacation seriously until Kendra had a terrible nightmare about being trapped and unable to escape. The next morning she and her mother finally talked openly and at length about the depth of Kendra's feeling and the possibility of homeschooling. (p.134)

Sheffer (1995) perhaps speaks for many who understand school resistance as an intuitive act of self-preservation, suggesting that giving your child what she wants need not be 'giving in to manipulation', and quitting school need not be 'running away'. From this perspective, knowing when to quit and try something new can take maturity, self-awareness, strength and adaptability. Well-meaning parents may teach their children a kind of 'learned helplessness' by declaring that the child *must* go to school no matter how distressed she is and there is nothing either parent or child can do about it (Sheffer, 1995). The suggestion that forced school attendance may lead a child to see herself as 'helpless', contradicts the psychological assumption that insisting a school-resistant child attend school re-establishes appropriate parental authority, makes the child feel secure, and encourages her to face and

conquer her fears—making her a stronger and more independent person (see for example Heyne et al., 2004).

Dispute and Subvert Terminology

Most proponents of what I have called the ‘alternative approach’ are critical of the label ‘school phobia’ (e.g. Fortune-Wood, 2000; Knox, 1990; Pilkington & Piersel, 1991). They argue that the term ‘school phobia’ has negative connotations and implies that the child’s anxiety is irrational. Pilkington and Piersel, for instance, argue that school phobia is an inappropriate term for children who resist school, as the word ‘phobia’ is commonly associated with ‘neurotic’ behaviour. Instead, they favour the term ‘school refusal’ (see Pilkington & Piersel, 1991, p.297). As explained in chapter one, the term ‘school refusal’ is now preferred by most researchers and clinicians. However, this is generally not because they reject the implication that school resistance is ‘neurotic’ or ‘maladaptive’. Rather, it stems from a desire to emphasise that school resistance is a (heterogeneously determined) behaviour indicative of underlying pathology (i.e. school refusal) not, as was once thought, a separation anxiety syndrome.

Knox (1990) argues that school phobia is a “bad” (p.20) term because it implies that school resisters are displaying an excessive and irrational fear of a normal and natural situation. For Knox, institutionalised schooling represents a highly unnatural social situation where large groups of children of similar ages are confined in small spaces. Contrary to popular practice, Knox also problematises the term ‘school refusal’, arguing that it implies ‘naughtiness’ and downplays the child’s extreme anxiety. As indicated above, Knox understands school resistance as ‘acute school induced anxiety’, that is, a severe anxiety problem caused by aversive experiences at school.

As well as offering a critique of the dominant terms used to label school resistance, the critical theorists can be seen to appropriate and subvert psychiatric/psychological language and meanings. This is evident, for example, in a statement made by British home-schooling organisation Education Otherwise who suggest that when children develop “severe anxieties” about school, inappropriate treatment “can lead to troubled children becoming troubled adults” (*School Anxieties*, 2004, p.1). Here Education Otherwise accept the

dominant notion that school resisters are ‘troubled children’ and use this understanding to point to the need for such children to receive ‘appropriate’ (i.e. compassionate, individualised and respectful) care from professionals (and other adults). Another example comes from Knox (1990) who, as the mother of a school-phobic child, is constituted as a potentially ‘bad mother’ within the dominant discourses. In her critique of school phobia, Knox does not deny that school phobia exists (although she thinks this term inappropriate) or that her own child was school-phobic, rather, she uses psychiatric/psychological language, theories and categories (e.g. attachment, socialisation, phobias, mental illness, separation anxiety, critical periods, adolescence) to reconstitute the meaning of school phobia as a genuine anxiety problem that is caused by school, thus deflecting responsibility for the ‘problem’ away from herself (and her child). This subverting of dominant language and categories can be seen as a first step in challenging and resisting meaning and power.

The Family is not to Blame

Within critical approaches, school resistance is generally attributed to school factors (e.g. bullying, academic pressure, inappropriate work) rather than to parenting or family problems. Education Otherwise, for instance, state that in their experience “[school] anxieties and/or attendance problems are most often caused by real difficulties *in school*” (*School Anxieties*, 2004, p.1). Libertarian and home schooling advocate Fortune-Wood (2000) concurs. He states that it is incoherent to attribute a child’s school anxiety to home, a place where s/he apparently wants to be, rather than to school, a place the child is trying to avoid. Such an approach normalises school resistance and frees parents from blame and suspicion. In this way, critical perspectives are in tension with the psy discourses, which have traditionally and consistently constructed school resistance as a problem of family dysfunction, in particular, maternal pathology.

Much of the theorising around family pathology has focused on separation anxiety theory, an explanation for school resistance originating in psychodynamic discourses (see chapter one). Not surprisingly then, some proponents of the alternative approach provide a strong critique of separation anxiety. Pilkington and Piersel (1991) have two main criticisms of this theory. The first relates to research methods. They argue that most of the research

concerning school phobia is based on clinical case studies which may lack empirical validity. They identify problems with the research such as inadequate sampling, retrospective case analysis, an absence of control groups, and a lack of differentiation among different types of school phobia. Secondly, Pilkington and Piersel (1991) question the “lack of generalizability concerning pathological mother-child relationships” (p.295). They argue that school-phobic children (suffering from separation anxiety) should have difficulty separating from their mothers in all areas of their life (not just at school) and this does not seem to be the case. Also, Pilkington and Piersel point out that some families with school-phobic children show no evidence of the maternal characteristics or disturbed family relationships allegedly associated with school phobia (i.e. maternal anxiety, unwarranted protectiveness, etc.). Furthermore, Pilkington and Piersel draw attention to the fact that the development of school phobia appears to be selective and does not necessarily afflict all (or any) children in a family where the mother is ‘anxious’ and ‘overprotective’. Finally, Pilkington and Piersel argue that if school phobia stems from separation anxiety, then the peak incidence should occur at kindergarten age (when the young child first experiences separation from its mother) not in middle childhood (as seems to be the case).

Knox (1990) is also very critical of separation anxiety theory as it is mobilised within the school phobia/school refusal literature, and draws attention to its dubious nature on numerous occasions: “This ridiculous and unlikely theory is widely held because...books...have been written for students in many disciplines, thus disseminating the theories to a wide range of young people training in medicine, psychiatry, education and sociology” (p.143). Knox suggests that psychiatrists frequently interpret *any* anxiety or tension within the family as separation anxiety, misconstruing normal reactions to stress as pathological or abnormal. Here she highlights a major point of contention within the discursive field of school resistance. Are the symptoms of emotional stress and dysfunction allegedly present in the families of school phobics and school refusers a ‘natural’ reaction to a stressful situation, or a root cause of the problem?

Critique of Institutionalised Schooling

Critical approaches call for a greater focus on external school variables that may be proving aversive to children, causing symptoms of ‘school anxiety’ in some: “A...shift in research is needed, emphasising the possible causal attributes of the school system and personnel in the etiology and maintenance of school refusal” (Pilkington & Piersel, 1991, p.300). Pilkington and Piersel suggest a number of possibly “noxious” (p.297) elements of conventional schooling, including large schools, academic stress, irritating and distracting classroom routines and physical confinement. Knox (1990) agrees, arguing that large, impersonal (often hostile) comprehensive schools are sources of stress for children and certain ‘sensitive’ children break down under this stress (displaying ‘acute school induced anxiety’ or ‘school phobia’). It is not surprising that home-schooling advocates like Knox, search for the causes of school resistance primarily in the short-comings of conventional schools. Critical approaches to understanding school resistance and mobilising school phobia/school refusal, and the network of discourses surrounding home schooling, can be seen to intersect, overlap and inform each other. Both groups, for instance, are influenced by the ideas of deschoolers such as Ivan Illich (1973) who argued that schools and other learning institutions are incapable of providing the best possible education for some or most individuals, and that most people learn better by themselves, outside of institutions, at a self-determined pace.

Home schoolers generally believe that conventional schools are mechanistic, factory-like places that do not recognise or respect the complexity and uniqueness of the individual child. They often argue that the negative social climate within most conventional schools, whether by this they mean peer pressure, bullying, immoral behaviour or authoritarianism, inhibits learning and progress. Problems (like ‘school anxiety’) are understood as arising when the ‘needs’ of the individual child are not met within the system of mass schooling (Stevens, 2001). However, the child’s ‘needs’ are not self-evident and cannot be predicted with any certainty or finality. Rather, the needs of the child are constructed differently within competing discourses and serve to justify particular approaches to the treatment of children. Some child ‘experts’, for example, argue that children who avoid school ‘need’ their parents to provide and enforce clear expectations of school attendance in order to feel secure and

(ultimately) happy (e.g. Csóti, 2003; Heyne et al., 2004). It is important to recognise that while many home schoolers do identify schools as sites of social and political struggle over who controls and disseminates knowledge (and to what ends), and hence are able to take a critical approach to mass schooling and question many social norms—giving them a different perspective on school resistance from the majority of psychiatrists, psychologists, teachers and parents—home schoolers’ own embeddedness in educational and psychological discourses that equally constitute power/knowledge relations is perhaps less clear to them (Baldwin, 1993).

Criticisms of Professionals

Proponents of critical perspectives on school resistance are often concerned with the professional treatment received by children who have been diagnosed as school phobic/school refusers. According to Knox (1990), medical and educational professionals in the United Kingdom are guilty of violating school resisters’ basic human rights by using “inhumane” (p.42) methods to force them back to school: “all sorts of methods are devised, expensive and inhumane, to get the child to return to school, or to remove him or her temporarily or permanently from the family” (p.42). The “expensive and inhumane” (p.42) methods Knox is referring to include: threats; visits from the Education Welfare Officer (who takes the child to school by force); referral to the Child Guidance Clinic; drug treatment; court cases; care orders (if necessary placing children in secure units); placement in psychiatric hospitals or residential schools; and fines (see Knox, chapter five).

Fortune-Wood (2000) who, like Knox, is based in the United Kingdom, argues that interventions aimed at returning the child to school using intimidation, threats and force do not meet the child’s ‘needs’ or recognise that the child’s ‘school anxiety’ is ‘real’. While parents may not be happy with the professional treatment their child receives, he suggests that if parents wish to avoid prosecution and hefty fines then they are left with no option but to “agree with the professionals, regardless of their own view and actively force the child to

attend school” (Fortune-Wood, 2000, starts at word 1007¹¹). He states that parents are caught in a no-win situation where they are seen as “uncaring” (word 881) if they leave the problem solely to the school, and are said to be highly anxious and irrational themselves if they support their child’s view.

Knox (1990) suggests that the alleged high incidence of psychiatric and social problems reputedly experienced by school phobic children in adulthood (see Adams, 1979; Berg, 1982; Berg & Jackson, 1985; Casat, 1988) may be due to policies of forced school attendance and the use of ‘therapeutic’ methods: “As a result of these inhuman treatments, about 60% or 70% of the children will grow up with psychiatric or neurotic problems. Some of them will have psychiatric troubles so severe that they will be unemployable” (p.43). She states that school-phobic children would be more likely to recover and lead ‘normal’ lives if they did not receive treatment from mental health professionals: “a policy of non-intervention in these cases would have a far more beneficial effect on the future life of these children than any of the enforced treatments, that have been carried out over the past 30 years” (p.193).

Both Knox (1990) and Fortune-Wood (2000) are highly critical and suspicious of the actions of mental-health professionals purportedly working in the interests of school non-attenders. Knox maintains that dominant theories and treatments regarding school resistance persist because it is in the best interests of the people in power (e.g. psychiatrists) that they should continue: “If grants were no longer available to finance the treatment of many children in Child Guidance Clinics and psychiatric units, the powerful would be the losers” (p.193). Fortune-Wood claims that educational psychologists are cowardly, unimaginative and have “sold out” (starts at word 1373) because they fail to question the dominant assumption that school is the only place where education can occur and place a return to school before all other considerations, including the child’s welfare. He argues that the inadequacies of the dominant approach to school resistance reflects “a problem endemic in our society” (starts at word 1492): children’s voices are not heard and their views are not taken seriously.

¹¹ Fortune-Wood is the author of a number of books about education and home schooling; however, the text on school phobia that I refer to and quote in this chapter is available only in electronic form and lacks page numbers and clearly defined paragraphs. Hence, I have used word numbers rather than page numbers to direct the reader to this information.

Solution to School Refusal

Unlike researchers and clinicians working within a psychological framework, proponents of critical approaches do not believe that the school refuser needs treatment aimed at changing his/her thoughts, behaviour or attitudes (e.g. cognitive-behavioural therapy, social skills training). Rather, they advocate removing the school refuser from the source of his/her anxiety, i.e. the school, and/or drastically adjusting the school environment to accommodate children with 'school anxieties' and better provide for the needs of all children. From this perspective, the significance of somatic symptoms commonly reported by school refusers should *not* be ignored or underestimated. These symptoms (along with suicide threats or suicidal behaviour) are considered to be indications that the child is under intolerable stress and heading for a nervous breakdown (see Knox, 1990, p.37). Clearly, the various and contradictory ways of constructing meaning around the physical symptoms associated with some school resistance have profound implications for the treatment experiences of these children.

While understanding conventional schooling as frequently inadequate or contrary to the 'needs' of children, critical approaches are not necessarily anti-school (for everyone). Knox (1990) presents children's responses to conventional schooling as diverse and individually determined: "there may be one child who finds school a challenge, enjoying both academic and social aspects...[and another] child who finds school intolerably stressful and becomes school phobic" (p.36). Not only do children's reactions to school vary considerably in Knox's narrative but so to do schools. She suggests that "good" (p.36), 'child-friendly' schools do exist: "There are some very good schools run on friendly and democratic lines, and with a minimum of the aggression-fear balance, and where there is virtually no bullying" (p.36). In fact, Knox seems to believe that Britain's "fragmented" (p.200), alienating and violent society can be redeemed through the establishment of 'good' schools. She recommends a reorganisation of the British education system, to allow for more character training, flexibility and individual choice:

...reorganize our education so that it becomes predominantly a character building exercise...abandoning traditional curricula, and replacing traditional syllabus with a variety of projects...leading to awards of different kinds...[This] would probably have repercussions as diverse as a reduction in the numbers of truants and maladjusted children; and a lowering of the population of both prisons and mental hospitals. (p.199)

The kind of schools normally favoured by those who, like Knox, take a critical approach to school phobia/school refusal do already exist. In Japan, the citizens' discourse is associated with several hundred small alternative schools scattered all over the country. Most of these schools were founded as radical alternatives to mainstream education and to provide places for tōkōkyōhi students to learn and socialise. One of the oldest is the Tokyo Shure, established in 1985 by Okuchi Keiko, a former teacher and the mother of a tōkōkyōhi child. The Tokyo Shure is basically a 'free school', established along similar lines to other free schools—the most notable, of course, being Summerhill in England. The Shure emphasises principles of self-government (i.e. children running their own school), egalitarianism and individuality. Students are free to move about, play and complete schoolwork (or not) as they please and have nonauthoritarian relationships with staff. The difference between Japanese free schools like the Tokyo Shure and similar schools operating in other countries is that Japan's alternative schools primarily exist to meet the 'needs' of children understood as tōkōkyōhi students. This focus may reflect a more intense awareness and concern regarding school non-attendance (at all levels of Japanese society) compared with in other countries.

While 'free' schools are generally considered acceptable within the alternative approach, home is often advocated as the most appropriate place for school-resistant children to learn. Home schooling is understood as a caring, coherent and even therapeutic response to school aversion. For example, Fortune-Wood (2000), suggests that through home schooling, "trusting relationships" (starts at word 1590) between parents and children can be restored and children may "recover" (word 1763) from their emotionally traumatic experiences with 'caring professionals'. This view is in tension with psychiatric and psychological discourses which strongly oppose home schooling for the school phobic or school refuser. From a psychological perspective, home schooling is detrimental to recovery and 'normal' emotional and social development. While opinions on both sides are categorical, there has been little research into the effects (ill or otherwise) of home schooling children who resist school. This gap in the research will, in part, be addressed by the current study.

Knox (1989) is one researcher who has attempted a follow-up study of school resisters who were educated out of school, although this research is now nearly twenty years old. The results of her three-year study of 100 children in the United Kingdom are reported in a paper entitled "Home-Based Education: An Alternative Approach to 'School Phobia'". The

children in the study had all developed an extreme fear of school, many had made suicide threats and several had made suicide attempts. Also, Knox suggests that some of the children were suffering from psychosomatic illnesses or nervous breakdowns. Knox reports that by 1989, 30 children in the study had completed the three years following the “school crisis” (p.145). Five had decided to return to school after a period of 12 to 18 months. Those who had completed an education at home until 16 years of age and then gone on to a tertiary institution had, according to Knox, achieved well both academically and socially. In addition, the other children in the study were progressing well following school withdrawal, apparently losing any “neurotic” or “agoraphobic” tendencies (p.145).

Webb (1999) has also conducted a (slightly more recent) follow-up study of home-educated children, although not specifically school-resistant children. In her book, *Those Unschooled Minds: Home-Educated Children Grow Up*, she discusses her research based on interviews with 20 home-educated people. At the time of interview, most of the participants were in their twenties or thirties. Many of those interviewed who had at some time been to school clearly remembered being unhappy there. Three participants in particular forced the issue by resisting school attendance. According to Webb, the subjects who learned at home due to negative school experiences emphasised that it was *school*, not learning, that they disliked. Seven of the participants left school because the social environment inhibited learning—mostly due to fear. Webb notes that one subject, ‘Kate’, refutes the theory that school phobics should be forced back to school or they will never be able to face up to life’s challenges. Kate (who is identified by Webb as school phobic) decided to re-enter school after completing most of her secondary education at home and found it less difficult than she had expected. Webb states, “Her happiness and success illustrate the potential value of a flexible system, in which it would be common and acceptable for time out of school and time in school to be taken when the individual felt each was appropriate” (p.44-45). According to Webb, all the subjects were leading ‘normal’ social lives as adults.

Limitations of the Alternative Discourse

The alternative discourse contests the dominant construction of school resistance as an irrational anxiety response to ‘normal’ experiences. However, like the dominant

discourses, it fails to recognise the socially *constructed* and partial nature of all knowledge and claims to truth surrounding school resistance. As with other researchers and clinicians debating school phobia/school refusal, individuals who operate within this critical paradigm are drawn into a search for the ‘true’ origins of ‘school anxiety’ in the interactions between child, family, school and society. They fail to question and, in fact, retain many of the beliefs and assumptions underlying more conventional approaches to school resistance. This is not to say that psychiatric/psychological approaches, concepts and terminology are never useful or should not be used. As indicated above, the appropriation and transformation of meanings and vocabularies that characterise the dominant discourses can be understood as a subversive activity. However, the often uncritical acceptance and use of psychological assumptions and language means that the alternative discourse may constitute a “de-radicalised” (Gavey, 1989, p.461) challenge to the dominant discourses because it moves “parallel to hegemonic discourse” (Weedon, 1987, p.110) and “adhere[s] to the existent terms of the debate” (Gavey, 1989, p.461). Proponents of this approach usually do not question the ‘truth’ of popular psychological concepts such as ‘self-esteem’, ‘learning disorders’ and ‘emotional trauma’. Knox (1990), for instance, while highly critical of separation anxiety theory as it is understood within the dominant school phobia/school refusal literature, nevertheless asserts that “There may, indeed, be such a thing as separation anxiety” (p.22) and describes one child’s behaviour as “an example of *true* separation anxiety, caused by circumstances outside the mother’s control” (my emphasis) (p.129). Knox appears to accept that separation anxiety exists as a ‘real’ disorder and limits herself to redefining its etiology.

The alternative approach seems to assume the existence of some essential, fixed truth about what school resistance really is, i.e. a ‘natural’ avoidance response. But the meaning of school resistance cannot be fixed once and for all (as the historic shift from predominantly psychoanalytic explanations to contemporary cognitive-behavioural approaches testifies). Foucault “warns against the seduction of totalizing theory, which appears to resolve all differences and contradictions through unified and cohesive explanation” (Diamond & Quinby, 1988, p.13). Like the psychiatric/psychological approach which it critiques, the alternative discourse lacks reflexivity and fails to recognise the complex, contradictory and contingent nature of the discursive field. This is not to say that we should necessarily take a relativist position, accepting that all knowledge about school resistance is equally persuasive

or of equal value. There may be legitimate grounds for distinguishing between ‘better’ and ‘worse’ explanations of school resistant behaviour although, again, this depends on one’s perspective and what one hopes to achieve by ‘explaining’ school resistance in the first place. When theorists attempt to explain and justify children’s school non-attendance with reference to ‘severe anxiety’, ‘sensitivity’ and ‘school trauma’, they run the risk of positioning these children once again as ‘sick’ and ‘disordered’ individuals who require therapeutic intervention.

The Student Discourse

The Process of Tōkōkyōhi: Reconstructing Perceptions of Self, School and Society

Yoneyama’s (1999) understanding of the tōkōkyōhi process, whereby a student passes from being an unquestioning school attender to attaining a “reintegrated subjectivity” (p.240), is based on her reading of what she calls the ‘student discourse’—accounts of tōkōkyōhi given by Japanese students. As these are rare, she draws primarily on two sources for student accounts. These are *Gakkō ni ikanai boku kara gakkō ni ikanai kimi e* (From me who doesn’t go to school to you who doesn’t go to school) published by Tokyo Shure no kodomotachi (Children of Tokyo Shure) in 1991 (as cited in Yoneyama, 1999) and *Kodomotachi ga kataru tōkōkyōhi* (Tōkōkyōhi as discussed by children) compiled in 1993 by Ishikawa, a child psychiatrist at Tokyo University, and his colleagues Uchida and Yamashita (as cited in Yoneyama, 1999). I have quoted some of this work (in this chapter and in chapter eight) which has been translated into English and included in *The Japanese High School: Silence and Resistance*.

Yoneyama’s (1999) approach to tōkōkyōhi stems from a focus on student views and experiences, and differs from other critical discourses on school resistance in its construction of school phobia/school refusal as a potentially positive process rather than as a wholly negative experience that severely damages children (unless properly treated). By emphasising the potential of tōkōkyōhi as a path to initiating social change, tōkōkyōhi is constructed within this discourse as a radical and political activity—a form of individual resistance to oppressive societal structures. Tōkōkyōhi students are not (only) understood as

unhappy, unwell children requiring increased adult sympathy but are also seen as insightful, strong, independent and self-aware social pioneers or visionaries.

Yoneyama (1999) states that the process of *tōkōkyōhi* can be conceptually organised around two factors: the child's physical condition (i.e. presence and intensity of somatic symptoms) and the child's consciousness (i.e. whether or not they want to attend school). Using these two factors as axes, she constructs four stages of *tōkōkyōhi*: "lassitude and burnout"; "physical symptoms"; "critical awareness"; and "refusal/empowerment" (p.223).

In Yoneyama's (1999) account, the first stage of *tōkōkyōhi* is characterised by the child ceasing to attend school. This may be for no specific or obvious reason. It usually follows a period where school attendance has become increasingly difficult, stressful and/or sporadic and is often accompanied by excessive tiredness. Yoneyama attributes these symptoms to academic pressure and/or social pressure to behaviour in certain ways. At this stage, the student usually has no clear understanding of why they cannot attend school. In the following quote, a student expresses his dismay at finding himself too tired to attend school: "I cannot believe that I cannot go to school...I went to school up to the first year of junior high school...[But now], I cannot go to school even if I wanted to"¹².

By stage 2 in the *tōkōkyōhi* process, clear somatic symptoms may begin to manifest. Yoneyama (1999) suggests that the onset of physical symptoms is triggered by increasing external and internal pressure students feel to return to school. This stage is often characterised by extreme psychological and physical pain. The next quote expresses the pressure one student felt to return to school and the alarming and debilitating nature of her physical complaints:

My family all thought of various methods to try to make me go to school. I really hated it. Teachers, friends, and nurse-teacher also proposed various ways...gradually, the condition of my health deteriorated. My whole body became numb. I had headaches and was constantly in a dopey state.¹³

There seems little doubt that school resistance can profoundly involve the body. Advocates from all the 'camps' that comprise the school phobia/school refusal debate agree that children who resist school often experience specific somatic symptoms that vary in intensity and frequency, may disappear altogether or appear to crystallise into organic disease. However, the relationship between school resistance and the body is a complex one.

¹² Contributor to Ishikawa et al., as quoted in Yoneyama, 1999, p.225.

¹³ Contributor to Ishikawa et al., as quoted in Yoneyama, 1999, p.228.

School resisters' bodies are 'read' and 're-read' by parents, teachers, peers and various medical and psychological experts and their symptoms have different meanings attached to them. These meanings can be seen to have immense social significance because they determine how children who resist school are understood and treated by others, and also inform their self-perceptions.

The relationship between school resistance and the body is further complicated by the fact that multiple different 'readings' are possible at any one time. The meanings school resisters attach to their somatic symptoms frequently change or they may hold several competing meanings simultaneously. However, according to Yoneyama (1999), at stage 2 of the *tōkōkyōhi* process students generally believe on some level that their somatic symptoms are 'real' and that illness and exhaustion are preventing them from attending school, e.g. "I could no longer go to school because of terrible nausea, dizziness and stomach-ache. I could not get out of the bathroom in the morning"¹⁴.

By stage 2 in Yoneyama's (1999) account of *tōkōkyōhi*, both the student's need to rest and parental anxiety and frustration are mounting. This leads to tension and conflict in the home as parents intensify their pressure on the child to return to school and the child feels increasingly sick, exhausted and desperate. According to Yoneyama, under these conditions *tōkōkyōhi* students may become violent:

When parents are not able to accept that their children genuinely need rest, violence may ensure...These violent situations seem to occur when the student's need to rest is met with increasingly pressure to return to school. The 14-year-old boy who killed his parents and grandmother...is an example of the extremity to which such pressure can lead. (p.231)

The suggestion that the school refuser may reach a point of desperation where it resorts to harming or killing family members may astonish New Zealand readers. In New Zealand and other Western countries, school refusal is not usually discursively linked with violent behaviour. The school refuser is generally constructed as 'sick', 'vulnerable' or 'disturbed'—not as 'dangerous' or 'bad'. New Zealanders generally perceive their schools to be child-friendly and nurturing places, so it would not make sense to attribute child violence and brutality to experiences at school or to school refusers.

In contrast, Yoneyama (1999) suggests that in Japan there have been a number of violent crimes committed by children, widely publicised, and reportedly connected with

¹⁴ Contributor to Ishikawa et al., as quoted in Yoneyama, 1999, p.229.

school. In addition, she suggests that some tōkōkyōhi students admit that they have thoughts, fears or fantasies that involve killing family members. For example, one student states: “I had dreams in which I killed my father. In fact I thought of killing my father”¹⁵.

The fact that tōkōkyōhi is frequently discursively linked with violence need not mean that Japanese tōkōkyōhi students *are* more violent than school refusers in other countries. Yoneyama (1999) claims that in Japan school non-attendance is often constructed as a ‘deviant’ and ‘antisocial’ behaviour and tōkōkyōhi students are not always clearly distinguished from ‘delinquents’ or ‘criminals’. This may create a social perception (and fear) that tōkōkyōhi students are capable of, or likely to engage in, serious criminal (i.e. violent) behaviour. In a large American ethnographic study exploring national standards in education, teachers’ lives and professional training, adolescent lives, and conceptions of individual differences in American, Germany and Japan, researchers found that “The breakdown of human relations—between parents and children, teachers and students—was a significant theme brought up again and again by [Japanese] teachers and parents”¹⁶. The following quote from a letter sent by one father to a special school for ‘re-training’ tōkōkyōhi students illustrates how highly publicised and perhaps sensationalised (but not necessarily statistically common) acts of child violence may feed into Japanese parents’ concerns regarding ‘the breakdown of human relations’ and shape attitudes and actions regarding children’s problematic school behaviour:

The violence of our son which was diagnosed to stop when he became a senior high school student has hardly changed. As his body grows, so does the risk to us at home...[I]f we keep him at home, the whole family may be ruined. The incident of the other day (where a professor emeritus of Tokyo University was stabbed to death by his grandson) comes to mind... (Yoneyama, 1999, p.94)

During the third stage of tōkōkyōhi, according to Yoneyama (1999), students start to reflect on and question their school experiences. This involves them in a process of re-evaluating who they are and why they are absent from school. They generally spend most of their time at home and are relatively isolated from others. While still experiencing anxiety and somatic symptoms, students gradually come to realise that their absence from school is not primarily due to health problems but rather to choice. They may come to accept that they

¹⁵ Contributor to Ishikawa et al., as quoted in Yoneyama, 1999, p.230.

¹⁶ National Institute on Student Achievement, Curriculum, and Assessment, 1998, chap four, part three (last para).

actually neither like school nor wish to return. The following quote illustrates the difficulty one student had admitting (even to himself) that tōkōkyōhi was a ‘choice’ and not a physical illness:

It is one year since I started tōkōkyōhi...For a long time I thought that I ‘cannot’ go to school. This is [partly] because my physical condition is so bad...But recently, I came to think that I ‘do not’ go to school. No, [actually] I knew one year ago that I ‘choose not to go’ to school. But I was afraid to admit it, and kept saying that I ‘cannot’ go.¹⁷

Within Yoneyama’s (1999) model, the student comes in time to question the value and necessity of school and may decide that s/he is not ‘bad’ or ‘selfish’ for disliking and refusing school. The tōkōkyōhi student gradually frees him- or herself from the shame and stigma associated with tōkōkyōhi and can imagine a life outside of school. Such a profound shift in thought processes and self-perceptions must be considered extraordinary. Yet Yoneyama gives little indication as to how the tōkōkyōhi students in her study accomplished this task—other than through critical self-reflection. The following account is typical in that the student indicates a radical shift in perspective regarding school attendance but provides us with little insight into the forces behind this process:

...when I myself began tōkōkyōhi, I started to wonder whether I am indeed scum, and whether tōkōkyōhi students are [all] scum...It took me about one year to be freed from the fixed idea that one must go to school no matter what.¹⁸

The final stage of the tōkōkyōhi process involves a “discovery of selfhood” and “critical reappraisal of school” (Yoneyama, 1999, p.232). The student is “healed” (p.233) and ‘empowered’ by rejecting society’s values, norms and expectations regarding school, while acknowledging and following his or her own will. According to Yoneyama, students may come to see their ‘selfhood’ and school attendance as fundamentally incompatible. This new independence and critical awareness does not necessarily preclude returning to school. The student may still *choose* to return to school but, Yoneyama suggests, this return is for his/her own reasons and on his/her own terms.

Yoneyama (1999) argues that students usually begin doing tōkōkyōhi without any clear anti-school sentiment—although not necessarily completely without critical awareness. This perhaps explains her assertion that tōkōkyōhi students usually experience a high level of inner conflict during the early stages of their refusal. They feel unable to attend school but

¹⁷ Contributor to Ishikawa et al., as quoted in Yoneyama, 1999, p.231.

¹⁸ Contributor to Ishikawa et al., as quoted in Yoneyama, 1999, p.232.

believe that they should be at school and that doing tōkōkyōhi is wrong. As tōkōkyōhi progresses, Yoneyama argues, students “usually develop a clear understanding of their experience of school” involving “profound criticism of and/or detachment from the school they know” (p.211). The resolution of the tōkōkyōhi process within this model is antithetical to the ‘cured’ state as defined in the dominant Japanese psychiatric and behavioural discourses. Instead of accepting that school is ‘normal’ and inevitable, the tōkōkyōhi student consciously rejects both ‘normal’ school values (and/or school) and the assumption that s/he is bad or inferior for not attending. Yoneyama suggests that doing tōkōkyōhi and being ‘abnormal’ can become a source of pride for some students as the following quote indicates: “tōkōkyōhi children are Japanese who can say ‘No’. I see myself as a ‘praiseworthy’ person... ‘proud of not going to school’ but also ‘having an enough spirit to ignore the criticisms of stupid people’”¹⁹.

Is Yoneyama’s Theory Useful for Analysing School Resistance in New Zealand?

It might be argued that Yoneyama’s (1999) analysis of tōkōkyōhi in Japan has little relevance to a discussion of school resistance in New Zealand, because Japanese schools are fundamentally different from schools in New Zealand and other Western countries with less regimented education systems. Of course there is considerable heterogeneity within and between Western nations’ schools, and even within New Zealand schools (and other educational institutions) there is no one form that education takes in practice. However, Yoneyama certainly seems to assume that the factors contributing to tōkōkyōhi are distinct to Japan (and perhaps other similar autocratic, meritocratic societies) and may not apply in what she understands as more ‘liberal’, ‘democratic’ Western societies. Yoneyama constitutes tōkōkyōhi as being a problem that is deeply entwined with the highly controlling nature of Japanese schools and heavily influenced by social and cultural specificities. Using the Australian education system as a reference point, she argues that Western education is more committed to promoting values such as mutual respect, shared responsibility between staff and students, self-discipline, cooperation and social equality. However, while many Western

¹⁹ Contributor to Ishikawa et al., as quoted in Yoneyama, 1999, p.234.

schools would perhaps like to claim that they promote such values, this does not necessarily mean that students and staff predominantly experience school in this way.

It is reasonable to assume that different societies attach very different social and personal meanings to school-resistant behaviour, and that the meanings attached to constructs such as 'school refusal', 'school phobia' and 'tōkōkyōhi' can also differ in important ways. However, while there may be important differences in the experiences of Japanese school resisters and those in other countries, stemming from each society's political and social structure, there are also some major commonalities that cannot be dismissed. Regardless of country, school-resistant children and their parents have very similar complaints concerning schools: bullying, bad teachers, unsuitable schoolwork and inflexible/unsympathetic systems (among other things). There is also significant overlap in the ways in which school resistance is understood and treated within different societies. For instance, both Japan and New Zealand have a strong tradition of understanding some school resistance as a mental illness to be treated by experts. If school resistance is a phenomenon intrinsically linked to the 'autocratic' nature of Japanese schools, then it should not occur (or be as prevalent) within more 'democratic' education systems, and this does not appear to be the case.

Yoneyama (1999) states that to understand the construct of tōkōkyōhi, it is necessary to examine competing discourses and the various ideological assumptions (about school and children) inherent in those discourses. Given the fluid and dynamic nature of discourse, it would hardly be surprising if certain discourses about school non-attendance (along with the discursive practices attached to them) transcended the boundaries of culture and language. These discourses may do some similar work regardless of whether they are mobilised in Japan, Britain or New Zealand. They may also metamorphose in interesting ways in response to historical, social, political and cultural factors. Acknowledging and embracing both possibilities can only increase our understanding of the complex social and discursive processes that determine how specific instances of school resistance are understood and responded to.

Yoneyama's (1999) work makes a valuable contribution to international debate over the meaning of school resistant behaviour. She seeks to examine the complex phenomenon of school resistance in a critical light and privileges student rather than professional perspectives and interpretations. Professional discourse is important because it has the

authority and firm institutional base to profoundly affect how school resisters are understood and treated. However, Yoneyama states that the key to understanding tōkōkyōhi in Japan lies in understanding how it relates to what students experience in school. I think that this is also an important line of enquiry for those investigating the causes of ‘school refusal’ in New Zealand and other Western countries. Yoneyama’s research is innovative in that she not only questions dominant assumptions about tōkōkyōhi but also explores the possibility that resisting school (and being a ‘school refuser’) can ultimately be understood and experienced by students as an ‘empowering’ process that leads to happier/healthier individuals. By constructing tōkōkyōhi as a radical social movement that resists and challenges Japan’s education system and social order, Yoneyama has clearly stepped well outside the parameters of the usual debate surrounding school phobia/school refusal, which limits itself primarily to debating causes, classifications and treatments. To the extent that Yoneyama challenges and subverts dominant meanings about school resistance, recognises that these meanings arise out of discourses that have ideological and political agendas, identifies the diverse and profound implications of these discourses for the subjectivity and experience of Japanese students, and suggests a radically alternative view of tōkōkyōhi that understands it as potentially leading to emancipation, enlightenment and social reform, I believe that her work is insightful and valuable for New Zealand researches in the field.

Critical Responses to Yoneyama’s Student Discourse

According to my reading of Yoneyama (1999), the transformation of subjectivity and development of a critique and resistance to school/society does not come easily to tōkōkyōhi students. It is interesting how Yoneyama constructs this process, as deeply disturbing, challenging and painful—even life threatening:

...words come usually after months or years of solitary self-reflection...when they experience enormous anxiety and pain (both psychological and physical). It is so traumatic that many students try to commit suicide...many literally ‘excommunicate’ themselves from society—from school, neighbourhood...even from their own family. (p.87)

The tōkōkyōhi process appears to take on the nature of a ‘sacred journey’ or a ‘quest for enlightenment’. Like ascetic monks or prophets, tōkōkyōhi students are segregated from normal society, spend much time in solitude and experience ‘agonies’ of the mind and body.

Tōkōkyōhi is constructed as a kind of ‘trial’ or ‘ordeal’ that ultimately reveals the path to redemption (i.e. de-alienation, resistance and social reform) for all Japanese students: “[tōkōkyōhi] is a social movement initiated by children...who have been obliged to go through a long and painful process of self-discovery...It amounts to a legitimization crisis for the Japanese education system, and more broadly, for Japanese society” (p.240).

The idea that knowledge and enlightenment comes with patience, pain and suffering is not a new one. Within many cultural and religious traditions, individuals who wish to attain greater insight must first endure mental and physical hardships, such as fasting, solitude, poverty, excessive study or physical training. Additionally, it is not uncommon for individuals to retrospectively embrace painful or difficult life-experiences that they once considered unfair or intolerable, believing that loss, suffering and hardship ultimately bring greater understanding, compassion, inner peace or personal/spiritual development.

I do not wish to argue that tōkōkyōhi is *not* a painful, profound or potentially transformative experience. But while Yoneyama (1999) is quick to point out that the dominant discourses about tōkōkyōhi are socially constructed, she fails to acknowledge that the student discourse is equally constructed, partial and open to re-interpretation. That is, she is not self-conscious about her own use of discourse as a political, ideological and rhetorical tool.

Yoneyama (1999) argues that all adult discourses on tōkōkyōhi potentially impose a false consciousness on tōkōkyōhi students who are searching for their ‘authentic’ selves:

The adult discourse about *tōkōkyōhi* confronts them with an ideology of how they should identify themselves...Whether negating them as ‘social failure’, ‘social victim’, or ‘social resister’, the point is that each type of adult discourse can be taken as an imposition, something which each individual student must either accept or reject. (p.239)

In contrast, she assumes that the student discourse reflects the ‘real’ experiences of tōkōkyōhi students and provides a standard against which the ‘truth’ of other discourses can be measured: “To understand the *tōkōkyōhi* phenomenon, it is essential to scrutinise competing discourses, and to measure that discourse against the words of students themselves who actually live with *tōkōkyōhi*” (p.190). Yoneyama legitimates and privileges the views of tōkōkyōhi students by constructing tōkōkyōhi as a process that leads to a more authentic self-consciousness and attitude to living. From this perspective, surviving or completing the ‘trial’ of tōkōkyōhi not only leads to de-alienation but gives tōkōkyōhi students the wisdom and

authority to become a 'voice' for Japan's oppressed youth who have been 'silenced' by an autocratic education system:

...the most vocal of all students of Japan are those who either refuse to go to school or are unable to go to school...When *tōkōkyōhi* students are able to express themselves...their voices exist as the strongest contestation against school and society by Japanese students. (p.87)

Although Yoneyama (1999) recognises that there are multiple Japanese accounts of *tōkōkyōhi* (as mental illness, laziness, resistance, etc.), she does not question her own or others' appropriation of this psychiatric/psychological construct and, in fact, seems to import many dominant assumptions (implicit in the term) into her own analysis. Yoneyama can be seen to exploit inconsistencies within and between the *tōkōkyōhi* discourses in order to subvert the meaning of *tōkōkyōhi*. However, her attempts at subversion may themselves be subverted by a need to position herself (to some extent) within the parameters of the dominant debate in order to make her account acceptable (Croghan & Miell, 1998). Social scientists Croghan and Miell (1998) state:

...resistance involves the individual in a complex engagement with the opposing view which may involve a number of strategies including direct opposition, subversion from within, and the invocation of shared values in order to establish the right to be heard. (p.449)

In a paper entitled "Student Discourse on *Tōkōkyōhi* (School Phobia/Refusal) in Japan: Burnout or Empowerment", Yoneyama (2000) defines *tōkōkyōhi* as more or less synonymous with the Western concept of school phobia. She uses Berg, Nicholas and Pritchard's (1969) definition of school phobia, much cited in the dominant literature, to identify the main features of school phobia as a specific and 'real' "disorder" (p.77). Furthermore, she goes to some lengths to draw the classic distinctions between *tōkōkyōhi*/school phobia and other school-related 'problems' such as separation anxiety, truancy and dropout (which are all accepted as 'real' disorders or social problems):

Tōkōkyōhi is a subcategory of 'school non-attendance'...*Tōkōkyōhi* is not truancy...truants spend their truant time away from home, school-phobic children stay home in seclusion...*Tōkōkyōhi* among secondary students in Japan should be distinguished from separation anxiety...separation anxiety is common among younger children, whereas what is common among adolescents is school phobia...(p.78)

Yoneyama can be understood as resisting dominant representations of *tōkōkyōhi* while at the same time positioning herself "in ways that represent the least risk in terms of challenges to existing systems of knowledge and belief" (Croghan & Miell, 1998, p.449).

By constructing tōkōkyōhi students as suffering from something very similar to school phobia, Yoneyama (2000) (perhaps unintentionally) evokes ideas of ‘sickness’ and ‘disorder’ that are inherent in dominant psychiatric/psychological explanations of school resistance. She understands tōkōkyōhi (as opposed to other categories of school non-attendance) as involving a “complete withdrawal from society” and a “state of energy depletion” (1999, p.187). Social withdrawal and extreme fatigue, which are arguably suggestive of ‘mental breakdown’, are presented as inherent aspects of the tōkōkyōhi experience (as symptoms) rather than as specific ways of discursively constructing the tōkōkyōhi experience.

Summary

This chapter has explored what I have termed the ‘critical’ discourses on school resistance. I have suggested that these discourses express views on education, school-resistant behaviour and the psychiatric/psychological constructs ‘school phobia’ and ‘school refusal’ that subvert and challenge dominant perspectives. These approaches allow for unconventional, radical, and (arguably) potentially liberatory, responses to children understood as ‘school anxious’. To this extent I believe they are very useful for opening up new possibilities for school resisters and their families, potentially allowing them to have happier and more successful educational and social experiences through home schooling or alternative schooling. However, these discourses often continue to both engage with school refusal as a ‘real’ disorder and treat the various labels attached to school-resistant behaviour as merely descriptive. The proponents of these views fail to step back from school phobia/school refusal and examine them as products of discourse or critically consider the implications of assimilating dominant psychological language and concepts. To argue that school resistance is a ‘normal’ fear response to an aversive school environment is all very well, but to then talk about these children as ‘anxious’, ‘vulnerable’, ‘insecure’ individuals who require ‘understanding’ and ‘help’, is to potentially assign them to the same (relatively powerless) social positions as dominant discourses do. The next chapter will outline my approach to researching school resistance and home schooling, and discuss some of the philosophical and methodological problems that I have encountered.

CHAPTER THREE

In the Field with School Resistance

In this study I used qualitative research methods, namely, semi-formal interviews and document analysis. To the extent that I was often in the field, interacting with participants in their homes and schools, I also made observations, although not in any systematic way. The purpose of meeting and interviewing mothers, their school-resistant children, and a selection of practitioners, was to find out how individuals within the New Zealand context construct and enact school resistance and home schooling, and to consider what the effects, implications and outcomes of these meanings and practices might be.

This chapter begins with a discussion about carrying out social science research in a postmodern context and how poststructuralist ideas have informed my approach to the research process and to understanding data. This section provides a framework for reading the rest of the chapter. I then discuss some of the specific issues informing this research as a contribution to the critical literature on/about school phobia/school refusal. These are: the lack of discursive space given to the views of school resisters and their families; the construction of home-based education within the dominant discourses as necessarily contraindicated in cases where ‘school phobia’ or ‘school refusal’ is diagnosed; and the historic and on-going emphasis in psychiatric and psychological texts on maternal pathology. I review some of the literature relating to these issues in order to indicate their importance and relevance to a critical examination of school phobia/school refusal. I then go on to describe the research participants, procedures employed, method of analysis and some research issues that I encountered.

Competing Perspectives on Research

Qualitative researchers generally claim that data collected through methods such as interviews, observations and document collection has scientific legitimacy. For example, in *Participant Observation: A Guide for Fieldworkers*, DeWalt and DeWalt (2002) make it clear that they place qualitative research methods “within the context of scientific

approaches” (p.97). Within this framework, as a ‘scientific’ endeavour, it is important that data gathered using qualitative methods be valid and reliable. Data must represent social ‘truth’ about the context under study, that is, it must capture the ‘real’ world as accurately as possible. Such an approach, of course, assumes that there is a reality independent of the researcher whose nature can be discovered and documented: “[objectivity] does imply that there is a real world ‘out there’, and, while one can construct any number of views of the world, not all will stand up to a fair test equally” (DeWalt & DeWalt, 2002, p.94).

Any researcher using any research methodology forms an understanding that is partial. Within the realist view, ‘good’ qualitative research involves understanding researcher bias and controlling for it. DeWalt and DeWalt (2002) suggest that as credible researchers we should make our biases as explicit as possible so that others can make an informed assessment of our work. The validity and reliability of data is said to be dependent in part upon careful, self-reflective, well-trained observers and thorough, systematic recording: “observations of trained, self-reflective observers, using several different approaches to a phenomenon, can achieve an acceptable level of reliability and validity and are, to the extent of the method, objective” (p.96-97).

Interview transcriptions, such as the ones I used in my analysis, are usually considered to be ‘raw’ or ‘primary’ data. Data may be considered primary if it appears to present an unmediated, ‘objective’ copy of reality. Such data is carefully separated from the researchers own ‘subjective’ reflections, inferences, thoughts and early attempts at analysis. The primary record can become a point of reference for deciding what is real, significant and admissible and what is not: “one’s primary record can be used to ‘ground’ inferences made on less thickly compiled notes” (Carspecken, 1996, p.48). The assumption is that the data has authority—if it is carefully and honestly recorded, rich and detailed, then it contains some truth or reality about the social world under study. It is this ‘sticking close to the data’, constantly re-examining and referring back to the data, developing analysis, concepts and categories from the data that gives qualitative research its claim to authority, validity and reliability.

For many postmodern writers, theorists and researchers the traditional claim that qualitative researchers can directly capture lived experience is highly problematic. The researcher cannot presume that there is a world out there (‘the real’) that can be captured by a

‘knowing’ author through the careful transcription (and analysis) of field materials (interviews, notes, etc.) (Denzin, 1997). Every account is simply one version of the world among others. In fact, within poststructuralism a plurality of meanings is welcome. A transcribed text is only one of many possible re-constructions of reality (privileged by the scribe), convincingly real in its use of ‘lived experience’ and the words of ‘real’ people.

We commonly assume that experience gives access to truth and therefore it is through experience that we come to really know the world. Yoneyama (1999), for example, indicates that the ‘student discourse’ provides us with a more ‘truthful’, meaningful and accurate account of *tōkōkyōhi* because it comes from the words (and personal experiences) of students themselves and not from “observers” (i.e. adults) whose views are contaminated “with all kinds of ideologies” (p.222). However, social interests rather than objective truth may determine how experience is understood. This does not negate the existence or importance of experience. Experience can be meaningful but it has no inherent, essential meaning. Any reading of our experience is at best temporary, specific to the discourse within which it is produced, and open to contradiction and transformation via an alternative set of meanings. This view of reality challenges the common assumption that language is transparent and expresses already fixed meanings (Weedon, 1987).

When it comes to research, original voices, contexts and intentions can never be recaptured. Every time a recording is played or a transcription read it is a new event, a re-telling of an event previously seen or heard (Denzin, 1997). Proponents of the poststructuralist view argue that the data does not merely reflect the phenomenon being studied, rather it is *produced* through the researcher’s presence in the field and/or it is *constructed* through the processes of recording, analysis and writing: “the worlds we study are created, in part, through the texts that we write and perform about them” (Denzin, 1997, p.xiii). In other words, the reports and accounts of those we study can be understood as discursive productions and not as (accurate or distorted) reflections of their ‘true’ experience (Gavey, 1989).

Research techniques that seek to establish or enhance a text’s validity and reliability (e.g. thick data, member checks, triangulation, naturalistic indicators) can be seen as highly suspect. These techniques are often used by the author to attest to the scientific authority and accuracy of the text. But within a post-structuralist framework, science has no privileged

access or claim to truth. An approach to research that seeks validity and reliability clings to the belief in a ‘real world’ that can be captured and interpreted by the researcher’s methods (Denzin, 1997):

Traditional science is considered to be just one discourse among many, no more or less valid as a means to truth and knowledge than other discursive forms such as literature...It is not privileged, as it is within mainstream psychology, as the best or only approach. (Gavey, 1989, p.462)

Applying poststructuralist ideas to research can be highly problematic. If we reject the possibility of absolute truth and objectivity, then is research still a valid pursuit? Do we need one more story about the world—especially considering the cost in time and resources that research demands (Carspecken, 1996). Furthermore, if our text has no claim to authority then on what grounds can we expect others to read it and be persuaded? Few researchers would want to accept that their interpretations, arguments and conclusions are arbitrary, with no possible grounds for convincing others to accept them (Carspecken, 1996). Relativism can quickly lead to researcher paralysis. Hence, many contemporary critical researchers seek to appropriate postmodern insights while retaining some notion of ‘truth’ and some standards for valid argument. Patti Lather, for instance, has written a book, *Getting Smart* (1991), that attempts to reconcile post-structural insights with the aims of critical research.

Lather (1991) refers to her approach as “a postmodernism of resistance” (p.1). This kind of critical postmodern work is not concerned with “‘discovering’ reality, ‘revealing’ truth, or ‘uncovering’ the facts” (Gavey, 1989, p.463). Instead, the focus is on “disrupting and displacing dominant (oppressive) knowledges” (Gavey, 1989, p.463). In their video presentation *Head Work, Field Work, Text Work: A Textshop in New Feminist Research*, McWilliam, Lather and Morgan (1997) suggest that we understand our research as “ruined from the start”. The researcher can no longer expect to write a tidy, straightforward story with precise tools, transparent language and moral certainty. In fact, poststructuralist researchers may be more likely to question problems than to search for solutions (McWilliam et al., 1997), believing that “problems are rarely solved” but rather “are occasionally purged from common discourse or discussed in changed legal, social, or political terms” (Bacchi, 2000, p.48). For poststructuralists, the inconsistencies, contradictions and complications of our enquiry can reap instructive insights (McWilliam et al., 1997). McWilliam et al. suggest

that in place of traditional ‘validity’ requirements we seek to develop a “negative rigour” that distrusts comfort and tidiness, is disruptive and attempts to ask better questions.

Putting the Theory into Practice

This study, using insights from Lather, McWilliam and others, approaches school phobia and school refusal as discursive constructs not as clinical entities. In this respect, it differs from the vast majority of research on school phobia/school refusal. The process of engaging with school refusal, attempting research, producing an academic thesis is of course a discursive activity which draws me into making conscious and unconscious decisions about how I construct and position myself and others. My work is informed and controlled by my location in various discourses which to some extent shapes how I understand or read (my own and others’) research data (Gavey, 1989). For example, I have used different sets of meanings to interpret my data (construct meanings) from those used by, say, a psychologist or a school counsellor. I seek to disrupt normatively fixed borders, categories and identities and to create new spaces, different meanings and other possibilities.

While I wish to explore alternative and unconventional ways of understanding school resistance, I am not suggesting that schools can be understood *simply* as villains and school resisters/home schoolers can be understood *simply* as heroes. Nor would I want to suggest that educational and medical professionals ‘hold’ power (and make discourse) and school resisters and home schoolers ‘lack’ power (and are constituted in discourse). Everyone exercises power and power is always shifting; hence social actors have the potential to be constituted as both powerful and powerless. Furthermore, the effects of power within a discourse may be interpreted as both positive and negative. This thesis contributes to a ‘politics of schooling’ within which the experiences and perspectives of children who resist school and their parents who are home schooling them are taken seriously—but it is located in critical tension with an idealism which assumes that not being schooled is necessarily liberatory. Home schoolers cannot escape the exercise of power/knowledge by ‘unschooling’ i.e. rejecting formal, compulsory education. They are still enmeshed in educational and psychological discourses (albeit different ones from schools) that control and define their practice (Baldwin, 1993).

The words of my participants are not irrefutable or conclusive. The participants' understandings and their words are limited by the ways they are positioned, and position themselves, within certain discourses. Baldwin (1993) states that once the subject is positioned within a discourse they inevitably interpret the world from that position and in terms of the specific "images, metaphors, story lines and concepts" (p.26) made meaningful and relevant within that discourse. Individuals are not transparent to themselves and so the process of understanding one's placement in a discourse is likely to be elusive (Baldwin, 1993).

While approaching school phobia/school refusal from a social constructionist perspective outlined in chapter one, I do not wish to occupy a position of extreme relativism. I do believe that there are different ways of understanding and responding to school resistance and that some ways are 'better' than others. The reader may wonder how I am distinguishing between better and worse approaches to school resistance if 'better' and 'worse' are relative terms and knowledge is constructed. While critical perspectives on school phobia/school refusal may not be 'better' than psychological theories in any *absolute* sense they do for me represent a move away from 'falsity', if not actually towards 'truth' (McWilliam et al., 1997). That is, I value their contribution to contesting and undermining hegemonic theories and creating some uncertainty and space where new possibilities and practices can emerge. At the same time, I am critical of the attempts of some of these authors to create their own realist tale about 'school refusal' or 'school anxieties', their naive appropriation of psychological constructs and language, and the lack of reflexivity or self-criticism apparent in their work. I believe that it is possible within a constructionist approach to value and use the work of critical theorists while at the same time troubling it by asking pertinent questions (McWilliam et al., 1997).

The constructionist approach that I am adopting perhaps precludes me from claiming research 'validity' in the positivist sense; however, I do consider this work to be 'valid'—if valid means worthwhile and meaningful. A 'pragmatic approach' to validity implies that 'truth' is whatever aids us to take actions that produce a desired result, for instance, achieving particular "emancipatory goals" or promoting "social action" (Aguinaldo, 2004, p.128). Gavey (1989) expresses a similar sentiment when she states that "Theory and research should be assessed in terms of their utility in achieving politically defined goals

rather than their ‘truth value’” (p.472). I am interested in those constructions of school resistance that seem to allow space for and result in school non-attenders occupying ‘empowering’ subject positions—positions where they are understood and know themselves as ‘healthy’ rather than ‘sick’, ‘more’ rather than ‘less’, ‘active’ rather than ‘passive’. However, a pragmatic approach to validity is not without its problems. Employing notions of ‘empowerment’ or ‘emancipation’ as a basis for claiming research validity, positions these concepts as value-free and they may then do similar discursive work to positivist notions of ‘truth’ and ‘reality’ (Aguinaldo, 2004).

Canadian qualitative researcher Aguinaldo (2004), whose analysis informs my own, suggests a social-constructionist conceptualisation of validity that understands it as “a continual process of interrogation” rather than a “determination” (p.127). From this viewpoint, qualitative research findings are understood as ‘narratives’ or ‘representations’ that describe, construct and explain social reality. According to Aguinaldo, to interrogate the validity of a piece of research we must approach its findings as requiring multiple and (possibly) contradictory readings. Different representations or research narratives do different work (have different functions). A ‘realist narrative’, for example, assumes an objective world and allows us to describe “‘what is’ and therefore, ‘what we should do’” (p.130), whereas a ‘deconstructive narrative’ focuses on the social construction of meaning and language, and allows for a “proliferation of possibilities” (p.131). These narrative functions change across time and context. Hence, from this perspective, assessing validity is a continuous process of negotiation.

Problems Informing This Research (Research Aims)

Disqualified Stories

The knowledge that school resisters have about school can be understood as ‘subjugated knowledge’. According to Foucault (1980), subjugated or marginal knowledges are those knowledges suppressed, negated, obscured or disqualified by official histories as lowly or unscientific. These include “the discourses of the madman, the delinquent, the pervert” (McHoul & Grace, 1993, p.16). The concept of subjugated knowledges can be used

to critique scientific discourses, like the discourses of psychopathology associated with school phobia/school refusal. This is not to say that we should always seek to legitimate and reinstate subjugated knowledges; however, in some cases such knowledges may allow us to analyse and critique dominant hegemonic discourses (Harwood, 2003).

The knowledge of children who dislike and avoid school is disqualified by dominant psychological discourses. As *the* explanations of the ‘problem’, psychiatric/psychological theories of school resistance as personal pathology disregard school resisters’ explanations for why they sometimes think and behave differently from the majority of children.

‘Disqualified knowledge’ is one type of subjugated knowledge identified by Foucault (cited in Harwood, 2003) in the article “Two Lectures”. Disqualified knowledge refers to knowledge that is excluded from the dominant system of social meanings because it is seen as “inadequate”, “naïve”, “located...beneath the required level of cognition or scientificity” (Foucault, quoted in Harwood, 2003, p.49).

In the case of school resistance, subjugated disqualified knowledges offer competing perspectives on school and school non-attendance that challenge pathologising psychiatric/psychological theories and practices, and may raise doubts regarding therapists’ claims that professional interventions are the best or only way to help school phobics/school refusers (by hastening school return and thereby minimising long-term pathology): “It is through the re-emergence of these low-ranking knowledges, these unqualified, even directly disqualified knowledges...that criticism performs its work” (Foucault, quoted in Harwood, 2003, p.50).

It may seem obvious to some that the disqualified knowledge of school resisters (and those closest to them) is central to understanding why some children will not go to school. Yoneyama (1999) appears to recognise this in her focus on students’ views and experiences of *tōkōkyōhi*. However, as Harwood (2003) points out, “the perspectives of young people are rarely sought in educational research” (p.46), and this is especially true in the case of school phobia/school refusal. Harwood quotes Slee as saying: “Students who leave schools prematurely, voluntarily or otherwise, are too seldom consulted in constructing representations of life in schools” (p.46). Educational research is unlikely to attach importance to the views of children who are school refusers and hence considered to be

irrational and dysfunctional. School refusers, like other ‘disordered’ individuals, are “*discredited* by their diagnosis” (Harwood, 2003, p.46).

Research that seriously considers the perspectives of ‘disordered’ children perhaps opens itself up for criticism. Testimony and interpretations given by children and by the ‘mentally ill’ are frequently considered to be unreliable and therefore likely to lead to faulty research findings. However, this risk is outweighed by the importance of school resisters’ contributions to research that seeks to understand the application and implications of pathologising discourses. In this study, I challenge dominant assumptions about school phobia/school refusal and create space for the knowledge and lived biography of mothers and children who are home schooling as a result of school aversion. My aim is to contribute to the literature a critical perspective on both the discursive framing of school resistance, and the methodological assumptions in existing studies, which allow the significant views of children and their families to be overlooked, trivialised and/or dismissed.

Technologies of Exclusion

In her thesis about Metropolitan College, the last public alternative high school in New Zealand, Vaughan (2001) argues that individuals who are deemed to be ‘at risk’ and incapable of making ‘proper’ choices cannot be allowed the freedom and flexibility accorded to a ‘successful enterprising’ (p.98) person within neo-liberal societies. To allow students who are ‘at risk’ (whether the ‘school refuser’ or the ‘alternative school’ student) to opt out of conventional schooling is to allow them to miss out “on an education there that might challenge their likely unsuccessful, unenterprising social destinations” (Vaughan, 2001, p.119). Unorthodox educational arrangements like alternative schooling or home schooling “that do not provide recognised learning outcomes” (Vaughan, 2001, p.119) are seen as potentially allowing students to further compound their ‘at risk’ status by failing to acquire a ‘good’, that is, normal and conventional education.

As I indicated at the outset of this thesis, there is little research that explores teachers’ understandings of school resistance. Knox (1990) suggests that theories about school phobia stemming from separation anxiety have been widely disseminated via textbooks written for students in many disciplines, including education—although it is unclear what she bases this

claim on. Yoneyama (1999) argues that most teachers in Japan understand *tōkōkyōhi*, not as an illness, but as illegitimate absence from school due to laziness, idleness, selfishness or a lack of discipline. Thus, they have little sympathy for *tōkōkyōhi* students, often visiting them at home and attempting to shame or force them back to school. Cooper and Mellors (1990) similarly found that teachers' perceptions of children identified as school refusers (by the teachers) were relatively negative.

Cooper and Mellors (1990) conducted a study into British teachers' perceptions of school resisters. The study involved twenty-six teachers from ten Special Training Units in South-East England who treated children classified as 'school refusers' and 'truants'. Cooper and Mellors found that teachers did not consider school refusers to be well-behaved or hard-working and thought that they had poor relationships with peers, although school refusers believed themselves to be both hard-working and well-behaved, and rated their relationships with peers less negatively. The teachers indicated a dominant understanding of school resistance as psychological dysfunction when they classified school refusers as more emotionally disturbed, anxious and depressed than truants. They also seemed to demonstrate an awareness of the historic connection between school phobia/school refusal and pathological maternal traits such as 'over-protectiveness' as they rated school refusers' mothers (but not fathers) as having a high regard for their children, whereas the mother-child relationship with regards to truants was not understood in this way.

Teachers' attitudes towards home schooling are also not well documented. Some home schoolers report that school staff react very negatively towards their decision to home school. In the Baldwin (1993) study, home schoolers claimed that the greatest level of intolerance and unwillingness to share resources was apparent from some principals and teachers at state schools. Principals of private Christian schools were reportedly more supportive and willing to include home-schooled children. This may be related to the fact that fundamentalist Christians make up a large percentage of the home-schooling population both overseas and in New Zealand. McAlevey (1995), who explored the educational perspectives of home-schooling parents in Otago and Canterbury (New Zealand), states that "certain myths exist about home schooling, in particular that home schooled children are socially inept and that they receive an inferior academic education" (p.3). A statement made by the (then) head of the University of Auckland's school of education, John Hattie, would

seem to support this claim: “There is also the issue of socialisation, they [home schooled children] can lose social interaction, respect and value of others—kids learn a lot from the playground” (John Hattie, quoted in Naden, 2000, p.138). However, the research that exists on the socialisation of home-schooled children suggests that their socialisation is *not* at risk and they are developing on a par with their peers (see McAlevey, 1995 for a discussion). The most recent Education Review Office (ERO) report on home schooling in New Zealand, “ERO Reviews of Homeschooled Students” (2001), based on 619 ERO reports of students aged 6-16 years from 316 different families located throughout New Zealand, confirms this, stating that in general the socialisation of those children assessed by ERO “was not at risk” (p.11).

Kerslake, Murrow and Lange (1998) conducted an exploratory study of home schooling in New Zealand for the National Operations Division of the Ministry of Education. While this research is not recent, like the Baldwin (1993) and McAlevey (1995) studies it is valuable because of the lack of information regarding home schooling in New Zealand. The study surveyed families who were either currently home schooling their children or had recently done so. A low response rate was achieved, limiting the study’s generalisability. The report is based on the 209 questionnaires received from families who were currently home schooling their children and 109 questionnaires received from families who were no longer home schooling their children.

Kerslake et al. (1998) report that during 1989-1994 when ERO was reviewing home-schooling programmes on a regular basis, there were only three cases where ERO recommended that permission to home school be revoked. This indicates that home schoolers were meeting at least the minimum standards at that time. More recently, the ERO (2001) report found the quality of learning programmes overall was good; 94% of parents managed their child’s programme effectively and many encouraged goal setting, self-motivation and self-responsibility: “Learning programmes were generally good, well managed and suited to the student’s ability” (p.11). Progress and enjoyment of the home-schooling process was deemed satisfactory in 97% of cases with many parents claiming that their children were achieving better at home than at school. The report states that 90% of the home schoolers reviewed were taught at least as regularly and well as in a registered school. The report concludes:

The results of this investigation indicate that, with few exceptions, parents who choose to homeschool their children do so in accordance with the terms of their exemption. In general, the homeschooled children in this study appeared comfortable with the process, were progressing educationally, and their socialisation was not at risk. (p.11)

While ERO may be satisfied with the quality of home schooling in New Zealand, Kerslake et al. (1998) suggests that principals often complain that home-schooled children who return to school are well behind their peers. This leads one to wonder whether some New Zealand principals are allowing their evaluation of home-schooled children to be coloured by their commonsense beliefs about how and where learning takes place. Studies in the educational literature indicate that home-schooled children are not academically inferior to their schooled peers as McAlevey (1995) points out: “[according to researchers it] would seem...that home schooled children do very well in terms of...academic success” (p.44).

The Maternal Focus

While there is very little research exploring mothers’ perspectives on the experience of having a school-resistant child, one interesting study encouraged me to pursue a maternal focus. Margolin (1998) interviewed three American mothers with children who she classified as ‘school avoidant’ (using the Berg et al., 1969 definition of school phobia mentioned in chapter two—but not the term) and found no evidence to support the claim that these mothers were psychologically disturbed or behaving in ways that caused their children to not go to school. Margolin states that despite feeling blamed, the three mothers she interviewed did not accept that they had caused their children’s school avoidance. Nevertheless, the subjects did feel a responsibility to help their children and their inability to do so over time was deeply distressing to them and to their families (p.197). In addition, the subjects expressed a strong sense of having been “let down” by educational and psychological professionals and by bureaucratic systems that were “confusing, insensitive and unsupportive” (p.vi).

Margolin (1998) suggests that the ‘pathology’ allegedly observed in mothers of school-avoidant children (i.e. excessive anxiety, hostility and dependency) may result from the experience of having an extremely anxious, distressed and resistant child, who persistently fails to attend school: “would there be any doubt that a child’s psychological problem would cause a mother great distress and affect her demeanor, her mood, and her

behavior in relation to that child and in general?” (p.205). In other words, while mothers of school avoiders may appear to be ineffective or dysfunctional parents, this may be due to the difficult situation they are faced with rather than to any innate personal or parental deficiencies:

...while these women certainly were “lacking effective parenting strategies” (Hersov, 1990), I failed to see what effective parenting strategies were possible in the face of their situations. It was not as if there were clear, consistent or effective solutions that they ignored...the clearest picture I got was of tremendous concern, empathy and perseverance in their struggle to resolve the problem. (p.199)

Margolin (1998) has a strong professional background in school psychology and became interested in school avoidance while working as a research assistant for a psychologist at a large medical centre. Not surprisingly, considering this history, she approaches school resistance from a distinctly psychological perspective. While she clearly wishes to eliminate negative connotations of maternal blame for school resistance and present mothers in a more positive light, she does not want to undermine the dominant understanding that school resistance is a psychological problem (i.e. ‘school avoidance’ or ‘school phobia’) and that psychological problems originate within the individual and family: “Hearing from these three mothers, it is impossible for me to believe that their attitudes, feelings and experiences and their relationships with their children were not relevant to the development of their children’s school avoidance” (p.169).

While I take a more sceptical and critical approach to psychological constructs than Margolin (1998), the Margolin study informs my research approach because it raises doubts about the role of maternal pathology in school resistance, highlighting the on-going discursive tension surrounding mothers of school resisters within the school-phobia/school-refusal literature. Her study also draws attention to the fact that while mothers of school resisters have been characterised, classified and labelled in the literature, “no documentation of the mother’s perspective is available” (Margolin, 1998, p.18), thus making a research focus that values and privileges maternal perspectives pertinent. One specific purpose I had in interviewing mothers was to identify what circumstances and/or discursive positionings contribute to 1) the decision to home school a school-resistant child, and 2) the adoption of specific (and often unconventional) educational and parenting philosophies and practices.

Participants

The participants comprised three groups: mothers who had withdrawn a child from school because of his/her unwillingness to attend school and were home schooling; children who were being, or had been, home schooled (initially at least) due to their unwillingness to attend school; eight practitioners who were working with New Zealand children and families in preschool and school settings; and one psychologist who worked with school non-attenders whose parents had applied for Correspondence schooling on ‘psychological’ or ‘psychosocial’ grounds.

The Families

Six mothers and seven children participated in the research. Five families lived in suburban Auckland and one lived in a rural area outside of Auckland. I found the participants through emailing local home-schooling coordinators who spread the word about the study through the home-schooling community. This seemed the easiest and most efficient way to reach a large number of home schoolers who might be interested in the study or who might know of other families home schooling a school-resistant child. Most of my initial correspondence with the participants occurred via email and was with the mothers. All the respondents who indicated that they were home schooling a child primarily because the child was unhappy and anxious about school were included in the study. In one family, the school problem had occurred many years ago and the ‘child’ was past school-leaving age, although the family was still home schooling other children. Another family had two school-resistant children, who were both included in the study.

The method of finding participants meant that all the participant families were at the very least in email contact with the local home-schooling community. Involvement with the home-schooling community varied from minimal contact to ongoing involvement at an administrative level.

The children participating in this project ranged from five to nineteen years old at the time of interview. Five were male and two female. Occasionally, researchers will suggest that school refusal is diagnosed more frequently in girls, for whom anxious and fearful behaviour

is culturally sanctioned (Brand & O'Conner, 2004). However, on the whole sex is not seen as an important variable in diagnosing school refusal (King & Bernstein, 2001). This is not to say that boys and girls do not experience 'having' school refusal differently. An analysis of school refusal as a 'gendered' construct has yet to be undertaken. As I stated at the beginning of chapter two it is not my intention to specifically investigate issues of (school refusal and) class, ethnicity and gender. I did not systematically collect any information regarding the participants' ethnicity or social class. Given the effects of social class and ethnicity on families' experiences of schooling and social services, my lack of analysis of these factors may be considered a weakness of my study. Recognising this limitation, however, my interest is in contributing a critical perspective on school phobia/school refusal that examines the discourses and discursive practices surrounding school resistance (including those associated with home schooling a school-resistant child).

Three of the child participants had been identified as having 'special needs'. One child had been diagnosed with attention-deficit hyperactive disorder (ADHD) (commonly understood as a neurological problem associated with hyperactivity, poor impulse control and distractibility) and dyslexia (a problem relating to reading), one with dyspraxia (sometimes diagnosed when a child appears to experience difficulty with fine motor coordination) and one with Asperger's syndrome (usually understood as a condition similar to autism where the child is said to have normal or above average intellectual capacity along with atypical or poorly developed social skills). It is not unusual for school phobia and school refusal to be diagnosed alongside other developmental or educational 'problems'. From a psychiatric/psychological perspective, school resistance may be understood as a cause, a compounding or interacting variable or a result of other dysfunction. For my purposes, it was not particularly important whether the child participants were suffering from the same primary and/or secondary 'disorders' (however these might be defined). I am interested in the various and contradictory ways that resisting school is constructed as pathological within the psy discourses. From this perspective, all medical and psychological labels and definitions are social artifacts that are open to re-definition and re-interpretation.

Background Information²⁰

Anna and Jonathan: Anna, a trained early childhood educator, is the mother of three children, the youngest of whom, Jonathan, started to resist school at the age of eleven years. The family then moved and Jonathan was enrolled at a new school which he attended for six days before again resisting attendance. Various medical, educational and psychological professionals became involved with Jonathan. Anna decided to officially withdraw Jonathan from school and home school him when he was twelve years old. Jonathan was home schooled for approximately two years. Anna took a relatively structured approach to home schooling, working similar hours to school, using some school resources and dividing the day into traditional subject blocks. Jonathan also attended woodwork classes, maths lessons and YMCA sports, and had two paper runs. He socialised with neighbourhood children and other home schoolers. Jonathan agreed to return to school at the age of fourteen years and was still attending at the time of interview.

Vicky and Liam: Vicky is a full-time mother who has one adopted son, Liam, who began resisting school attendance as a five-year-old. Liam had been diagnosed with dyslexia and ADHD at kindergarten. Vicky withdrew Liam from school and had been home schooling for nineteen months at the time of interview. Liam was initially enrolled with the Correspondence School but six months later Vicky decided to home school due to a need for more flexibility. Vicky was taking an unstructured ('unschooling') approach to home education. There was no set timetable and learning often occurred outside the home and/or in response to Liam showing an interest in something. Liam was also attending drama and other activities. Vicky and Liam (who was eight years old when I interviewed him) were very involved with the (secular) home schooling community and met regularly with other home schoolers.

Elizabeth and Peter: Elizabeth has six children, the eldest of whom started disliking school at the age of six years. Peter began having problems at school when he changed from a small Christian school to a public primary school. Although Elizabeth was sick at the time, Peter was withdrawn from the school and began home schooling. All the subsequent children

²⁰ Pseudonyms have been used in all cases to protect the identity of the participants.

in the family have been home schooled exclusively. Elizabeth's approach to home schooling at the time that I met her was semi-structured but very flexible. The children would do some individual work from textbooks, have a daily bible study, read, have group discussions lead by Elizabeth and pursue their own diverse interests in maths, science, computers, music and sports. Peter (nineteen years old at the time of interview) was attending university where he was studying maths and physics. Elizabeth was the moderator of three email home-schooling lists, a founder and administrator of the local home-schooling support group, and had various other leadership roles within the home-schooling community.

Karen and Jamie: Karen has three children, the two youngest being twin girls. Her eldest child, Jamie, started disliking preschool as a two-year-old. Unable to settle him into preschool, Karen withdrew Jamie and waited till he was four years old before returning him to preschool. As a four-year-old, Jamie attended preschool unenthusiastically and showed an aversion for any group activity. Karen decided not to enroll Jamie at school. Karen's approach to home schooling Jamie (who was five at the time of interview) was very relaxed. She had no formal timetable or educational programme. Jamie learned informally through reading, talking, playing and exploring the world around him. He had a keen interest in animals; so much of his learning involved the natural sciences. Karen is university educated, was partially home schooled herself and has a mother who runs a small alternative private school.

Clare, Brittany and Sam: Clare is a solo mother with two children who resisted school for several years, Brittany and Sam. Brittany has been diagnosed with Asperger's syndrome and Sam has been diagnosed with dyspraxia. Clare withdrew her children from school when they were eight and ten years old and had been home schooling for two years at the time of interview. The family's approach to home schooling included some structured learning, regular classes with other home schoolers (e.g. art, drama, painting, and trampolining) and learning through doing everyday activities like shopping, cooking, housework and looking after pets.

Julie and Amanda: Julie and Amanda were living in rural New Zealand at the time of data collection. Julie withdrew her daughter from school after four years of problems beginning when Amanda started school. Amanda had a set curriculum which involved Julie in considerable planning, reading, checking and correcting. Julie belonged to the local home-

schooling support group and subscribed to several of the e-networks of home schoolers. Amanda was socialising with other home-schooled children and with her church community.

The Practitioners

I have attempted to identify and critically examine the meanings used by a small number of practitioners to make sense of school-resistant behaviour and guide their professional practice. It was my intention to interview any professionals connected with the participant families regarding school problems. However, it soon became evident that this was not going to be practical as most of the professionals who had been involved with the children at the time of their school difficulties had retired or moved on. Also, sometimes the families could not remember the names, roles and contact details of the practitioners they had seen, or preferred that I did not attempt to contact them. To protect the privacy of the families involved, I could not request any information about specific individuals or situations from professionals without express permission. This was only given on two occasions. In all other cases, I strictly refrained from discussing the participant children and families with professionals.

I decided where practical to interview a senior staff member at the preschools and schools where the children had displayed resistant behaviour. This allowed me to ‘get a feeling’ for the institutions attended by the children. As mentioned earlier, I also interviewed a psychologist employed by the Ministry of Education, Group Special Education (GSE) services, previously known as Specialist Education Services (SES). In one case, I returned to a preschool for a second interview to discuss a specific family’s experiences with both teachers who worked there (only one of whom I had previously interviewed), having obtained permission from the family first. The practitioners I questioned regarding their views on school resistance and home schooling were:

Mrs Kate and Mrs Mary—two teachers at a small, private Christian preschool attached to a church in Auckland;

Mrs Jasmine—a teacher at a large, private preschool attached to a popular evangelical church in Auckland;

Mr Hughes—the principal of a small Christian private school in Auckland;

Mrs Scott and Mr Phillips—two principals at public primary schools in Auckland;
Mrs Hyde—the associate principal of a public intermediate school in Auckland;
David Brown—a GSE psychologist based in Auckland.

I contacted the practitioners by phone and requested an interview. In only one case was the request declined. I also sent questionnaires to two ‘special character’ schools in Christchurch. In one case the director, Mr Smith, responded and his data has been included in the study to provide an alternative (secular) perspective on school resistance.

Procedure

The interview approach was interactive, flexible and semi-formal. Topics and basic questions to be covered in the interview were specified in advance, but I decided on the exact wording and sequence of questions during the course of the interview (Tuckman, 1994). The interview was conducted at the participant’s own home or workplace (school, preschool or office), or in one instance in the foyer of a hall where a home-schooling drama class was in progress, and lasted from $\frac{3}{4}$ to 2 hours. In two cases, the participants lived too far away to be interviewed in person and instead responded to the questions in writing. In one case, I interviewed both the mother and (nineteen year old) child together but in all other cases children were interviewed on a separate day from their mothers, after the mother’s interview. This meant that the children got to meet me at the time of their mother’s interview and were thus more familiar with me and with the process before I returned to interview them. It also allowed the mothers to get to know me and familiarise themselves with my research before they handed their child over to be interviewed. Mothers were invited to remain present while children were interviewed. Two mothers stayed, one occupied herself elsewhere and one (who had two children being interviewed) stayed for one interview and was absent for the other (chatting to a neighbour).

Interviews were recorded on audio tape (with the participants’ written permission) in order to accurately and thoroughly document the data gained. These tapes were later transcribed. The content of the interview data (as presented in this paper) remains basically unaltered, although in some cases words have been omitted or sentence structure ‘tidied up’

for clarity and ease of reading. I had irregular, informal email contact with two of the mothers subsequent to the interview.

The anonymity of the participants was assured, with fictitious names being used for mothers, children and practitioners. In some cases I asked to see or copy relevant documents, e.g. letters from school staff, correspondence with psychologists, policy documents relating to attendance. Participants were told that the completed thesis would be made available to them should they wish to read it.

All but one of the families were still home schooling children at the time of interview and so in most cases children were present (although not necessarily in the room) during the mother's interview, and in one case up to six children/young adults were present. While this did lead to a certain number of interruptions during the interview process, because the children were an integral part of this study and I wished to familiarise myself with them, I did not view these interruptions as intrusive or disruptive. I was not sure whether hearing their mothers recounting personal information about their school difficulties would be embarrassing or distressing for the children concerned but thought that the mothers were in the best position to determine this. In only two cases did children actually remain in the interview room during their mother's interview. The children's presence was acceptable to the mothers, who often made efforts to involve them in the interview, such as asking them to demonstrate specific skills or confirm information. This was hardly surprising as home schooling families generally regard most activities to be potential learning opportunities. Seen this way, it would have been inappropriate for me to ask the children to be excluded, denying them any educational benefits my project might have afforded.

Approach to Analysis

I have outlined my theoretical and methodological approach in chapter one and in the early sections of this chapter. While not performing 'discourse analysis' in any formal sense, I engaged in a critical reading and analysis of my interview data and other texts. This involved:

- Examining the texts for the ways in which discursive objects (e.g. 'school refusal', 'home schooling') were constructed.

- Focusing on the differences between discursive constructions (within and between texts) and locating constructions within wider discourses.
- Examining what was gained by certain constructions within particular points in the text.
- Exploring the relationship between discourse, practice and subjectivity.

Research Issues

Exclusion of Fathers

Fathers were not interviewed during this project although, compared with mothers, fathers would possibly have provided different perspectives on school phobia, school refusal and the process of parenting and home-schooling a school-resistant child. The reason for not interviewing fathers was twofold. Firstly, fathers expressed no interest in participating in the study. My email describing the study and inviting participation did not specify that I only wanted to speak with mothers and children. I stated that I was interested in “all perspectives” on home schooling a school-resistant child, and yet in all cases the respondents were mothers.

Secondly, I suspected that the mothers were chiefly responsible for caring for and educating their children. Kerslake et al. (1998) found that the person who provided most of the education in New Zealand home-schooling families (at that time) was the mother/female caregiver (although usually both parents would be involved). McAlevey (1995) states that “Mothers make most of the decisions regarding home schooling, usually carry out the role of instructor and usually organise the home schooling” (p.31). Given that conducting in-depth interviews is a relatively intensive and time-consuming procedure, it made sense to focus on those members of the family at the epicentre of the school-resistance experience and the transition to home schooling.

The mothers’ stories confirmed for me that they were indeed the parent principally involved in both the children’s school problems prior to home schooling and the children’s supervision and education after school withdrawal. They described daily visits to, or communication with, the school. This included dropping children off and picking them up, doing voluntary work at the school, phoning the school to say the child would be absent,

staying at school with their distressed child until s/he calmed down, and talking to teachers and other staff about the difficulties the child was having. If the child remained home from school, it was the mothers who provided care during the day. As in the McAlevey (1995) study, mothers also appeared to have taken a leading role in researching and initiating home schooling. The mothers rarely mentioned their husbands' roles in responding to school problems, managing the child's behaviour, interacting with professionals, or home schooling. In fact, I would have to concur with McAlevey that while "Participants referred to their partners briefly...on the whole they seem[ed] absent from this study" (p.143). I suspect that full-time employment outside the home precluded the fathers in this study from being involved in the day-to-day events of their children's lives to the same extent as the mothers. Further research exploring fathers and school resistance might be useful for understanding paternal perspectives, experiences and roles in relation to this problematic child behaviour.

Children's Responses

One research hurdle that I had anticipated was that the children did not seem particularly keen to be interviewed. Jonathan initially agreed to meet with me (via his mother) but later decided not to. Amanda told her mother that she would answer a questionnaire about her school and home-schooling experiences but never did despite several reminders. The remaining children consented to being interviewed but (other than Peter) seemed somewhat uneasy during the interview, although they were relaxed enough during the rest of my visit. Of course, I tried to put the children at ease and appear friendly and non-threatening. However, it is perhaps inevitable that these children would experience difficulty and confusion when recalling and discussing school and their school resistance, given that these experiences were complex, unpleasant and historic. I do not consider this to be a limitation of the study, however, as the points at which confusion and incoherency occur are of as much interest to me as the participants' coherent, fluent and well-rehearsed answers. All the children who I met were without exception friendly, polite and cooperative.

Ethical Concerns

My main ethical concern in conducting this research was that the mothers might be distressed by the ways in which I interpret and understand their data. They may read the final thesis and feel that their statements have been misinterpreted or they may not agree with my analysis and conclusions. This is a problem, as it may lead to disappointment, frustration or feelings of betrayal. I addressed this problem by attempting to remain true to the original critical ‘spirit’ of this project (as communicated to the mothers). I hope that even though the mothers may take issue with how I have used or interpreted parts of their data or with my theoretical perspective, they would be happy with the work this thesis does in questioning both culturally dominant (and hegemonic) approaches to school resistance and the exclusion of school resisters from home schooling. Within this thesis I consider a variety of different perspectives on school resistance that serve different functions and suggest different ways forward. I hope this signals to the reader that multiple interpretations of this research are possible and that a variety of theoretical approaches can be utilised to assist in the progress towards certain social and political ends. It is my sincere wish that all the mothers will feel that ‘their’ story is told somewhere within these pages.

Some participants indicated that they wanted to raise awareness among educational and psychological authorities regarding the problems children have at school, the difficulties associated with school resistance and the option of home schooling. While these are issues addressed by this study, my purpose is not to draw attention to school refusal as a ‘real’ problem requiring additional government resources, increased professional input, and more effective treatment strategies. And I have avoided taking an idealistic approach to home schooling that sees it as outside of power/knowledge relations that constrain and control. Therefore, my thesis may not ‘raise awareness’ about school phobia/school refusal or ‘promote’ home schooling in the ways participants hoped. Taking this approach was particularly problematic considering my admiration for these mothers, personal empathy with the children (as fellow school resisters) and growing love of the home schooling process, naturally leading to a wish to defend all three against antagonists. However, as indicated above, my role as a critical researcher meant that I had to guard against simply casting institutions and ‘experts’ as ‘baddies’ and mothers and children as ‘victims’ or ‘heroes’.

There is no doubt that I have imposed on my participants. This occurred even on the most basic level—some had to tidy the house or defer other activities. While I tried to avoid positioning myself as ‘expert’ or ‘academic’, this does not mean that I avoided exposing the participants to the meaning systems that I value and use to make sense of the world. Indeed, it could be argued that my perspectives and biases were all the more readily transmitted because I appeared so friendly, understanding and innocuous. Through interacting with me and answering questions I had written, the participants probably framed their responses in ways that were unique to this study. My questions often required the participants to draw on marginal or ‘critical’ discourses and where individuals had no access to these discourses, confusion and difficulty sometimes occurred. Anna commented that when asked if the child has rights, she felt confused and found the question “required much thought”. Another mother commented that she felt I was “coming at this from a perspective that is foreign to most home educators” and hence she had some trouble answering the questions. As I indicated above with regard to the children’s interviews, these moments where the participants’ process of making meaning broke down or was disrupted were not considered a problem but rather provided me with instructive insights.

Availability of Subjects

The number of families expressing an interest in this study was probably limited by the number of children in New Zealand being home schooled due to school resistance. Over recent years the number of home schoolers has increased markedly; but nevertheless only about 6000 children are being home schooled (ERO, 2001). Of this group, it is unclear how many children are being home schooled because of school resistance and how home schooling is working for these children and their families. It is also unclear how many school phobics and school refusers are enrolled with the Correspondence School. According to Kate Ford, acting principal of the Correspondence School (in 2003), there are a lot of school phobic/school refuser children receiving Correspondence schooling in New Zealand as plans to reintegrate these students back into local schools “don’t always succeed” and Correspondence schooling is seen as “the only viable option” (personal communication, July

22, 2003). I am assuming that of the perhaps 1%²¹ of children in New Zealand identified as school phobic or school refusers, very few are home schooled or receiving Correspondence schooling (except as a last resort) because of the pervading belief among those who treat school phobics/school refusers (expressed in the literature) that home-based education is inappropriate and detrimental for these children.

Parents ‘story’ their reasons for home schooling in a variety of ways and some home-schooled children in New Zealand who have resisted school, and hence could potentially have been included in this study, are perhaps not understood by their parents as being home schooled for this reason. Kerslake et al. (1998) reported that a minority of parents in their study indicated they were home schooling because their child “disliked, or was not doing well at, school” (p.120). This is perhaps the kind of response one could expect from those parents who had decided to home school due to their child’s school resistance. In the McAlevey (1995) study, three out of five mothers indicated that they had decided to take their children out of school and home school due to “negative experiences” (p.61) at school. One mother states: “[my daughter Sue] had an absolutely shocking six months...she didn’t want to go to school at all, it was just awful for her” (p.64). Hence, for the purposes of my study ‘Sue’ is a school resister. For many other researchers and clinicians, Sue may well be classified as a school phobic or school refuser. However, neither Sue’s mother nor McAlevey understood Sue in these ways.

It is possible that more intensive national advertising might have yielded more family participants for my study. However, because the interviews I conducted were relatively in-depth and lengthy, yielding ample data for critical analysis and discussion, additional participants were not considered necessary. It is not my wish to claim that the perspectives of my participants are typical or representative. Rather, I have sought to identify and examine the range of competing meaning systems that these particular participants engage with and consider the social implications of such meaning systems. Baldwin (1993) indicates that the home schooling philosophies of families of school refusers were being actively promoted in New Zealand at the time of her study (presumably within the home-schooling community), although they are not addressed by her research. This project begins to address the

²¹ This figure is quoted and widely accepted within the international literature, e.g. see Heyne et al. (2004). Obviously, the prevalence of school refusal will depend on how one defines a school refuser.

marginalised views of those individuals in New Zealand who are home schooling due to school resistance.

CHAPTER FOUR

Discourse in Practice: Practitioner Perspectives on School Resistance and Home Schooling

A central practical aim of this study is to explore the relationship between the knowledge, needs and desires of school-resistant children and their families and practitioners' perspectives and interventions. A part of this work involved interviewing eight educational practitioners whose jobs in preschools and schools could be expected to bring them into contact with school-resistant children and one Group Special Education (GSE) psychologist employed by the Ministry of Education (MOE) to assess school non-attenders' eligibility for state funded Correspondence schooling on psychological or psychosocial grounds. As I have indicated, my aim was not necessarily to gather information about practitioners' views that was representational but rather to identify and explore the social meanings informing the attitudes and actions of the practitioners, particularly as they related to the possibility of educating school-resistant children at home. In this chapter I will discuss the interview data, paying close attention to the ways in which school resistance and home schooling are discursively constructed by the practitioners, locating these meanings within wider discourses, and relating discourse to institutional practices and the subjective experience of the school-resistant child and its family.

In most cases the teachers and principals had (or claimed to have) very little exposure to, or experience with, school-phobic or school-refusing children. In this sense, although the practitioners I interviewed were 'front-line' professionals interfacing with children and families in the community on a daily basis, with the exception perhaps of the GSE psychologist, they were not 'experts' on school phobia/school refusal or home schooling, and can be distinguished from those researchers and clinicians who specialise in diagnosing and treating school resisters (whose perspectives are well documented in the literature), and from those educationalists who are spokespersons or advocates for the home-schooling movement.

As previously discussed, there are a variety of terms used in the literature to describe and constitute children who resist school and these terms have been used inconsistently and with varying connotations. The psychiatric/psychological terms 'school phobia' and 'school

refusal' now appear in both dominant and other literatures, and imply different things depending on the discourse in which they appear. During the interviews with practitioners, I made use of the term 'school phobia', and to a lesser extent, 'school refusal', but at times I would ask about or make reference to children's 'aversion to school' or to children 'disliking and resisting' school. With reference to children resisting kindergarten I tended to use the phrases 'chronically anxious' or 'unhappy' at kindergarten, 'not settling', or 'not enjoying' kindergarten. It is quite possible that had I used other terms or identifying phrases to talk about specific types of school and preschool non-attendance in the interviews, my questions would have elicited different responses. This is because language is not merely descriptive but always constitutes meaning and reality in certain ways.

Some practitioners drew a distinction between the concepts 'school phobia', 'school refusal' and/or 'truancy'. For example, one principal thought that a school phobia was an anxiety disorder that would be diagnosed by a psychiatrist, whereas school refusal for this practitioner meant children not wanting to come to school for a variety of less serious reasons (e.g. problems with homework or peers). Not all practitioners included children who resisted school (to stay home) with little or no anxiety under the label 'school phobic' and, in fact, often no 'official' label was used when talking about these children. Sometimes other ways of constituting school resistance were mobilised. David Brown, for instance, predominantly referred to children who find school aversive as 'anxious', 'emotionally fragile', 'psychologically fragile' or as having 'anxiety disorders', rather than labelling them 'school phobic' or 'school refusers'. Mr Smith used the phrase "reluctant school goers" to nominate school resisters, whom he understood as children who had "had negative school experiences" (personal communication, August 23, 2005), and indicated that he did not consider these children to be school refusers. Overall, it would be fair to say that school resistance was described and constructed in a variety of competing (and often inconsistent) ways within the practitioners' narratives.

The practitioners I interviewed were: Mrs Mary (a teacher at a small, private Christian preschool attached to a church in Auckland); Mrs Jasmine (a teacher at a large, private preschool attached to a popular evangelical church in Auckland); Mr Hughes (the principal of a small Christian private school in Auckland); Mrs Scott and Mr Phillips (two principals at public primary schools in Auckland); Mrs Hyde (the associate principal of a

public intermediate school in Auckland); David Brown (a psychologist employed by the MOE); and Mr Smith (the director of a special character school in Christchurch)²².

Dominant Discourses: Prescribing School, Drugs and Therapy

The practitioners I spoke with frequently drew on psychiatric and psychological discourses to explain school resistance. These discourses construct children's resistance to school as a pathological behaviour normally associated with certain mental disorders and caused by (depending on the discipline and theoretical orientation of the practitioner) biochemistry and/or family dysfunction and/or distorted cognitions and/or conditioning/social learning. These discourses are compatible with a more or less medical model of understanding phenomena labelled 'illness' and 'disorder'. They assume some identifiable cause for school resistance that is located in the individual and/or family.

Some practitioners identified how they came to an understanding of school resistance as a pathological disorder located in the individual. One principal suggested that he learned about school phobia through educational psychology courses taken at university. Another principal claimed to be "just making up" her understanding of school phobia (i.e. taking the common meaning of 'phobia' as extreme, irrational fear and linking this with 'school'). However, her next comment indicated that her views on school resistance were at least partly informed by attitudes within the wider educational community: "We talk a lot in schools about the reasons children don't want to come to school". David Brown stated that he learned about anxiety disorders and different theories of causation at university, although his application of this knowledge with school-resistant children was something he attributed to experience. Mr Smith believed that he had formed an understanding of school phobia "on the job".

²² The ninth practitioner Mrs Kate was interviewed only with regards to one specific child's situation. Her data does not appear in this chapter.

Psychiatric Discourse: School Resistance as Mental Illness

Defining the problem: The psychiatric discourse constructs school resistance as a ‘real’ illness stemming from biological and/or psychological dysfunction. School phobics and school refusers are understood as possessing certain traits and commonalities that clearly distinguish them from ‘normal’ children who may also (at times) not want to be at school. In this way, through a process of being defined and separated out from ‘normal’ thoughts and behaviour, school resistance becomes pathologised and the ‘difficult’ behaviour of children who resist school becomes a ‘mental disorder’ of childhood.

When practitioners mobilised the psychiatric discourse, they drew a distinction between school resistance as school phobia—a ‘real’ mental disorder (considered rare, abnormal and pathological)—and other more superficial or transient reasons for not wanting to be at school (considered quite common and within the scope of normal functioning). Mrs Hyde, for instance, believed that children with school phobia would be exhibiting a variety of pathological symptoms: “To have phobia...all these other symptoms are going to be there”.

Mr Phillips linked the term ‘school phobia’ with psychological problems (perhaps requiring specialist intervention) and distinguished this form of school resistance from a “lower level” occasional ‘refusal’ to go to school:

I would see a refusal as being a lower level issue than a phobia. A phobia I would see as being more extreme, where there are some fears real or not that need more investigation than perhaps teachers and the school principal can deal with...I think all children at times say “I don’t want to go to school today”.

Mrs Scott understood school phobia as a continuum, with ‘normal’ children who sometimes complain about school and/or do not want to attend and those children with ‘real’ anxiety issues, positioned at opposite ends:

If it’s just kids saying, “I don’t want to go to school” or “school’s not good” or “I’m bored” or “people are mean to me”—then they’ve got to learn to cope. If it’s at the other extreme, where a child’s on the verge of a nervous breakdown, that’s a whole different kettle of fish.

Mrs Jasmine distinguished between ‘normal’ and ‘pathological’ preschool anxiety according to the length of time the child had been at kindergarten and the child’s age. A child who was approaching ‘school age’ and still did not want to be at kindergarten was considered to have deeper (psychological) issues that needed investigating:

As a parent I think I’d be a bit nervous if my child at four-and-a-half was still having anxiety problems and not wanting to be where they are. But also I’d be asking other questions “why

don't they want to be here?"...I'd be delving a bit deeper...

Mr Hughes drew a distinction between children who have "a real issue that needs sorting", i.e. 'phobia' (which he saw as rare) and the rather common occurrence of what he called 'sin', that is, children not wanting to be at school because they want their own way or because they want to avoid facing their responsibilities:

...older children, they'll often put pressure on parents because they don't want to be at *this* school...I don't call that phobia. In Christian terms, we call that sin [laughs]. It's just wanting my own way...We do have *at times* children who don't want to come to school...my son...he didn't want to come to school...it was because he hadn't done his jolly homework...that's just sin. It's not fronting up to your responsibilities, and lots of kids are like that...

Causes of school phobia: The practitioners identified many reasons they thought a school 'phobia' might develop, including some school factors such as inappropriate school work, relationships with teachers, bullying, and stress. However, a truly 'phobic' child was generally considered to have emotional problems that extended beyond school and, in fact, may have little to do with the school environment. Mr Phillips drew on the psychoanalytic theory of separation anxiety to explain the one 'true' case of school phobia he had seen. This discourse allowed Mr Phillips to constitute the child's school resistance as stemming from "significant issues within the family relating to grieving and separation", rather than from anything to do with school. Mrs Scott also drew on the theory of separation anxiety to explain children's school resistance. She believed that children are sometimes afraid to come to school because they have become anxious about separating from a parent following divorce: "Sometimes it can also be the home things. I've seen this when families break up or marriages split and the child feels that by coming to school they're going to be leaving the distressed parent at home". While it is probable that some children *are* afraid of separating from their mothers, by positioning children who resist school as 'separation anxious' within psychoanalytic discourse (and hence 'neurotic' and 'dependent'), other possibilities for their distress at school can be effectively ruled out.

Within dominant discourses, school resistance has traditionally been constituted as a problem related to family pathology. This pathology is no longer limited to the notion of a hostile-dependent mother-child relationship but, from a more systemic approach, can involve the interrelationships and communication patterns of any or all family members. Mrs Jasmine used this concept of the 'pathological family' to emphasise that problems at kindergarten are usually a reflection of problems at home:

I know we've just had one here where the child was happy as anything one day, the next thing we were having all sorts of problems, toileting problems, emotional problems. It actually turned out the parents had separated; I think that has a lot to do with it.

Mrs Mary also understands children's problems at kindergarten as often stemming from parental behaviour. Mrs Mary positions the parents of children who dislike kindergarten as anxious, vulnerable and unable to cope, and this understanding informs her interactions with these parents who she sees as requiring support, understanding and careful management from staff. Such a perception of parents allows Mrs Mary to attribute children's resistant behaviour at kindergarten to parental anxiety, and thus removes responsibility for the child's distress from the preschool and teachers:

Sometimes teachers have to be almost more supportive of parents than they are of children in...situations [where a child dislikes kindergarten]....Anxiety in a parent really is quite scary for a child. It communicates itself very easily. For a child to feel that their parent isn't secure, I think, is a very scary thing.

While it is quite possible that some parents, who have a school- or kindergarten-resistant child, are themselves anxious, as Margolin (1998) has pointed out, this does not necessarily mean that parental behaviour is *causing* the child's resistance. Parental anxiety may be a *result*, not a cause, of children's problematic behaviour around preschool and school attendance. While Mrs Mary expressed a great deal of compassion and concern for parents with children who resist being left at kindergarten, positioning these parents as needy and anxious may serve to delegitimise their views (by constructing them as 'irrational' and 'emotional'), and thus the parents of children who resist kindergarten may become objects of paternalistic care, 'expert' teacher knowledge and specific behaviour management strategies.

David Brown also positioned school-resistant children within the pathological family discourse, as coming from 'troubled' backgrounds. This understanding allowed David Brown to explain school resistance as an 'anxiety disorder', linked with 'depression', and stemming from personal biography:

...a greater degree of children who have anxiety disorders and depression come from backgrounds where there's been conflict and separation and suicide attempts...there is a tendency for them to have relatives who've had those sorts of difficulties too.

Children 'at risk': School resisters who are positioned within the psychiatric discourse as 'maladjusted' children who have 'disorders' that prevent 'normal' school attendance are necessarily understood as 'at risk', as Mr Phillips explains: "Anyone who has a phobia or a disorder that is not diagnosed and treated, they've got to be at risk". In keeping

with this dominant view of children who resist school as often ‘at risk’, the practitioners in this study understood the school resister and, in particular, the ‘school-phobic’ child as likely to experience educational, emotional and, especially, social maladjustment if appropriate interventions were not carried out. Mrs Scott, for example, positioned children with ‘phobias’ about school as ‘at risk’ of general social dysfunction: “If you have a phobia about coming to school and all the things that are associated with schools then it may very much damage how you interact in society generally”. Mrs Mary understood kindergarten resistance in older preschoolers as indicating that they were ‘at risk’ of becoming “isolated” and “lost in the system” once at school. Mrs Hyde believed that children with school phobia run the risk of becoming social misfits because they are not assimilating the norms and values of their peer group:

When they come back they are apart from the other children. The other children see them as being *different*...They’re at risk with relationships with other children because we know that (particularly at intermediate)—and with peer pressure too—at intermediate school where they are, they form groups of children and they become *apart from the group*...I think really they can run the risk of almost being a misfit because they don’t fit in.

As a psychologist rather than a principal/teacher, David Brown had a different interpretation of the risks associated with school resistance, suggesting that children who are “genuinely anxious” or “very psychologically fragile”, are ‘at risk’ when “not treated correctly” by practitioners. Such a view stems from the notion that school resistance is symptomatic of a ‘real’ illness that requires intervention by knowledgeable and experienced professionals. When school-resistant children are understood as ‘sick’ and ‘vulnerable’ individuals who are ‘at risk’ of having their problems compounded by inappropriate treatments, it becomes judicious to clearly mark out school resistance (especially ‘anxious’ school resistance) as a psychiatric/psychological issue to be dealt with by mental health experts, as opposed to, say, an educational matter to be handled by teachers or a disciplinary matter to be dealt with by the principal.

Also with a different take on the risks associated with having a school ‘phobia’ was Mr Hughes, who understood children’s problems as the responsibility of parents not professionals. He suggested that a lack of parental concern and involvement may place the school-phobic child ‘at risk’. This view reflected Mr Hughes’s commitment to family values and parental responsibility, informed by a “Christian world and life view”: “[we] say parents are responsible for the care and nurture of their children, as Christians”.

Assessment and intervention: While school resistance was understood in a variety of ways by the practitioners, the perception that not wanting to be at school could indicate the presence of a ‘phobia’ (i.e. mental illness) meant that assessment, diagnosis and appropriate treatment were considered vitally important by most of these practitioners. When school resisters are positioned as ‘sick’ or ‘maladjusted’ within dominant discourses, it becomes very difficult (or impossible) for them to decline or avoid psychiatric/psychological assessments and treatments aimed at helping them return to school. Mr Phillips described the school phobic child as “a ticking time bomb”, whose phobia was “only going to grow and get worse” if s/he was not diagnosed and treated. Mrs Scott suggested that a child with school phobia who was not diagnosed “might be so miserably unhappy that they top themselves or get into wagging or...become really depressed”. This dominant representation of school phobia, as psychopathology that seriously harms children, can be seen to inform practitioners’ responses to school resistance.

The school’s role in managing school-resistant children was generally thought to include initial identification of potentially pathological cases. This meant having systems in place for identifying problematic attendance patterns and parental concerns. Mrs Hyde described her school’s rigorous attempts to identify, monitor and predict school phobic behaviour:

All the children have to ring when they’re not here...Because of the systems that we’ve now got in place where—it’s very time consuming—by nine o’clock if a child hasn’t turned up at school every class teacher sends through to the main office with the names of any children who haven’t turned up or the phoning in is checked against this and any child who hasn’t got a record of a note or ring in from a parent, the home is rung to make sure that they are here...we can see [school phobia] coming...

In Mrs Hyde’s narrative we can see the vital role the school plays in ‘policing’ behaviour and identifying deviant individuals. By having complex surveillance systems in place, the school can identify any child whose attendance deviates from the norm and quickly initiate processes that make the child highly visible to school authorities. Since 1992 the Ministry of Education has funded programmes aimed at improving school attendance such as the Student Engagement initiative (see Education Counts²³). Children who are identified as having problematic attendance patterns may become a target for punishment or rehabilitation

²³ This is a Ministry of Education website that provides information about education statistics and research (www.educationcounts.govt.nz).

(depending on how their non-attendance is understood) aimed at returning them to school as quickly as possible.

In contrast to Mrs Hyde's school, Mr Hughes took a much less proactive and systematic approach to identifying cases of school phobia, reflecting his belief that parents are responsible for their child's education (and pathology). His emphasis on 'parental responsibility' and desire not to intrude into family matters meant that he was comfortable relying on parents to alert him to any problems with children resisting school attendance: "the parent would make that known to either the teacher or myself...and then we listen to what's going on...I'm a great believer in that sort of approach".

Most practitioners also felt that schools had a role to play in channelling children into therapeutic services if an attendance problem persisted despite attempts being made to accommodate the child's needs. The assumption was that if staff had addressed any apparent problems at school and the child was still unwilling to be at school, then their resistance must stem from psychiatric/psychological or family issues beyond the professional scope of the school practitioner. Mr Phillips, for example, stated that he would contact specialist services "fairly early" if a child was not wanting to attend school despite efforts being made by staff to "work it through". The practitioners' attribution of all serious school resistance to individual pathology and their faith in schooling as 'good' and 'necessary' meant that other possible explanations for (and hence responses to) this form of school non-attendance were often not available or obvious to them.

The majority of practitioners saw a team approach (involving the school and parents, the school counsellor, and perhaps a psychologist or psychiatrist) as necessary in cases of school resistance. Primary school principal Mrs Scott emphasised the importance of parents and school working together:

Certainly the classroom teacher [needs to be involved in the intervention], in cooperation with the parents. That's the way you've got to work. It's got to be seen that Mum and Dad and the teachers or the principal—whoever's involved from the school—get on together, that they communicate and that they monitor how the child reacts.

Preschool supervisor Mrs Jasmine also stressed the need for practitioners to communicate and work with parents when children resist kindergarten in order to "find out what the home situation is", get to the root of the child's anxiety, and manage the child's behaviour appropriately. While practitioners tended to construct their interactions with parents in terms

of ‘helping’, ‘guiding’, ‘supporting’ and ‘cooperating’, it may be that another (related) function of drawing parents into the therapeutic activity around their child is to make them more visible to authorities who can then assess parental pathology and if necessary treat the parents alongside the child.

The classroom teacher was considered the most appropriate starting point for addressing problems with children not wanting to come to school. If the child’s behaviour was thought to stem from a minor problem (e.g. difficulty with homework, teasing or anxiety about some school event) then it was usually explored and dealt with by the teacher or a senior staff member:

...you get rid of the low level stuff. Is it that homework’s a problem? Is the child being hassled by someone? Is there a problem in the classroom? Is there a problem in the playground?...you can eliminate those fairly quickly. (Mr Phillips)

This approach reflected the practitioners’ assumption that problems with children not wanting to be at school could be considered ‘normal’ if they were relatively transient and easily resolved. In these cases, the help of mental health experts was considered unnecessary because the school resistance was not seen as symptomatic of psychiatric disorder.

If the attendance problem could not be resolved at the classroom level or through a trip to the principal’s office, then the practitioners indicated that referral to the school counsellor or a psychologist was probably necessary in order to examine and assess the child’s behaviour and circumstances:

...We have a system here where it’s the class teacher who encourages them to work along with the class. The next step would be that they would come to one of the deans and share it with us and our system...If it’s ongoing, we’ve got a school counsellor here two days a week, so we would try the school counsellor, working through with them. If it’s still continuing, we’d put it in the hands of Group Special Education or SES. (Mrs Hyde)

This course of action was suggested through the discursive construction of persistent school resistance as ‘pathological’ behaviour outside the scope of normal educational expertise.

Proposed treatments mentioned by the practitioners for cases of school resistance identified as ‘school phobia’ reflected the current emphasis on cognitive-behavioural therapy in the literature. These included counselling, working with psychologists to recognise “unhelpful thoughts” and change “thinking patterns” (David Brown), modifying the school environment (e.g. half days) and behaviour modification (e.g. making contracts, reinforcing attendance). Such interventions are usually considered to be the specialty of psychologists (as opposed to psychiatrists) and are often understood as the ‘softer’ end of mental health

management because they do not involve medicating or hospitalisation. Medication was mentioned by GSE psychologist David Brown as necessary for some school-resistant children who had “sunk to a low point” or were considered at a “very high risk of suicide”.

Cognitive and behavioural technologies have proven highly transferable to classrooms and other institutional settings (where it is not unusual to reward and punish behaviour or require individuals to examine their thought processes). It is not surprising therefore that while sometimes constructing school resistance as a psychiatric illness (i.e. an anxiety disorder perhaps associated with depression), the educational practitioners emphasised a cognitive-behavioural approach to therapy rather than medication or in-patient treatment. This, of course, does not mean that school resisters are not medicated. David Brown stated that he believes there has been “an over-emphasis on medication as a treatment for people with anxiety disorders and school phobia” in New Zealand. David Brown claimed that once school-resistant children reach the point of being referred to psychiatrists and clinical psychologists they are frequently prescribed medication, in part because “psychiatrists...are still very steeped in the medical model”. That is, psychiatrists frequently understand school-resistance as individual malfunction arising from biological and/or psychological pathology that can be treated with drugs. This is a model that David Brown at times appeared to be consciously trying to break free from: “I’ve sort of got vehemently anti-labelling anyway as a philosophy”. Read (2000), co-founder of the Phobic Trust of New Zealand, also indicates that medication is commonly considered “beneficial to recovery” (p.18) from ‘anxiety disorders’, including those that may cause children to resist school (e.g. social phobia).

For the practitioners in this study, the main purpose of intervention was to have the child return to some form of schooling (where s/he could be educated and socialised), if not willingly, then without significant distress. Discourses that place school resistance within the realms of serious mental illness require a response from ‘caring’ professionals and construct social as well as psychological realities. The practitioners communicated a sense of genuine concern and anxiety regarding the welfare of children with school phobia or ‘genuine anxiety problems’, especially those who did not return to school. Associate principal Mrs Hyde felt that a return to school was vitally important for school-phobic children, not just for the sake

of the child's development, learning and socialisation, but in order to prevent the child's behaviour from becoming completely unmanageable:

I think [a return to school is] 100% important...not only for their own learning but for their relationships with others, for later in life, etc....it gets worse and worse the longer they are at home, the harder it is to get back to school and the whole problem exacerbates. It just gets out of hand.

Mrs Scott was concerned that if a child with school phobia was not brought back into "schooling of some sort", then the pathology underlying the 'problem' would never be addressed and the child could be permanently (socially) disabled:

[A return to school is] Huge. Huge, because these problems don't go away. If you can't bring that child back into a mainstream situation—just the long-term implications...you don't get to the root of the problem, which is perhaps the social integration and some of those things. That may have implications for them in their life, how they deal with situations or can't deal with situations.

Primary school principal Mr Phillips and Mr Smith, the director of a special character school, also considered a return to schooling to be very important but thought that some school resisters might need an "alternative method" (Mr Smith) of education from what mainstream schools provide: "I think [a return to school is] the ultimate. It's the aim...to 'school', whether it's a state mainstream school, a return to schooling and education as defined in the education act; it's got to be the ultimate, where we've got to go" (Mr Phillips). Mr Smith indicated that a partial or full return to school was "very important" as it would draw the school phobic child "back into the process of schooling"²⁴. David Brown indicated that for him, ideally, school resisters should return to school *willingly* and *want* to take advantage of the opportunities schools afford: "I guess the ideal that we're always looking for is to enable the student to feel that they can return to school and participate fully in all that schools have to offer". For the practitioners in this study, psy knowledge, perhaps transmitted via teacher training courses, as well as Ministry of Education guidelines that stress the importance of school and practitioner efforts to facilitate the attendance of *all* students (see Education Counts), combine to produce a strong and almost unquestionable belief in the importance of school return.

The process of school return can be understood as a normalising technology aimed at reintegrating a 'deviant' individual back into 'normal' society where s/he can be monitored,

²⁴ In contrast to this statement, Mr Smith had previously indicated that it was a process of 'unschooling' that helped "reluctant school goers" "settle in" at his school (personal communication, August 22 & 23, 2005).

adjusted and reformed. The desire expressed by David Brown (and others) to have school-resistant children return to school willingly and happily reflects a modern approach to the management and discipline of children that (ideally) avoids repression and external control (Marshall & Marshall, 1997). The therapeutic methods advocated by these practitioners for the treatment of school phobia maximise compliance by “allowing children to learn what they ought to desire for themselves, and how to achieve it” (McWilliam, 1999, p.7). Such “well regulated liberty” (Rousseau, cited in McWilliam, 1999, p.7) leads to self-control and an illusion of personal autonomy. This marks a change from external discipline to internal discipline, which has become both the aim of the ‘good’ teacher/caregiver and “the ideal ‘eye’ of surveillance” (Marshall & Marshall, 1997, p.141).

In keeping with the principles of the ‘good’ teacher, early childhood educators Mrs Mary and Mrs Jasmine aimed for children to enjoy and willingly participate at preschool. These practitioners considered kindergarten to be a beneficial and fun experience for most children; however, they understood some young preschool children as less mature than their peers and unable to cope with kindergarten. In this case, temporary withdrawal was considered appropriate, especially if the parent was seen to be very stressed and anxious about their child. Mrs Jasmine indicated that as a child approaches ‘school age’ (when willingly separating from parents and spending time with other children in an institutionalised setting is considered developmentally appropriate) resistance to kindergarten would be considered more serious and withdrawal from the centre may not be suggested. Instead, the child may be encouraged to understand kindergarten (and school) as inevitable and to behave in an ‘age-appropriate’ manner, i.e. willingly stay at kindergarten and participate: “we have children here at four-and-a-half who still get upset. We give them the talk ‘you’re a big four-year-old now; you’re going to go to school soon. You’ve got to stay here and be at kindy”” (Mrs Jasmine).

Behavioural Discourse: School Resistance as a Learned Response

In chapter one, I discussed a widespread approach to explaining school resistance in Japan, labelled the ‘behavioural discourse’ by Yoneyama (1999). Within this discourse, school resistance is understood as *tōkōkyōhi*, which in this particular instance means refusing

school due to laziness. A similar perspective was evident in my interviews with New Zealand practitioners who indicated that they thought some school-phobic children did not (just) have anxiety about attending school but also a behaviour problem. That is, they were not (necessarily) afraid to attend school but had learned that not going to school could be rewarding in some way: “I think originally there are [anxiety] issues...but the more they stay off...they then start looking for things and looking for reasons why they can’t come” (Mrs Hyde).

Within the Japanese behavioural discourse, *tōkōkyōhi* students are often constituted as ‘delinquents’ or ‘criminals’, and are not clearly differentiated from truants (see Yoneyama, 1999). The New Zealand practitioners I spoke with did not construct any school resisters as ‘bad’ or ‘dangerous’, that is, as delinquents or criminals. School resisters who were considered to have behavioural rather than emotional problems seemed to fall into two groups. There was the “naughty” truant (David Brown) with no anxiety problems who ‘wagged’ school to hang out at the mall and go “shopping” or “shop-lifting” (Mrs Hyde). And there was the school resister with some genuine anxiety who had also developed behavioural issues (e.g. willfulness). Children in this second group were classified as ‘school phobic’ by some practitioners (e.g. Mrs Hyde) and were distinguished from children with severe anxiety or ‘phobia’ by others (e.g. Mr Phillips, who labelled this group ‘school refusers’). However, as I continue to reiterate, the meanings of school resistance and the various terms used to nominate it were difficult to pin down. Mr Smith, for instance, proposed that the truant could be a child who had learned to use anxious behaviour as a means of resisting school. Mr Phillips similarly indicated at one point in our interview that truants and school phobics were not necessarily “exclusive” groups. According to Lisa Ng, researcher for the Ministry of Education, ‘truancy’ is “the sum of unjustified absences [absences that are not explained or not explained to the satisfaction of the school] and intermittent unjustified absences [when a student is absent for part of a morning, afternoon or period without justification]” (2007, p.1). This understanding of ‘truancy’ would seem to include most school resistant children as schools generally do not accept school resisters’ assertions that school is inherently aversive and hence would presumably deem their absences from school as ‘unjustified’.

When practitioners mobilised the behavioural discourse, they often spoke about school resisters as though they were being manipulative and difficult. Mrs Hyde indicated that she saw one student's failure to compromise with the school over his attendance as a 'power game' on the boy's part: "He had come to an agreement with the psychologist that he would come in for half days but of course he didn't come up. We just feel with him at the moment, he keeps on moving all the boundaries". Mr Smith expressed a similar sentiment, suggesting that some children "come to understand how to use [school phobia] as a tool for avoidance". Mrs Jasmine suggested that some children who anxiously resist kindergarten are "strong-willed" and will try to manipulate their parents into letting them stay home for reasons that she considered to be invalid, e.g. "wanting to be at home with Mum":

I know with my son, he was very, very strong-willed and he just wanted to be at home with mum. I think if a child's like that, you've got to get to a stage where you say this child's just stringing mum along and as a parent you've got to be firm... That's how we try to encourage a lot of the parents here.

Role of the family: Within the behavioural discourse, school resistance was attributed (at least in part) to poor parental management. Parents were understood from a behaviourist perspective as intentionally or inadvertently reinforcing their child's fear and avoidance behaviour. This was sometimes linked to parental personality characteristics such as hypersensitivity, anxiety and over protectiveness: "you get a really sensitive mum and [their child's distress at being left at kindergarten] really upsets them, they think that the child's always like that and they're not". Mrs Hyde indicated that she thought school phobia could result from parents giving in to their child's desire to choose the easy option and stay home:

...it's easier to be at home and parents can mollicoddle their children. I think any of us would prefer to be at home rather than going to work [laughs]. If they know that they don't have to [come to school] and the parents aren't saying, "you've got to go to school whether you like it or not", the parents are saying, "just have another day".

The assumption that parental mismanagement is centrally implicated in some cases of school resistance (whether classified as 'phobia', 'refusal' or 'truancy'), leads to the conclusion that parental education and re-training may be helpful when children resist school. Within a behaviourist framework, what is learned can always be unlearned and any deviant behaviour can potentially be managed back to normalcy. The practitioners' believed that the family's cooperation and compliance with intervention was crucial, if the child's problematic school behaviour was to be successfully modified. Mrs Hyde suggested that to get school-phobic children back to school, parents must be convinced that a school return is

the best (or only) course of action: “You’ve got to have the home on side in order to get them back. It doesn’t work if you haven’t got the parents working towards it too”. Mrs Jasmine stated that when a “strong-willed” child gets upset and resists being left at kindergarten; the teachers must educate the child’s parents so that they can “set the boundaries” and insist the child stay.

Assessment and intervention: When school resisters were positioned as ‘wilful’ and ‘poorly managed’ within the behavioural discourse (rather than being seen as ‘sick’ or ‘highly anxious’), the practitioners generally suggested that behaviour modification techniques aimed at returning the child to school were acceptable and useful. These included increasing pressure for school attendance on the child and/or parents, making school more rewarding or less aversive (e.g. organising a buddy for the child, allowing half days, excusing the child from certain classes), and educating and advising parents. Particular discourses legitimate certain forms of behaviour or practices, and these practices in turn reproduce the discourses that legitimate them (Willig, 2001). The psychotherapeutic practices of ‘forced attendance’ (i.e. physically escorting the child to school) and ‘rapid return’ (i.e. returning the child to school without delay) were constructed within the behavioural discourse as acceptable and appropriate for use with children positioned within this discourse as ‘less anxious’, ‘naughty’, or as having ‘refusal’ rather than ‘phobic’ problems.

The practitioners utilised different criteria to determine when it was appropriate to use forced attendance and rapid return with school resisters, but generally speaking there was an assumption that these techniques should not be used with children who were suffering from ‘genuine’ anxiety disorders (or other psychiatric problems). David Brown, the psychologist, believed that a rapid return to school is acceptable when a child is ‘truant’ as opposed to ‘anxious’, although he acknowledged that distinguishing truant children from anxious children was not always easy (or possible): “[forced return is acceptable] In situations where there doesn’t appear to be a real anxiety, any difficulty—if it’s basically just being naughty, wagging, without any kind of fear or anxiety, just sheer naughtiness—but it’s always a hard call”. Intermediate school associate principal Mrs Hyde, indicated that while force was most appropriate in cases of “deliberate staying away” which were not accompanied by “bullying, anxiety, [and] stress” (i.e. truancy), she was not opposed to using force in cases of school

phobia (where at least some degree of 'real' anxiety was present): "the law says they've got to come to school. We'll do everything in our power to have them at school".

Some practitioners were uncomfortable with the idea of 'forcing' children to attend school or saw force as potentially problematic. For Mr Phillips it was the physical aspect of forced attendance that he disagreed with. He believed that 'force' aimed at parents "under the Education Act" was acceptable but not "heading around in a car and taking a child kicking and screaming into...school". David Brown's concerns focused around the psychological implications of forced attendance if the child was not emotionally ready to return to school. He suggested that forcing "emotionally fragile" children back to school before they were 'ready' could "do all sorts of emotional damage and even push the child to suicide". David Brown referred to the testimony of parents who felt that their children had been emotionally damaged through being taken to school by force to emphasise the need for careful assessment of school resisters, and the necessity of therapeutic intervention (carried out by mental health professionals) rather than forceful approaches (managed by the truancy officer) in cases of 'genuine anxiety':

I've certainly heard parents describe situations where truancy officers have pretty forcibly taken kids into school. And they've said it was just horrible, the repercussions emotionally on the child have been really bad...I think the whole area of anxiety and school phobia is possibly not as well understood or as well handled as it might be. That's just a personal comment.

Because the behavioural discourse constructs school resistance as primarily a behavioural/management issue rather than a psychological/emotional problem, it becomes possible for some school resisters to receive interventions aimed solely at increasing school attendance. David Brown describes how some school resisters, considered by GSE to have "milder anxiety" problems, do not qualify for GSE assistance or Correspondence schooling and may become the province of the truancy officer:

The interesting...question...is: what happens to the students who are not deemed to have sufficiently severe psychological issues to go on Correspondence...We can only work with students who have severe and challenging behaviour or are deemed to be severely at risk. So those milder anxiety type kids, we at the moment haven't really got a brief to work with...it would normally be handled by an agency called NETS, which is the non-enrolment truancy service...They're dealing with the whole spectrum of non-enrolled students. Some of them are naughty truants; some of them have varying levels of genuine anxiety.

The understanding that school resisters can be more or less anxious (and/or wilful) depending on their level of "psychological robustness" (David Brown) and the presence of behavioural

problems would seem to indicate that the meaning of any particular child's school resistance can (and does) change over time and depending on the particular practitioner discourse being mobilised. This may allow practitioners to use a variety of strategies and services in their attempts to return a child to school without necessarily compromising good practice by forcing a 'disturbed' child into school or negotiating with a 'wilful' child over attendance. That is, by constructing a child's school resistance in multiple ways (e.g. as manipulation, as naughtiness, as stress, as separation anxiety, as emotional dysfunction, as a psychosocial need, or as a family problem) a range of (seemingly contradictory) treatment practices become possible. Mrs Hyde did not seem to see any problem with using both 'disciplinary' interventions (i.e. threats, force) and 'therapeutic' interventions (i.e. counselling, support, part-time attendance) with the same child (labelled by her as 'school phobic'). And David Brown indicated that 'anxious' children (as well as 'naughty' children) may be referred to truancy services. This is perhaps not surprising as 'discipline' and 'therapy' are by no means mutually exclusive and, as Foucault (1979) has argued, can be seen to be thoroughly bound up with each other.

Competing Discourses: 'Anti-school' Philosophies, Christianity and the New Right

Within the narratives of Mr Hughes, David Brown and Mr Smith, alternative constructions of school resistance were apparent (often sitting alongside culturally dominant meanings). Mr Smith defined school phobia or school refusal as "a reluctance to attend school based on previous experiences". Hence, he seemed to be suggesting that school resistance is a product of negative experiences at school rather than individual pathology (innate or learned). While Mr Smith stated that his school was established primarily for children with "a huge love of learning" (by which he seemed to be meaning for children who *want* to be at school) (personal communication, August 22, 2005), he does not completely rule it out as an appropriate educational setting for 'reluctant school goers' suggesting that, "It can work for some, because they get a say in how their programme works". He mentions one case of a school phobic child enrolling at the school where after one month, according to Mr Smith, "it was...apparent to [the] child that school was okay".

Mr Hughes is a fundamentalist Christian (ex-home schooler) who emphasises traditional conservative family values, parental (and biblical) authority and a desire for individual and local freedom. As mentioned above, Mr Hughes understands education as a parent's responsibility, not a responsibility of the state, although schools can play a role if parents desire: "*parents* are responsible for their children's education...The parents come to us because—they're not off-loading their responsibility—they're saying 'you can help with teaching our child in specific areas, like the academic'".

Mr Hughes also considers parents to be responsible for meeting their children's social and emotional needs: "we're not into socialising the whole child because we believe the *home* has the vital role to play there". The school's function is to teach basic academic skills: "we are fairly focused on reading, writing and arithmetic", not to "*tell* parents what to do", provide necessities (e.g. breakfast) or entertain students (e.g. with school trips). Mr Hughes argues that state schooling, informed by secular humanist philosophies (that he rejects), reflects a belief among school practitioners that school can "be everything" to the child. By trying to 'parent' children rather than just 'teach' them, state schools, in Mr Hughes's opinion, fail to do what they are good at, i.e. instill basic academic skills. From this perspective, described as a resistance to "statism" by Norwegian home-education researcher Beck (2006), state schools "are viewed as a threat to individuality, parental rights, the family and to quality in education" (para 26).

Mr Hughes constructed school resistance in a variety of competing ways. He saw it as "sin" in cases where children were not 'genuinely anxious' but just wanted to get their own way or shirk their responsibilities. He also suggested that it could be just a normal "part of growing up". He thought that persistent anxiety about school could mean that school "doesn't suit" the child, or it may indicate that the child's "got a real [psychological] issue that needs sorting". In addition, he attributed 'school phobia' to problems at school, although he stated that when children are really unhappy in school, "problems at home" are probably implicated.

The meanings that Mr Hughes draws on to explain school resistance at different points in his narrative do particular work for him. His use of fundamentalist Christian discourse allows him (as a Christian) to account for school phobia as a problem stemming from secular state schooling: "many children who go through schools (and I'm not talking

about this one)...they just don't like school...I can honestly say we don't have that problem [school phobia] here". He uses neo-conservative discourse to construct intervention with school-phobic children as a matter of parental choice not state responsibility: "I believe the parents have the right to control the education of their child...I don't actually agree with the law in this country that says parents have to send their child to school...This government is hell-bent on centralising, controlling and making sure there are no choices for parents". And he makes use of more critical educational perspectives to explain school resistance as stemming from a personality ill suited to institutionalised schooling, thus negating the need for mental health intervention (as there is no 'disorder' to treat) and confirming the need for home schooling: "Something about school, you can be in the outer group or sent to Coventry...that only happens at school. That's why home schooling often is better...a lot of the cases [of persistent school anxiety] school doesn't suit..."

The fundamentalist Christian and anti-government/pro-market neo-conservative discourses that Mr Hughes mobilises inevitably shape what he considers to be an appropriate response to school resistance. Within Mr Hughes's narrative, staying away from school (with parental knowledge) was not necessarily indicative of mental illness or family problems and did not necessarily require a response from Mr Hughes: "I'm pretty relaxed about [a child not coming to school], in the sense that I could say, 'okay, keep me informed of that'". Mr Hughes firmly believes that parents—not teachers, school counsellors or psychologists—are the best people to help the school-phobic child (however that child might be defined). From this perspective, professional intervention is not automatically seen as helpful or necessary but may be understood as a potential threat to parental autonomy. Nevertheless, Mr Hughes does acknowledge that some parents with children who are distressed about school may wish for guidance and support. Drawing on fundamentalist Christian views, Mr Hughes suggests that for Christian parents the "pastor" is the appropriate 'expert' to consult when a child becomes school phobic:

As a principal, I wouldn't call those people [special agencies] in. What I'd do is if there's problems there, we'd put it back to parent. If the parents are struggling—in the past I have had parents who are distressed about issues—if they're Christians, I'd refer them to their pastor and that's where the issue is dealt with.

In David Brown's case, culturally dominant understandings of school and school resistance informed by and reified within New Zealand Ministry of Education policy appear

to have been disrupted by exposure to home-schooling pedagogy and philosophies. David Brown was made aware of competing discourses about school resistance through his work with home schoolers and students enrolled with the Correspondence School who expressed non-traditional and critical views on schooling and shared with David Brown stories about their negative experiences within ‘the system’:

To tell you on a personal level rather than Ministry policy—yeah, definitely working in the Correspondence arena gave me a lot of contact with these various situations...I listened to a lot of views of people who were coming from a different angle from the traditional norm. They had had experiences with ‘the system’ that weren’t terribly positive.

New Zealand Ministry of Education guidelines support a particular way of seeing school and school non-attendance. The Ministry has a very strong view that staying in school is best:

In order to achieve, students must stay at school, experience a sense of belonging and support, and stay interested and engaged in learning. All schools face the constant challenge of ensuring that all students feel they belong and are encouraged to participate at school. This is the foundation of motivation, interest and pleasure in learning (MOE, n.d.A, para 4).

Individuals who stay in school are said to be ‘engaged’ whereas those who are absent from school for a variety of reasons (e.g. suspension or ‘truancy’) are categorised as ‘disengaged’ and understood as ‘at risk’:

Every day a student is not at school is a day they are not learning. Over time, patterns of non-attendance can place students at risk of poor achievement and early drop-out, thus compromising their later outcomes in life across a range of social and economic measures (MOE, n.d.B, para 3).

School resisters can be said to be ‘disengaged’ according to Ministry guidelines if they are absent from school and, as mentioned above, may be considered ‘truant’ if their absence is deemed unjustified by the school.

While the term ‘engagement’ with its connotations of intense involvement, interest and participation is used by the Ministry to denote attendance at school, this may be misleading as within a compulsory system, school attendance does not necessarily signal student interest, involvement and participation in learning or school life and school non-attendance certainly does not mean that an individual cannot be meaningfully ‘engaged’ in educational pursuits. Ministry perspectives and definitions do not seem to allow room for individuals to be ‘engaged’ in learning but ‘unjustifiably’ absent from school. As an official knowledge that comes with the status and power of regulation and legislation, the Ministry’s view acts to subjugate other perspectives and ways of understanding school attendance and

non-attendance, for example, those home schooling perspectives that understand school withdrawal as a positive step towards enhanced learning and life opportunities. The Ministry's position constitutes an official knowledge that sets the parameters of practice, that is, how schools and Ministry employed psychologists can and should understand and manage children who are absent from school.

Despite his position as a Ministry of Education employee, David Brown's recognition of marginal discourses about school non-attendance that question and compete with dominant Ministry perspectives allows him to shift his personal position on this topic, acknowledging that resisting school attendance may sometimes be "totally appropriate":

I guess on some occasions [an aversion to school] is a reasonable and rational response, particularly where the schooling situation is putting them through hell for whatever reason, whether it be the peer group or they're being inappropriately handled at times by teachers. Yeah, sometimes their reactions are...self-defence...

Understood in this way, school resistance may be justified but nevertheless can still be constructed as a 'real' anxiety disorder that (in this case) stems from prolonged stress or trauma at school. Hence, David Brown does not reject the psychiatric/psychological construction of school resistance as pathological; he merely expands his understanding of the etiology of this pathology to include a serious consideration of school factors like bullying and teacher mismanagement. This way of 'storying' children's resistance to school is not incompatible with David Brown's role as a psychologist (rather than a school practitioner), although perhaps sits less easily with his position as an employee of the Ministry of Education.

David Brown uses critical educational discourses and his own observations that some children "do incredibly well" when taken out of school, to question the assumption that school is always 'good' and 'necessary' and to argue that mainstream schools do not cater well for some students' 'needs'. He suggests that these students may be better served by alternative educational arrangements such as home schooling. This group includes (but is not limited to) those school resisters whom David Brown positions as "emotionally fragile" within the psychiatric discourse. David Brown indicated that he felt comfortable recommending that children with "a genuine psychological reason" for not attending school be home schooled or placed on Correspondence (usually with a plan for school return at some stage). By incorporating critical perspectives on schooling into his educational

philosophy, David Brown is able to consider alternative educational arrangements for some students with problematic school attendance, and position himself as more “broad-minded” than the majority of school-based practitioners:

...there seems to be a strong belief among people in the school system that school really is for everyone, or should be for everyone. I certainly believe everyone should have the opportunity to be involved in school if they *wish* and if it's going to be beneficial for them in every way. But I think that there's some students, in some circumstances where that's certainly not the case.

Practitioners' Attitudes Towards Home Schooling

I have indicated that the attitudes of educational practitioners towards school resistance and home schooling may inform, shape and limit the thinking and behaviour of families in important ways, as well as determining how school non-attenders are categorised and treated. Exposure to and attitudes towards home schooling within this group of practitioners varied. David Brown, Mrs Scott and Mr Hughes were relatively familiar with home schooling through work, social contacts or personal experience and indicated that they were able and willing to offer parents information about home schooling as a possible educational option for their child. David Brown even expressed concern about what he saw as a lack of community understanding regarding parents' rights to home school and (under some circumstances) receive government funded Correspondence schooling. Mrs Mary, Mr Smith and Mr Phillips had some exposure to home schooling through knowing families who had (or still) home schooled. They did not feel sufficiently informed to talk to parents about the possibility of home schooling a child, although Mrs Mary and Mr Phillips thought that providing this kind of information to parents might fall within the scope of their professional role. Mrs Hyde and Mrs Jasmine indicated that they had very little exposure to home schooling and were not equipped (or willing) to offer advice or information to parents who expressed an interest in home schooling.

Mollycoddling Parents, Misfit Children and Missing out on School

Intermediate school associate principal Mrs Hyde, and preschool supervisor Mrs Jasmine, expressed particularly negative views on home schooling. Mrs Hyde understood

school as the best place for all children to be educated and socialised. This understanding of school as both ‘good’ and absolutely ‘necessary’ (and hence non-attendance as abnormal or wrong) is what Yoneyama (1999) refers to as “school absolutism” (p.202), or in her later work, “school faith” (2000, p.80). Mrs Hyde’s uncritical adherence to the ‘school faith’ creed meant that other ways of understanding schooling or education were not obvious to her. This became evident when Mrs Hyde discussed the case of a home-schooled child I will call Briar, whom had recently been enrolled at school:

I know of one child we’ve got at the moment who was home schooled and it has been the most horrific experience for this child, getting her back into the schooling system. It’s been absolutely horrific. She came to us, head down, couldn’t talk, absolute bundle of nerves. It’s taken probably right up till now to get her comfortable in the system. She was home schooled last year. She was an absolute wreck when she came to us.

Do you know why? What was her home schooling situation?

I don’t know. I know that the mother’s probably—I think it’s fair to say that she’s [the child] probably mollycoddled to some extent.

In Mrs Hyde’s narrative, schooling is set up in opposition to home schooling in terms of what the school and school pupil have and what the home school and home-schooled child lacks. Schools, in Mrs Hyde’s view, provide educational and social experiences and opportunities that the home environment cannot replicate or compensate for. Therefore, home-schooled children lack the skills that schooled children naturally acquire. Such an approach constructs teaching and learning as activities that (properly) take place in schools (where appropriate resources and expertise are located), and hence schools are understood as indispensable for children. For Mrs Hyde, all ‘educational’ experiences (e.g. working with hard and soft materials, sharing with others, and learning from your mistakes) have become inextricably linked with school and schooling:

There’s *so* many things that a child can do when they come to a school like ours. A parent can’t provide all the tuition programmes, all the sports equipment, the computer programmes, the music, the art, all the technology equipment we’ve got, soft materials, hard materials...There’s just so much money invested in equipment, in people expertise. A normal parent could not provide it...So much of our curriculum now, it’s not on one person giving information. It’s about sharing...with other children, it’s on questioning, it’s on group work...learning from your mistakes and your relationships with others—they [home schoolers] just don’t get this.

Mrs Jasmine expresses a similar perspective on schooling to Mrs Hyde, arguing that schools—purpose built for education and staffed by experts—are best equipped to meet the learning needs of children and that an ‘average’ parent would find the job very difficult, if not beyond them:

My perception is that the school system offers a lot...personally I just wonder if in a home situation, I don't know, if they'll use their time as wisely as they would in a school situation...Personally, it's not something that I could do...I think it would be a very, very hard job. I think it would take a certain type of person to do it. Good luck to them [laughs] if they think they can do it.

Mrs Hyde understands the parental desire to home school in terms of parents wanting to protect their child from the 'real' world: "At some stage the child's got to get out in the big wide world and if you are protecting up till then—I'm not too sure about that". When home schooling is constructed in this way, parents may be positioned as neurotic, insecure and unrealistic, while home-schooled children may be understood as hypersensitive, dependent and "mollycoddled" (Mrs Hyde). Interpreting Briar's behaviour from this vantage point it is perhaps not surprising that Mrs Hyde understands Briar as highly anxious, unhappy, lacking confidence and socially incompetent, and links these emotional and social deficits specifically with the fact that Briar "was home schooled last year". Mrs Hyde's 'school faith' allows her to account for Briar's problems by pointing to home schooling and rules out the need for any other explanation.

The 'Good' Home School

While Mrs Hyde's and Mrs Jasmine's location within dominant educational discourses meant that they were unable to see any advantages to educating children at home and feared the repercussions of removing a child from the school setting, most practitioners expressed a more optimistic view of home schooling. As indicated above, David Brown stated that he had seen home schooling work well for some children and believed that it could potentially provide educational opportunities, social experiences and a lifestyle superior to school:

Look at the advantages, they can be flexible. If it's a beautiful sunny day they can choose to get up early, they can do a couple of hours of work in the morning, they can go to the beach for the majority of the day or go on some interesting educational visit...When their friends come home from school, they can link in with them...They have more time to get involved in heaps more activities. The potential is there for them to have a fantastic educational and social life, without necessarily doing the society norm of going to school.

While most practitioners I spoke with believed that home schooling had some advantages, I would argue that these practitioners predominantly defined and understood home schooling in relation to school (as the 'other'), that is, in terms of what it 'lacked'

(compared with school) and how successfully it compensated for these inherent deficiencies. For example, Mrs Mary, whose brother and sister-in-law were home schooling, understood home schooled children as lacking socialisation opportunities (and hence lacking social skills): “I think [home schooled children] miss out a bit [socially]...Tend to be a little bit more shy and withdrawn...You learn a lot from getting a lot of different input from different places, I think”. Thus, she emphasised the need for home schoolers to have a wide sphere of contacts outside the family.

That the educational practitioners largely understood home schooling as inferior to school (in at least some areas e.g. socially) but potentially acceptable when parents work hard to rise to the standard that school has set is hardly surprising when we consider that Ministry of Education regulations state that in order for a child to be granted a home schooling exemption s/he must be taught at least “as regularly and as well as” in a registered school (Vaughan, 2004, p.103)—thus school is officially positioned as the benchmark for home schoolers to measure up to. Implicit in this regulation is the assumption that at school children are regularly and well educated whereas within the home school they may not be. Additionally, the Ministry’s understanding of student ‘engagement’ as meaning attendance at school would seem to exclude home schoolers despite home schooling being a legal, if not particularly popular, choice within New Zealand. This is important because ‘engagement’ is discursively linked with positive educational and life outcomes within Ministry discourse, whereas being ‘disengaged’ means to be an ‘at risk’ student.

Practitioners who understood home schooling as a potentially acceptable alternative to attending school tended to construct home schooling in terms of the ‘good’ and ‘bad’ home school. Schools, however, were not generally understood as categorically ‘good’ or ‘bad’, but rather as ‘good’ or ‘bad’ for certain students at certain times (depending on the student’s circumstances, personality and emotional state). Practitioners emphasised that in order for the potential benefits of home schooling to be realised, home schooling must be “done properly” (Mr Phillips). For David Brown and Mrs Scott, ‘good’ home schooling meant providing an active and varied social and recreational life to complement the academic programme. This may have reflected an assumption that home schoolers need to replicate the ‘holistic’ approach to education found in most secular state schools: “I’ve learnt...to really recommend to parents a number of things and one of those is that it’s incredibly important to

plan a really stimulating and varied recreation, exercise and social programme for the kid” (David Brown).

For Mr Hughes, who rejected what he saw as the state school’s ‘humanistic’, ‘holistic’ approach to education, the ‘good’ home school was organised and structured. His own children “had school from nine till lunchtime, three hours. Then they did their music and the art type of things”. Mr Hughes was unable to see the merit in a more relaxed approach to home schooling (e.g. unschooling), indicating that he thought home schooling failed when parents approached learning as though it would ‘just happen’. Thus, for Mr Hughes, the ‘bad’ home school was one that neglected to ‘school’ at all.

The common assertion that home-schooled children need a full and varied social life because they are not mixing with peers at school may sound reasonable. However, it implies that while parents who send their children to school can be assured that their child’s social needs are being appropriately catered for in the school environment, the parents of home-schooled children must be ever vigilant in their attempts to compensate for a lack of school socialisation. Such discourses can be understood as regulating the educational practices of individuals even when, as in the case of home schooling families, those individuals are purportedly outside of institutional control and understand themselves to be autonomous. In addition, discourses that construct school as the best place for socialisation to occur may function to negate and exclude the experiences of those children for whom the school environment is *not* a positive social experience.

Mr Hughes had a different perspective on school socialisation from most of the practitioners I spoke with. He understood state schools as places where children are poorly disciplined and lack good role models. It becomes possible from this standpoint to constitute home schooling as the “best option” for socialising children because it removes children from the negative effects of bullying, peer pressure and peer dependency which many Christians (and others) believe are associated with mainstream, secular school culture:

You get a lot of criticism from people saying your children won’t be socialised—what a lot of nonsense. They are actually more socialised...At intermediate schools—a lot of my teaching has been there—I think they can be a disaster in the sense of socialisation. You’ve got a whole lot of eleven, twelve, thirteen-year-olds and...they look to the examples that you don’t want them to follow [i.e. each other].

An Alternative Approach for ‘Unconventional’ Students

A number of the practitioners expressed a belief that conventional schooling does not suit all children all of the time. This more flexible understanding of students’ ‘needs’ and education sat somewhat uncomfortably alongside other more dominant approaches. When practitioners approached schooling from this direction they constructed a minority of students as requiring or being best served by an alternative type of education. Mrs Mary, for instance, suggested that some children view school “as more of a punishment than an opportunity”. She felt that schools need to provide “flexible learning programmes” for these children because families can not always “accommodate their needs”, i.e. by home schooling. Mrs Scott made a similar argument, proposing that some children just dislike school and implying that this may be a reasonable and legitimate response to mass schooling: “Who’s to say that coming to school with three or five hundred other kids is the right thing. That’s why I think alternatives have to be looked at”.

David Brown indicated that he did not see schools as accurately reflecting life in the ‘real’ (non-school) world and, consequently, did not understand adjustment to mainstream schooling as a prerequisite for success in later life. Instead, like the critical theorists discussed in chapter two, he acknowledges the possibility that some (‘psychologically intact’ as well as ‘emotionally disturbed’) children might not fit into conventional schooling and hence might be happier and more successful learning at home:

I have seen heaps and heaps of students who, maybe they just didn’t quite fit the establishment type structure of a school—which is a fairly unique type of environment. I don’t think we ever go through an environment in our lives again that’s anything like school...The question is should we really attempt to force all students to adapt themselves to that environment or do we recognise that there are some students whose belief system or psychological make-up doesn’t fit.

Home Schooling the School-Phobic Child

The educational practitioners (who included senior staff members from preschools, primary and intermediate schools) were all opposed to, or expressed reservations about, the idea of home schooling the school-phobic child (even if they were tolerant or supportive of home schooling in general). While some practitioners believed that “you have to look at [all]

the options” (Mrs Scott), and so were not prepared to rule out home schooling the school phobic child ‘a priori’, allowing such a child to stay at home was often considered to be a last resort or a temporary solution when attempts at school return had failed or a suitable school environment was not available. Mrs Hyde states: “We would never be encouraging—there are other situations where we would recommend home schooling but not with school phobia”. Mrs Mary thought that home schooling an anxious child who was resistant to attending kindergarten should be provisional until the child becomes “more secure” or needs more than the parent can provide. Hence, home schooling was seen as an inferior and problematic educational option for children understood as ‘school phobic’.

The practitioners used psychiatric/psychological discourses to explain why home schooling was contraindicated in cases of school phobia. The ways that children who resist school are positioned within these discourses (as suffering from mental illness and/or maladaptive thinking and behaviour patterns) evidently made it difficult or impossible for practitioners to see home schooling as a positive or appropriate response to school phobia. This, in part, stemmed from the way these discourses construct severe or prolonged resistance to school as indicative of family pathology (perhaps making home a less than ideal environment). For example, although Mr Hughes voiced many criticisms of state schools, he nevertheless indicated that family problems are likely to be implicated when children are very unhappy at school: “often I think you’ll find...It could be the relationships at home, problems at home [causing the school resistance]”. This belief caused him to have reservations about home schooling in cases of school phobia: “I’m not sure that home schooling would be so flash”—although he thought that home schooling was the *best* educational option for ‘normal’ children.

The practitioners indicated that when children suffered from school phobia, school withdrawal would not address the underlying disorder or problem, and could well make things worse, for instance, by allowing a socially anxious or immature child to avoid socialising with peers: “if they can’t get along socially when they’re in a group...what if they’re at home and it’s just them and mum? Are they going to grow up being socially inept?” (Mrs Jasmine). Mr Phillips stated: “The drawback that I would have [with home schooling] is the issue of the phobia actually being dealt with. Is the issue being confronted?” Mrs Scott expressed similar concerns that home schooling the school-phobic child may not

allow one to “get to the root of the problem”, which she suggested might be issues with “social integration”. Even Mr Smith, who understood school phobia as a fear resulting from negative experiences at school, expressed the opinion that home schooling would prevent the school-phobic child from “work[ing] on the fear”. This widespread acceptance that school phobia implies an irrational fear response to schooling which the child must confront and work through (for its own good), meant that while “removed anxiety” (Mr Phillips) was often cited as a possible benefit of home schooling, this was also understood as a potential drawback because it meant that the child with school phobia was not dealing with his or her ‘anxiety problem’. Consequently, most practitioners saw some form of reintegration into schooling as crucial for the school-phobic child and did not see home schooling as having much therapeutic (or other) value in these cases.

In contrast to the educational practitioners’ views, David Brown suggested that sometimes a home-based education can be the *best* option for a child who is ‘genuinely anxious’ about school. David Brown’s approach to the issue of home schooling the school-phobic child was informed by his perception of school as a “unique” and not always positive environment. In expressing this view, David Brown placed himself well outside the dominant psychological paradigm:

Having worked with these types of students for several years, I gradually changed my angle slightly on this. It seems that in some circumstances, the students can actually do better both educationally and socially on Correspondence or doing home schooling...I don’t know if that is official ministry policy, it might even be slightly at variance to the official policy—I’m expressing a personal opinion there.

Implications of Practitioners’ Views for Professional Practice

While the practitioners acknowledged and identified many school factors that *could* contribute to a child not wanting to attend school, it seems improbable that they would ever see school as being at the root of persistent school resistance. Drawing on dominant psychiatric/psychological meanings, most practitioners understood school factors as having a superficial part to play in school phobia and school refusal. By using dominant discourses to account for children’s school resistance as ‘irrational anxiety’, perhaps stemming from individual and/or familial pathology, practitioners were able to retain their faith in the commonsense assumption that schools are not hostile, alienating and frightening places but,

rather, are the ‘best’ place for most children to be educated. This ‘school faith’ is important for educational practitioners because it provides the philosophical justification for their everyday practices. As Mr Phillips states: “I couldn’t be a school principal if I didn’t believe [that the majority of children are best educated at school]”. An ideological commitment to schooling may make it very difficult for practitioners to recognise or acknowledge the potential role that school factors play in causing children to resist school. Mr Phillips admitted to feeling frustrated when children do not happily attend school: “It’s my hope here that children will be happy to attend school. It’s basically what I build my philosophy on...So if it’s not, it irks us, because it’s going against what we believe and where we want things to be”. In the two instances in which practitioners discussed specific cases of school phobia, school factors were played down, dismissed or not identified by the practitioners. This occurred even when the child’s complaints all appeared to relate strongly to the school situation.

Mrs Hyde described her management of two children she identified as school phobic, Noah and Zach²⁵, in some detail. According to Mrs Hyde’s narrative, the reasons given to her by these intermediate school boys for their lack of school attendance were all school-based. The boys had made no reference to problems at home or within the family. In the first case, Noah had listed the reasons he could not “face school” (see below)²⁶. He nominates a variety of school factors or situations that make him feel anxious, embarrassed, rejected or inadequate. It appears from Noah’s list that it is not one specific thing but *everything* about the school environment and culture that is making him unhappy:

THE REASONS I CAN’T FACE SCHOOL

I can’t face school because some people in my class bully me
 I can’t face school because it makes me feel pressured
 I can’t face school because it makes me feel stressed
 I can’t face school because I can’t keep up with other people in the class
 I can’t face school because I get embarrassed
 I can’t face school because some girls in the class call me a loser, freak/freaker
 I can’t face school because sometimes the teacher says that my work isn’t good enough
 I can’t face school because most people are better than me (comparing)
 I can’t face school because I get pushed around
 I can’t face school because I can’t get my work done on time

²⁵ These are pseudonyms. Noah and Zach were not participants in this study.

²⁶ Hyde showed me Noah’s list during the interview and I obtained a copy.

It is likely that Mrs Hyde asked Noah to list the reasons he “can’t face school” in order to pinpoint (and eliminate) the school factors purportedly keeping Noah away from school. The way the activity is constructed (i.e. “I can’t face school because...”) implies a fault or weakness in Noah and could be seen as a subtle way of encouraging him to understand his feelings about school as ‘his’ problem, rather than as justified responses to the school environment.

Mrs Hyde states that the school has done everything it can to accommodate Noah by removing “every pressure”, in the hope that he will return to school for half days: “we put all these strategies in place with him...we took off homework...there were going to be no expectations in class, we took off every pressure, we took off his drum lessons, we did everything we could”. As Noah still did not return to school, Mrs Hyde concludes that “it’s a home situation” that is maintaining Noah’s school resistance. Mrs Hyde’s ‘school faith’ and psychiatric/psychological understanding of school resistance means that she is not able to understand Noah’s persistent avoidance of school as a reasonable or legitimate response to schooling. Instead, she positions Noah within the psychiatric discourse as unable to cope with ‘normal’ school experiences, e.g. homework, music lessons, questions in class (hence removing “every pressure”), and within the behavioural discourse as wilful and manipulative: “he keeps on moving all the boundaries”. Mrs Hyde’s perspective allows her to blame Noah’s parents for his continued absence from school rather than considering the possibility that the school’s responses to Noah’s resistance may have been inappropriate: “You’ve got to have the home on side in order to get them back. It doesn’t work if you haven’t got the parents working towards it too”.

In the second case of school phobia discussed by Mrs Hyde, persistent bullying is supposedly the reason given by Zach for not wanting to be at school. However, Mrs Hyde appears to be arguing that the complaints of bullying are exaggerated and Zach himself is a ‘troublemaker’, initiating many of the conflicts with his peers, who are constructed as the innocent parties in Mrs Hyde’s narrative:

...he always says it’s bullying. Every little thing becomes a bullying incident. If a child says something—but he often stirs the pot. In this last instance where a so-called fight came about—it wasn’t actually a fight—he’d started it all off...He actually stirs it off in a little way, then when it gets out everybody else gets the blame for doing it.

Mrs Hyde's understanding of school (and Zach) may make it impossible for her to take Zach's complaints seriously. While Mrs Hyde seemingly leads Zach to believe that she empathises with him, she fails to seriously address the possibility that persistent bullying still takes place despite the school's attempts to curb it. Mrs Hyde constructs the intermediate school environment as structured, 'policed', and socially and developmentally 'healthy'. Within such an environment school phobia can not be caused by persistent bullying because the school has an anti-bullying policy and staff devote much time and energy to preventing 'real' incidences of bullying:

When there was a recent incident of bullying...it was followed through. I think it's taken me five hours to follow through an incident after school that occurred. Now the principal's talking to the *whole* school about peer pressure, how it's not acceptable if you're watching, how you're as much a part of it as the others. So there's lots of talking, lots of following through, lots of work involved.

Mrs Hyde's intervention with Zach indicates that she understands his school resistance, not as a social problem (i.e. bullying) relating to the school environment, but as an individual problem relating to Zach's apparent desire to cause trouble and his lack of interpersonal skills. Coming from this perspective, Mrs Hyde focuses on training Zach by reinforcing certain aspects of his behaviour that she considers adaptive and appropriate (i.e. coming to school, confiding in parents and staff, and following set procedures when he has a problem at school):

He had a problem the other day where he thought he was bullied, but praise, praise, praise all the time: "fantastic you're actually at school, really pleased you went and rang Mum, we've always said you've got to tell someone about it, you've got to get support. We think you're fantastic, you did the right steps, you rang Mum, you came and you spoke to me".

Mrs Hyde's approach can be seen to make Zach (a deviant individual) more predictable, manageable and controllable, especially at those times when he is most likely to abscond (i.e. following an upset at school). By supporting and training Zach in the ways that he should behave rather than excluding or punishing him, Mrs Hyde ensures that Zach stays at school and within the 'gaze' of authority figures.

While Mrs Hyde constructs school and school resistance in certain ways according to her individual interests and the meaning systems that she values, Noah and Zach are also engaged in a struggle to define the meaning of their school experiences. Despite being children, 'subjected' to adult authority, and school resisters, 'subjected' to discourses that position them in negative ways, the boys are nevertheless capable of resistance. Mrs Hyde

claims that she has tried everything to return Noah to school but has ultimately been forced to bow to the option of Correspondence schooling. Mrs Hyde's sense of frustration and powerlessness at not being able to *make* Noah come to school where she believes that he belongs, is obvious. Even the psychologist appears in Mrs Hyde's narrative to have been rendered powerless in the face of Noah's resistance: "she doesn't see that we're ever going to get this child back to school". Constructed in this way, Noah's failure to attend school becomes a selfish, unreasonable and stubborn act that snubs the school and those who have tried to 'help' him, and it is the school (not Noah) that is constructed as the hapless 'victim' of school phobia.

Gate Keeping: Disqualifying Students for Educational Alternatives

While some practitioners saw a need for educational alternatives like home schooling, it was far from clear who, in practice, would be considered eligible for, or best served by, such alternatives. Mrs Scott stated that some children just dislike school and therefore, for these children, "[educational] alternatives have to be looked at". However, it is unclear how Mrs Scott would distinguish children who may be suited to alternative education because they dislike school, from school phobic children who need to face their 'irrational' fears, and from those children who Mrs Scott claims "don't want to go to school" but "have got to learn to cope [with school attendance]". A child may state that they will not go to school because they dislike it and yet be labelled 'truant' by the school and 'school phobic' by the psychologist. Mrs Scott suggests that a child has the right to choose alternative education if this decision is "based on good information" and the child is "well informed...about what school's about and what education's about". However, we may be left wondering what constitutes "good information" or being "well informed". Some school resisters probably consider themselves to be very well informed about what school and education are about on the basis of their own (negative) experiences within the system. But because this knowledge is predominantly understood as 'irrational' and 'distorted', the school-resistant child may inevitably be considered unfit to make 'good' choices regarding his or her education.

David Brown was one of the practitioners who saw room in education for alternatives. He understood school as a potentially hostile and stressful environment: "There

is very significant peer pressure at school to adhere to certain norms and be part of the ‘in crowd’. And if you dare to fight against that then look out! [laughs]”. This led him to suggest that some children may require home schooling or Correspondence schooling because they 1) are too “emotionally fragile” to attend school, 2) could be harmed by attending school (e.g. due to bullying), or 3) are ill-suited to mainstream schooling due to personality or philosophy. He was very clear about the merits of home education for children who have been under emotional or social pressure at school:

If [children] are emotionally fragile and anxious, [home schooling] can give them a complete break from the quite considerable peer pressures at school...Coming out of the school situation for some kids can enable them to be more individual and not have to put up with this pressure from the norms in a school situation...it can enable them to recover their emotional, psychological strength, get their education back on track...It can enable them to grow socially by getting involved in plenty of recreational, social activities.

However, David Brown’s philosophical position on home schooling appears to be inconsistent with his professional practice. While David Brown seems convinced of the benefits and logic of home schooling certain children (at least temporarily), in practice he does not recommend school withdrawal unless the student is suffering serious psychological distress: “For us to [recommend Correspondence], there has to be pretty significant psychological reasons why it’s inappropriate for the child to go to school”. According to the Correspondence School’s enrolment policy, a GSE psychologist must approve all applications for Correspondence schooling on ‘psychological’ or ‘psychosocial’ grounds. Furthermore, the psychological grounds must “be of sufficient severity to prevent or seriously impede the student from attending a local school” (MOE, 2006). Clearly, such a policy disqualifies most school-resistant children—including ‘truants’, the ‘mildly anxious’, and ‘unconventional’ students who are not temperamentally or philosophically suited to schooling. David Brown does not see home schooling or Correspondence schooling as a general solution to school resistance and, in fact, indicates that in the majority of cases he would try to reintegrate children into school because it is not clear that a return to school would be psychologically harmful:

I’m not in favour of as soon as there’s any difficulties, taking [children] out [of school]...I can think of quite a few occasions when I certainly encouraged the gradual return to school and talked to the guidance counsellors about what support to put into place. Don’t get me wrong, I’m not saying that I always encourage [child to leave school]—not at all. I think it depends on the situation. It depends on the degree of genuine psychological distress.

The outcome of David Brown's approach to assessing and classifying school resisters may be that regardless of the rationale behind the school non-attendance, all students who are absent (without permission) and are not deemed to have "severe or challenging behaviour" or to be "severely at risk" will inevitably be reintegrated into mainstream schooling if at all possible, and will probably fall under the jurisdiction of the Non-Enrolment Truancy Service (NETS).

An outcome that sees most school resisters returned to school if at all feasible is consistent with the Ministry of Education imperative to ensure student 'engagement', that is, attendance in mainstream schooling and to reduce incidences of students exiting this system. The options of Correspondence schooling and Alternative Education (i.e. educational programmes for young people who the Ministry identifies as 'alienated' from the school system) are seen by the Ministry as inferior outcomes for students who are deemed 'disengaged' as these options may disadvantage the student by removing her/him from the direct learning supports that schools can provide and from access to highly trained teaching staff (MOE, n.d.C). Early Leaving Exemptions²⁷ are also considered undesirable by the Ministry as they are linked within Ministry discourse to a lack of educational qualifications which are said to place a young person at risk of unemployment, poverty and dependency on the State.

While David Brown's practice appears to be governed by relatively rigid Ministerial criteria which attempt to ensure that only the most severely disturbed children have access to government funded Correspondence schooling, David Brown understands the decisions he makes about school resisters as derived mainly from the student's "individual needs" and "*specific* circumstances". Within a therapeutic framework, David Brown constructs his practice as highly individualised, responsive, caring and egalitarian. He states, for instance, that he wishes to avoid "coercing people...into a direction that might not necessarily be the best one for their circumstances". David Brown can be understood as positioning himself as an enforcer of government policy within Ministerial discourses and as a caring therapist within psychotherapeutic discourses. While these 'caring' and 'policing' roles invite contradiction, the way David Brown constructs his practice as client driven, open to possibilities and alternatives, free from educational dogma, and highly responsive to the

²⁷ While school is compulsory for 6 to 16 year olds, parents of 15 year olds may apply to the Ministry for an exemption from schooling on the basis of educational problems, conduct, or the unlikelihood of the student gaining benefit from attending available schools.

needs of the individual, functions to obscure the institutional power that he exercises over his clients' lives and also denies the influence of Ministry knowledge, policies and guidelines that serve to constrain and shape his work as a psychologist. As a Ministry of Education psychologist, David Brown classifies children in ways that allow or deny them various educational opportunities and point to particular institutional and practitioner responses.

Summary

This chapter has addressed the data from my interviews with practitioners. The practitioners brought a range of meanings and experiences to the topic of school resistance and often constructed this phenomenon in ways that seemed incongruent and contradictory. They can be understood as trying to make sense of school resistance in response to my questions and comments by drawing on a diverse range of meanings and ideas.

The practitioners approached the terms 'school phobia' and 'school refusal' as descriptive labels for 'real' disorders or types of problematic behaviour related to school attendance. School resistance was described in a variety of ways. Only one practitioner (David Brown) expressed any concern regarding possibly misleading assumptions attached to the traditional terms. A few practitioners indicated an understanding of 'schooling' itself as a historically and culturally determined practice open to redefinition.

The practitioners understood mild and transient forms of school resistance as potentially 'normal' child behaviour that would often resolve on its own. Extreme and/or persistent school resistance was virtually always understood as pathological and abnormal behaviour, although not necessarily as irrational and unjustified. School resistance was understood as justified in cases where students had negative experiences at school. Most practitioners, however, understood schools as predominantly 'good' and 'necessary' social institutions, and considered bad school experiences to be the exception. Consequently, school return was considered to be appropriate and beneficial in the majority of cases of school resistance, and as strongly indicated in situations where school resistance was understood as involving psychological, behavioural or familial dysfunction (i.e. in cases where school resistance was seen as extreme and/or persistent).

The majority of practitioners acknowledged that conventional schooling was not the only or best way to educate *all* children (although there was a general acceptance that school was the best way to educate *most* children). Home schooling was considered a viable educational alternative by some practitioners, especially where it was seen to meet the ‘needs’ of a minority of ‘unconventional’ students (who may resist school attendance). However, it was unclear which school-resistant children qualified as truly ‘unconventional’ as opposed to being seen as having emotional, behavioural, familial or social problems. It appeared that certain individuals such as young children and those whose parents definitely wanted them at school, would not qualify as ‘unconventional’ in this sense.

With regards to questions about home schooling the school-phobic child, practitioners drew on psychiatric/psychological discourses to explain that this option was almost certainly contraindicated. This was apparent even when practitioners had previously discussed school phobia as a potentially rational, justified and (in mild cases) non-pathological response to schooling. This attitude may have a ‘real’ impact on the lives of school-resistant children, as my interviews indicated that at these practitioners’ schools, staff play a pivotal role in identifying children as absentees who are potentially ‘at risk’, and as certain types of non-attenders, requiring certain types of responses from the school. If these practitioner views are representative of perspectives within the wider New Zealand school community, then it would seem that very few persistent school resisters will be afforded the option of home schooling (except as a last resort). In the next chapter I take a closer look at the therapeutic processes that children are likely to encounter when they are identified as school phobic or as school refusers and consider the implications of these processes for constituting the subjectivity and experience of school-resistant children.

CHAPTER FIVE

A Journey Through the Therapeutic: All Paths Lead Back to School

Eleven-year-old Emma missed more than 40 days of school last year...Emma...now attends primary school regularly after several months of cognitive behaviour therapy...therapy was the key to Emma's recovery. Emma was taught relaxation techniques and provided with strategies to conquer anxious thoughts.²⁸ (De Silva, 2006, p.4)

In this chapter I take a closer look at therapeutic practice with school resisters. In particular, I am interested in examining psychotherapeutic²⁹ solutions to the problem of school refusal. I argue that the school refuser can be understood as being subjugated during their journey through the psychotherapeutic. Therapy subjugates the school refuser by constituting him or her as a diminished subject—fragile, vulnerable, irrational and unhealthy (Furedi, 2003). It can also be seen as manipulative and controlling in that school resisters are often diagnosed and placed ‘in therapy’ against their will, and are subjected to processes that openly aim to alter the way they think, feel and behave, with the objective of school return. Therapy with school refusers can even be understood as harsh and punitive in that children are often physically forced back to school or have their normal rights and privileges suspended until compliance is procured. This last view of therapeutic intervention with school refusers informs much of the critical literature on school resistance (e.g. Fortune-Wood, 2000; Knox, 1990). However, influenced by Foucault and by Foucauldian scholars, in particular, Rose (1999), I would argue that critical theorists and home schoolers miss the point when they understand intervention with school refusers as primarily harsh and repressive, and call for more humanitarian and sensitive responses from professionals towards children with ‘school anxieties’.

Nikolas Rose is a professor of sociology based in the United Kingdom who examines the links between political power, expertise and the self in his book *Governing the Soul: The Shaping of the Private Self* (1999). In this chapter, I draw on the work of Rose (1999) and Foucault (1979) to argue that psychotherapeutic interventions with school refusers are more

²⁸ A report on school refusal in Australian newspaper *The Age*.

²⁹ I am using this term to refer to all psychological (as opposed to physical) methods used to treat ‘mental disorders’.

about good governance than about helping or protecting distressed children for their own sake. This is not to say that many therapists working with school refusers do not have good intentions or that what is ‘good’ for the state cannot be made ‘good’ for the child. The point is that no therapeutic endeavour is politically neutral or power-free and to assume that it is denies the ‘policing’ function common to all the psy disciplines. Foucault has argued that modern governance is not primarily repressive, aimed at suppressing individuality and telling people what to do; rather it is concerned with the recognition of subjectivity and with teaching people the skills for self-management. Psychotherapeutics can be seen as a branch of the modern governing apparatus, whose empowering and productive aspects are double-edged. Inducing individuals to regulate their own behaviour, as occurred in the case of ‘Emma’ (quoted above), can result in a more profound subjugation than methods that rely on using external force.

Before turning to the work of Foucault and Rose, I will discuss Frank Furedi’s perspective on ‘therapy culture’ as set out in his book *Therapy Culture: Cultivating Vulnerability in an Uncertain Age* (2003). Furedi is, like Rose, a professor of sociology in the United Kingdom. He is also a prolific author, and has written several other books that critically examine the fears and fads of our times, including *Paranoid Parenting: Why Ignoring the Experts may be Best for Your Child* (2002). I use Furedi’s work in the first section of this chapter to consider the more obviously coercive and repressive dimensions of psychotherapeutic work with school refusers and their parents. I examine how school refusers might be understood within this framework as ‘diminished’ subjects. The last section of this chapter examines (and questions) the potential of home schooling to provide a more liberating alternative to traditional therapeutic interventions with school refusers.

Therapeutic Coercion: Fostering Dependence and Conformity

Furedi (2003) understands modern psychotherapeutics as a cultural phenomenon that systematically shapes individuals’ self-perceptions, social relationships and political behaviour. He is highly critical of the ‘growth industry’ of counselling—how contemporary Anglo-American societies have made therapy into a way of life and the widespread influence of psychological concepts like ‘self-esteem’. He argues that therapeutic culture provides a

distinctive “system of meaning and symbols through which people experience and make sense of the world” (Furedi, 2003, p.22). While not the only meaning system competing for dominance within Western societies, therapeutic culture has in contemporary times acquired considerable influence over individuals. For Furedi, this shift does not represent social progression but is primarily about imposing a new conformity through the management of people’s emotions. This is an authoritarian and destructive regime that praises some emotions and stigmatises others, while constructing people as fragile, powerless victims in need of continual professional support.

Furedi (2003) argues that while therapy culture may have been around for a while, it is in recent decades that it has really taken hold. He suggests that during the 1970s, writers and activists were often scathing and suspicious of psychological explanations and opposed the medicalisation of normal life events like pregnancy and childbirth. Rose (1999) similarly notes this trend, stating that “cultural critics of the 1970s saw the growth of interest in therapy and self-development...as a turning away of the feverish engagement of the previous decade with the public world and radical politics” (p.219). Therapeutic culture, with its modern obsession with the self, was understood as narcissistic. Now, according to Furedi, the quest for liberation through political and social activism has been exchanged for a fatalistic acceptance that we cannot radically change our life circumstances.

Within the literature on/about school phobia and school refusal, while most practitioners recognise negative aspects of institutionalised schooling such as bullying, peer pressure, stress and academic failure, and acknowledge (to a greater or lesser extent) the role these play in causing school refusal, the focus of intervention is generally on counselling and training the school refuser to accept and deal with aversive elements of school life which are considered inevitable (and ‘normal’). Even those authors who understand school resistance as ‘school anxiety’, stemming *primarily* from school factors, frequently focus on the inability of mainstream schooling to meet the individual ‘needs’ of the ‘anxious’ or ‘sensitive’ child and hence the benefits of the home school or alternative school, rather than suggesting radical changes be made to the state schooling system³⁰. For example, British home-schooling organisation Education Otherwise state that “real difficulties *in school*” are the most common reason for “school anxieties” (*School Anxieties*, 2004, p.1). Nevertheless, they do not suggest

³⁰ As mentioned in chapter one, certain groups in Japan are more radical and proactive in this regard.

that parents of children with ‘school anxieties’ lobby for school reform but, rather, focus on what parents can do to help their child either manage their ‘anxieties’ and “start attending school happily again” (*School Anxieties*, 2004, p.3), or leave school and deal with their problems through “therapeutic” (*School Anxieties*, 2004, p.4) activities like talking, painting and taking long walks.

Managing Behaviour, Thoughts and Emotions

Psychotherapeutic interventions with school refusers can be understood as technologies of domination in that they aim to impose conformity by managing the behaviour, thoughts and emotions of school refusers back to normality through expertly designed programmes that utilise a variety of cognitive and behaviour re-shaping techniques. Sometimes overt force and coercion are used by therapists in cases of school refusal. ‘Forced school attendance’ and ‘rapid return’ are behavioural procedures used to return children to school against their will. Methods utilised with school refusers that involve an overtly authoritarian approach and the use of force have elicited a certain amount of criticism from some educationalists, therapists, parents and students (see chapter two). Jonathan Diaper (1990), for instance, writes in the *Times Educational Supplement* that he suffered from school phobia at fifteen years old and was forced to return to school with very damaging consequences:

I could not and still cannot, find a single reason why forcing me back [to school] was a good thing...It took me about two months to get inside the door...The social worker and the psychologist were ecstatic, but I felt the same. Were they happy for me or for their wonderful theory, that seemed to be triumphing...It has taken me until now [three years later] to recover from the damage inflicted as a direct result of the rapid return theory...It is time that the dusty old ‘rapid returners’ stopped playing Russian roulette with children’s lives. (p.B2)

Therapists are generally advised to use forced school attendance and rapid return with caution on the grounds that these techniques can provoke strong resistance in some children and cause unacceptable levels of emotional distress in others (or in their parents). These factors may cause the intervention to be abandoned which, from a behaviourist perspective, would only serve to reinforce the child’s resolve not to attend school (see Kearney, 2001, p.174-175). American psychologist Kearney (2001) describes the process of forced school

attendance in his book *School Refusal Behavior in Youth: A Functional Approach to Assessment and Treatment*:

Parents help prepare their child for school in the morning—physically, if necessary—and then issue a command to the child to go to the car to be taken to school. If the child refuses, then parents issue a short and clear warning (e.g., ‘Go to the car now, or I will take you there’). If the child still refuses, then parents physically carry him or her to the car; generally one parent drives...as one parent sits with the child to prevent dangerous misbehavior (e.g., jumping from the car)...At school, parents repeat the command to enter the school building...If the child still refuses, then parents physically take the child inside, and school officials may help as appropriate...to prevent the child from running away...he or she should be closely supervised by school officials. (p.175)

Therapy culture’s authoritarian and coercive dimensions rarely assume such an open and public form as in the case of forced school attendance and rapid return, where parents are trained to ignore (and thus hopefully suppress) their child’s emotional displays and to meet resistance with force (if necessary). Perhaps this accounts for the somewhat controversial nature of these techniques (at a philosophical level anyway). The language used within the therapeutic model usually focuses on negotiation, cooperation, integration and working with the client as a ‘team’, and therapeutic culture is often understood as encouraging emotional openness. As popular talk-show host/therapist Dr Phil states in his book *Relationship Rescue*: “*You* have to get real about *you*...No defensiveness, no denial—total honesty” (McGraw, 2000, p.1). However, according to Furedi (2003), it is not an openness to emotions and tolerance of how individuals feel that distinguishes therapeutic culture; rather, it is its profound interest in managing individuals’ internal lives through repressing certain emotional attitudes while cultivating others. Furedi insists that modern individuals transgress ‘acceptable’ emotions and behaviour at their peril.

During the therapeutic process, school refusers are systematically trained to perceive themselves and their world in certain ways. Some of their current perceptions may be questioned, dismantled and re-constructed to better conform to the practitioner’s perspective and therapeutic aims. The school refuser who expresses a ‘distorted’, ‘maladaptive’ cognition like ‘school is a horrible place’ may be encouraged to develop a “more sensible or rational appraisal of the situation” (Heyne et al., 2004, p.21), such as, ‘I need help to cope with school’. In *School Refusal in Adolescence* (2004), a guide for practitioners working with school refusers, written by psychologists from an Australian school refusal clinic, Heyne et

al. state that “The aim of cognitive therapy is to effect a change in the child’s emotions and behaviour” (p.19).

Heyne et al. (2004) assume that the distressing feelings school refusers have about school stem from ‘unhelpful’, ‘irrational’ and ‘maladaptive’ cognitions which the practitioner as an ‘expert’ who is ‘helping’ the child has the authority (and responsibility) to challenge and change. This is done systematically through a seven-step process which involves teaching the child that their emotions are affected by their thoughts; helping the child to identify thoughts and feelings associated with school attendance; asking the child to determine whether a cognition is ‘helpful’ or ‘unhelpful’, that is, produces “negative feelings” or “positive feelings”; disputing “unhelpful or irrational” cognitions; teaching the child to employ ‘adaptive’ self-statements about school; asking the child to practise the “more helpful ways of thinking” s/he has been taught; and checking that the child has completed practice tasks assigned by the practitioner (p.20-23).

It could be argued that a regime that seeks to “train, educate and in some cases dictate how people should feel” (Furedi, 2003, p.197), touches individuals at a much deeper level than simply telling them how they should behave, or even modifying their behaviour through medication. The business of government is extended—not only from the public to the private sphere—but to the very internal life of the individual. When therapeutic endeavours with school refusers are wedded to forms of behaviour modification that target not only conduct but thoughts and emotions (e.g. cognitive-behavioural therapy), they can be understood as more intrusive and coercive than simply physically forcing a child to attend school.

Furedi (2003) states that while therapeutic culture is profoundly interested in feelings, it is hostile to ‘negative’ emotions like hatred and anger. Intense love or attachment may also be constructed as ‘negative’ when they cause a person to lose, ignore or sacrifice their self-interest for the sake of another. For example, parents who are perceived as too devoted, involved or protective are thought to produce maladjusted offspring (like school refusers). Therapeutic initiatives usually focus on helping individuals to manage their emotions in a ‘positive’ way and control or eradicate ‘negative’ emotions (Furedi, 2003). Within a psychological framework, ‘avoidance’ is a prime target for school-refusal intervention—considered to be a totally maladaptive and ‘negative’ way of dealing with distressing feelings about school. Hence, a central aim of cognitive-behavioural therapy as it is used with school

refusers is to systematically change children's emotional responses to school through techniques like 'exposure', 'desensitisation', 'cognitive restructuring' and 'relaxation training', in the hope that maladaptive 'avoidant' behaviour will decrease or cease.

Practitioners often do not question their right to inspect, judge and modify the emotions and actions of school refusers. However, it is unclear why a teacher rather than a child or a psychologist rather than a mother should possess the 'truth' about how to deal with feelings positively (Furedi, 2003). A child may have good reason for dealing 'negatively' with an emotional issue. Adults tend to construct much of the behaviour associated with school resistance as negative, unproductive and dysfunctional. But passionate emotional responses and violent, aggressive or evasive behaviour may be legitimate and appropriate reactions to certain conditions and treatments that individuals endure. Furedi (2003) argues that teaching individuals to 'manage' their strong emotions (because it is in their best interests) may equate to teaching them to conform to values and belief systems that *should* be questioned: "The diseasing of so-called negative emotions distracts attention from the fact that maybe it is the conditions that gave rise to them that needs to be cured" (p.198).

Furedi (2003) states that within therapy culture, reliance on oneself or on informal support networks—family and friends—to manage or solve important problems is usually discouraged. The average person is seen as lacking the necessary skills, training, experience and resources to deal appropriately with serious social and psychological issues, and close relationships with others are often perceived as a source of problems rather than as potentially providing valuable material and psychological support for individuals. Rose (1999) makes a similar observation, identifying what he calls "a neuroticization of social intercourse" (p.249) within psychotherapeutics, that is, the therapeutic construction of many personal and social problems as emanating from disturbances in our interpersonal relationships. The problematisation of social relationships and the assumption that normal individuals lack the training and experience necessary to solve their own (or others') problems, may serve to weaken traditional family and community ties, undermine the competencies of the individual and the family, and increase dependence on (and the need for) professionals. Therapists position themselves (and are positioned by others) as 'relationship experts'. They have taken charge of the interpersonal domain because they are seen to possess the knowledge, skills and authority to identify personal and interpersonal pathology,

and to advise individuals as to how they should conduct their relationships with others in order to achieve happiness and social efficacy. This is clearly demonstrated, for instance, in the opening line to *Relationship Rescue* where Dr Phil states: “If your relationship is in trouble, big trouble or small, I’m going to tell you straight-up how to fix it” (McGraw, 2000, p.1).

Managing the Parents of School Refusers

Practitioners working with children and families in distress usually understand a pivotal part of their role as providing *support*. However, Furedi (2002) argues that ‘support’ is often a euphemism for prescriptive advice about how individuals should behave in certain situations. It is clear that not all decisions or actions will receive the support of practitioners. In the case of school refusal, practitioners will support the child’s attempts to return to school but are unlikely to support his/her decision to stay at home. They will support parents in instigating interventions designed to return the child to school but may not be equally supportive if the parents decide to abandon the intervention and home school instead. They may support a parent’s application for Correspondence schooling but only if this is understood as an interim measure and is pursued in conjunction with on-going therapy aimed at school reintegration. For example, one of the parents I interviewed whose child had been diagnosed with ADHD stated that she received support from Specialist Education Services (SES) only while her child was enrolled at school. When she withdrew her son from school (following threats made by the principal that he would be excluded), the family became ineligible for any SES assistance.

While therapists may believe that their relationships with clients are cooperative, egalitarian and empowering (for the client), parental input and control over children’s treatments and interventions usually occurs within a context where the child is clearly understood (and perhaps officially labelled) as emotionally/socially/behaviourally ‘disordered’, ‘at risk’ and requiring therapeutic attention. Parents may feel unable to genuinely make their own choices or trust their own judgment when their child’s problems are constructed in this way. Claims to be working in partnership with the child and/or parents ignore the fact that the therapeutic ‘partnership’ assumes a relation of inequality and that

interventions with school refusers are based on an agenda formulated by professionals. It is possible to see the process of assessing, teaching, modeling, assisting and reviewing parental behaviour, while purportedly empowering parents to help their children by managing them more effectively, as actually serving to construct parents as “inept amateurs” (Furedi, 2002, p.176). Furedi (2002) states that parental input into therapeutic interventions “has a perfunctory and entirely decorative function” (p.180).

The assumptions that practitioners make about the parents of ‘maladjusted’ children may inform their interactions with these parents and the ways in which they carry out interventions. In *School Refusal in Adolescence* (Heyne et al., 2004), the practitioner seeks to form a special bond with the school refuser that excludes the parents. The practitioner sees the child on his/her own for therapy and encourages him or her to believe that he/she has formed an alliance with the practitioner that may not include the ‘unsympathetic’ parents. Heyne et al.’s approach to intervention appears to give priority to developing a positive therapist-client relationship and excludes the parent from any important (therapeutic) work being done with the child:

A dual practitioner model is employed from the start of assessment and throughout intervention, whereby one practitioner works with the child while another works with the parents...it affords the practitioner working with the child a greater opportunity to establish a therapeutic relationship. Rather than seeing the practitioner as aligned with the parents, the child may perceive a greater alignment between him/herself and the practitioner, which facilitates openness and collaboration.... (p.16)

The parent/child relationship may be delivered a fatal blow when parents are given the often emotionally fraught task of actually escorting the child back to school in order to prevent him/her from developing negative feelings about school staff or the practitioner:

Initially, two people should escort the child—preferably both parents...The involvement of school staff is usually discouraged in order to prevent them from becoming aversive to the child. Practitioners are not usually involved in the procedure for the same reason... (Heyne et al., 2004, p.40)

As mentioned above, the meaning of forced school attendance and rapid return (which may involve force) are not self-evident and views on the topic are mixed. While parents frequently express reservations about forced attendance damaging or further straining their relationship with their child, therapists often argue that forced attendance and ignoring a child’s distress will actually *increase* the child’s confidence in and positive regard for the parents: “In addition to helping with the school return, a kind but firm approach can give

children security. Children learn that they can rely on their parents to support them through a crisis and that their parents mean what they say” (Heyne et al., 2004, p.38). From this perspective, parents who have consistent and firm expectations of school attendance (and follow through on these), can show their child that they are in control and that they really believe school is ‘good’ and ‘necessary’. This is understood by Heyne et al. as “modeling confidence”: “Parents’ confidence and definite expectation that children are going to school can provide a good role model” (p.40).

Some parents come to question the rationale of forced attendance in the light of their child’s responses to attempts at pressuring him/her to return to school. David Brown, the GSE psychologist I interviewed, had spoken with parents of school-resistant children who had “encouraged/dragged” their child into school because they believed that the child needed to face and overcome their ‘irrational’ fears. He stated that for these parents it became obvious that such a strategy “is not good” and that other options needed to be explored: “Parents will say to me ‘I did this but I just increasingly got the feeling that this is not right, this is not right for my child’”. Yoneyama (1999) also describes situations where parents have come to question whether insisting on school attendance is in their child’s best interests. For example, one Japanese mother states: “...[my daughter] glared at me with the most terrible look I had ever seen. It was then that I saw how much I had pushed her up against the wall [by pressuring her to attend school]” (Ishikwa, Uchida & Yamashita, 1995, quoted in Yoneyama, 1999, p.204).

The failure of psychological interventions (like forced school attendance and rapid return) is commonly attributed to non-compliant parents who question, resist or just fail to implement the practitioner’s programme. Brand and O’Conner (2004), a retired school counsellor and retired social worker who together treated school refusers at an American high school, argue that parents who are not supportive of the school and the school’s approach to dealing with their school-resistant child are seriously compromising (or even thwarting) the ‘team’ effort to help the student:

Student A’s rehabilitation was not predicted in view of the seriousness of her presenting problems and the bleakness of the situation when her parents handled their distress by criticizing the professional staff at the high school...The team process never really got underway on behalf of student B. During the time that we were exceedingly active with their daughter, the parents seldom initiated contact with us, although we frequently reached out to them. (para 49-50)

Most practitioners who work with school refusers believe (perhaps quite rightly) that they possess ‘specialist’ knowledge and expertise relating to how best to manage school refusal—knowledge that ordinary parents, teachers and even other therapists do not have access to. In the De Silva (2006) article, described in chapter one (see page 12), Monash Medical Centre psychologist Amanda Dudley states that “teachers (and parents) sometimes have difficulty identifying school refusers”; and Centacare psychologist Pat Boyhan states that in cases of school refusal “School counsellors are usually unable to provide the complex family counselling required” (p.4). Similarly, Brand and O’Conner (2004) suggest that their student-patient’s private therapist does not know how to best treat school refusal and may be hampering the intervention process. Unlike the Centacare psychologist, who is a community-based professional working outside the school, Brand and O’Conner believe that school-based mental health practitioners (like themselves) are the best ‘experts’ to treat school refusal:

The approach used by student A’s therapist was similar to that of private therapists who have not had as much experience with school refusers as have school mental health professionals. Often, these therapists fail to see anxiety when it is the primary disorder. Behavioral inhibition and avoidance may also be missed...Another piece of this familiar pattern was that student A’s therapist did not share our concern for working toward some kind of return to school...He seemed unaware that many therapists agree...the child’s return to school should be the primary criteria of successful intervention. (para 25-26).

Professionals working with school refusers may genuinely believe that by insisting on *specialist* involvement, they are promoting the best interests of these ‘complicated’ and ‘vulnerable’ children and their families. However, it is not hard to see why professionals working with school refusers in schools or special clinics may have a vested interest in constructing school resistance as a serious and complex disorder that requires specialist assessment and treatments. More important perhaps than the good (or otherwise) intentions of professionals, is how their words and actions are being interpreted and experienced by the children and families that they are employed to serve. This topic will be explored in more depth in chapter six.

The Diminished Self

Furedi (2003) argues that therapeutic power is not primarily exercised through force and punishment but through cultivating in the individual or within society a sense of

vulnerability, powerlessness and dependency. To see oneself as ‘messed up’, ‘helpless’ and ‘vulnerable’ becomes ‘normal’, and so too does help-seeking behaviour, reliance on and collaboration with ‘caring’ professionals. The individual becomes diminished and this inevitably leads to self-limitation, self-doubt and compliance—in short, people who are easier to govern (Furedi, 2003). The school refuser can be understood as a subject who is diminished within the therapeutic paradigm through being constructed as ‘emotionally fragile’, ‘psychologically disturbed’, ‘irrational’, ‘immature’ and ‘dependent’.

An example of how the school-resistant child can become diminished when constituted within a therapeutic framework comes from the work of Márianna Csóti, the author of *School Phobia, Panic Attacks and Anxiety in Children* (2003). Csóti constructs the school-resistant child as “The Anxious Child” (p.236) in a poem included at the end of her book. The ‘anxious child’ is understood as imprisoned by her own neurotic fears (e.g. she “won’t leave her bed”, p.236), dependent (e.g. she pleads with her mother: “Can I be by your side all day?”, p.236), sickly (e.g. she vomits and has “runny poo”, p.236), and, at a more metaphysical level, as “lost in the wild” (p.237) and existing in “darkness” (p.237). The solution to the problems of the ‘anxious child’, according to Csóti, is for her parents to “help her to cope” (p.237) (with school attendance). Helping the ‘anxious child’ to cope with school attendance is from this perspective considered synonymous with restoring her to a state in which she is independent, self-assured and free (and hence presumably willing to attend school).

Furedi (2003) argues that a cultural narrative that constructs individuals as ‘emotionally vulnerable’ and ‘helpless’ may create a social climate where people really do feel sick, insecure, anxious and emotionally damaged. Summerfield (2001), an honorary senior lecturer at St George’s Hospital Medical School in London, takes a similar position to Furedi, suggesting that the contemporary practice of attributing soldiers’ problematic behaviours following war experiences to post traumatic stress syndrome may encourage these individuals to see themselves as “medicalised victims” rather than “feisty survivors” (para 13). Some Japanese psychiatrists, critical of the prevailing psychiatric discourse on *tōkōkyōhi*, also adopt this line of reasoning when they argue that labelling school-resistant students “mentally sick” and admitting them to psychiatric hospitals may cause (rather than cure) neurotic and somatic symptoms (Yoneyama, 1999, p.200). We should not be surprised

then when the ‘school-phobic’ child is described by Csóti (2003) as “basically a child who has lost all confidence in herself and one who feels very insecure and scared” (p.37).

Children who resist school may believe that they do so because they are tired, physically sick, dislike some aspect of school, fear bullies or for no specific reason. However, when they are classified as ‘phobic’, ‘anxious’ or ‘emotionally fragile’ within the dominant paradigm, children are being told either directly or indirectly that they are suffering from a mental illness or disorder. Language is not merely descriptive but also constitutes experience and subjectivity. The child who is diagnosed with ‘mental illness’ will probably have regular visits with a psychiatrist, psychologist or counsellor and may be medicated. The child’s belief that there is something seriously wrong with her/him may be confirmed by adult assertions that s/he is *not* physically sick, school is *not* the problem (but rather the child’s inability to cope with school) and school return is both unavoidable and necessary: “Parents need to be very firm and tell the child that she still has to go to school, no matter how bad she feels, as it is her anxiety that is making her feel ill” (Csóti, 2003, p.228).

Csóti (2003) identifies her own daughter as school phobic, although the child’s problems appear (from her mother’s perspective) to spill over into every area of her life—not just school:

My own daughter suffered severely from school phobia...She suffered most of the symptoms mentioned in this book and became a sickly child from constant stress and lack of food. Her ability to function outside the confines of her home became extremely limited and her fears affected her whole life... (p.8)

Clearly, it is not just that Csóti’s daughter is anxious about school but rather that she has become an ‘anxious child’—and is understood and treated this way. Her distress at school is explained by her anxious approach to *everything*. At the same time, her physical and psychological difficulties are explained by the fact that she has ‘school phobia’. Csóti is not alone in constructing school resistance as an anxiety problem that extends well beyond school (and hence is not *really* about school at all). In the article in *The Age*, De Silva (2006) states that “Emma’s school refusal extended to her not wanting to play with friends after school or accompany her mother on shopping trips” (p.4). While it does not seem unreasonable for a child who is resisting school and hence perhaps attracting unusual amounts of social attention, concern and criticism to desire to be out of the public gaze, social withdrawal is not understood as reasonable or rational but as further evidence of the

deep emotional problems that are purportedly causing the school problem. While Csóti is clearly devoted to helping her daughter, by understanding and treating her child as having an ‘anxiety disorder’, Csóti constructs her as fragile, vulnerable, miserable and sickly. It seems inevitable then that the child will come to understand herself as defenceless and unable to cope without constant parental support and protection.

Csóti (2003) retrospectively identifies the ‘stresses’ she believes led to her daughter’s school phobia—the family moving to a college located in a 12th century castle; over-sensitive fire alarms; hearing students’ footsteps on the stairs; shadows in the bedroom; getting croup and vomiting; deaths of some people known by the family; a urinary tract infection; stepping in dog poo on the way to the school bus; and being sent home by the teacher three times when she was not really sick. It is interesting that Csóti understands these relatively common and apparently unrelated events as culminating in a completely debilitating ‘anxiety disorder’ and favours this explanation over any acknowledgement that school might have been the cause of the problem. In fact, other than being unnecessarily sent home by the teacher (a pleasing experience for most children who do not like school), school factors do not figure in Csóti’s explanation of her daughter’s fears and illness. In this narrative, ‘school’ has seemingly been written out of school phobia altogether.

Children have not always been viewed as inherently fragile, vulnerable and ‘at risk’; however, since the end of World War II such beliefs have gained strength in Western societies (Furedi, 2003). School refusal is commonly said to be triggered by relatively common events that are not necessarily related to school (e.g. moving house, birth of a sibling or sickness in the family). For example, in the De Silva (2006) article, Amanda Dudley states that “Sometimes an illness, a family problem or a dramatic event such as a house burglary can trigger school refusal” (p.4). Hence, it is not entirely unreasonable for Csóti to believe that childhood sicknesses, stepping in dog poo and alarms going off are ‘stresses’ that her six-year-old child cannot cope with. Csóti’s assertion that her daughter’s school aversion is caused by an ‘anxiety disorder’, can be understood as part of a growing trend within modern society to interpret children’s troublesome behaviour as evidence of psychiatric/psychological problems.

People who feel sick, vulnerable and damaged may seek validation and understanding through a professional diagnosis. For many, that diagnosis becomes an identity—not only a

way to understand and explain their experience but also a way to understand who they are (Furedi, 2003). On an American talk show (The Ricky Lake Show) screened on New Zealand television (on July 21, 2004), an eleven-year-old boy diagnosed with severe attention-deficit disorder (ADD) stated: “ADD—that’s me. I have that disorder”. Clearly this boy had taken on the ‘ADD identity’, although his mother said that his ADD symptoms had not begun until he was seven years old, following his parents’ lengthy (eight-year) divorce. Children are likely to accept the labels that adults in authority give them and often lack the maturity to critically evaluate a diagnosis that is presented to them as medical ‘fact’. Harwood (2003) discusses the case of ‘Ben’, a boy diagnosed with ‘conduct disorder’. Ben was told by his counsellors that because he had conduct disorder he could become a ‘psychopath’. Harwood states that while Ben was over time able to challenge the conduct disorder diagnosis (and reconstruct his behaviour as ‘immaturity’), he continued to firmly believe “in the existence of psychopathy and remained persuaded that he had the portent to become psychopathic” (p.58).

Diagnosis shapes the way people think and talk about their ‘problems’, the way behaviour is interpreted and managed, and the actions of agencies and experts. This is not to say that we can render psychotherapeutic practices impervious to power by doing away with diagnostic labels. Some therapists are strongly opposed to labelling children and instead choose to frame a child’s problems in terms of his or her ‘individual needs’. Psychologist David Brown took this position:

I normally like to take each situation as an individual situation. I’ve really sort of got vehemently anti-labelling anyway as a philosophy. Normally, I think I tend to describe the situation and describe what I feel the child’s needs are rather than using ‘diagnostic’ type terms.

While this approach reflects a desire to break free from the traditional power relations implied by the medical model, as discussed in the next section, a greater recognition of the client’s subjectivity may simply allow for a more complete governance of their subjectivity by rendering the self more visible to those with the authority to judge and mould it (Rose, 1999).

Csóti (2003) understands her daughter’s diagnosis as a transparent and objective process of identifying the child’s psychological condition. School phobia is understood as a label that expresses an already fixed subjectivity as an ‘anxious’, ‘sick’ and ‘disordered’ child. For Csóti and her daughter, diagnosis offers a degree of certainty about life and

apparent access to the truth: “It was suddenly a confirmed diagnosis, something definite that [my daughter] could work on to recover from” (p.194). It provides Csóti’s daughter (and the rest of her family) with a (psychiatric/psychological) language to talk about the ‘problem’: “It became a useful addition to our language at home” (p.194). It is not surprising then that Csóti’s daughter embraces her position within the psychiatric discourse as a ‘school-phobic’ child and experiences a sense of extreme relief at being able to attribute her problems to a legitimate illness: “the absolute relief [my daughter] experienced (noticed in the days following [diagnosis]) of having a name for her condition made a huge difference” (p.194).

The adoption of a psychiatric/psychological understanding of school aversion committed Csóti’s (2003) family to a certain course of action that may have made the “absolute relief” (p.194) of diagnosis short-lived for Csóti’s daughter. Csóti used a variety of cognitive-behavioural techniques to manage her daughter’s ‘disorder’. She believed and was able to convince her child that “school was a must” (p.207), that a fear of school was unfounded, and that ‘irrational’ anxieties must be faced in order to be overcome. This meant that Csóti’s daughter (at six years old) was required to ride the school bus, attend school, socialise with friends and cope without her mother (or any supportive adult in lieu of her mother), even when these activities provoked extreme anxiety that caused frequent vomiting. As the following quote illustrates, the understanding that ‘irrational’ and ‘debilitating’ anxiety and dependency must be faced and overcome, involved Csóti in a therapeutic process of systematically teaching her child to self-manage her problematic school behaviours:

I...taught her to empty her own vomit down the toilet at school, rinse out her little bucket, throw the rinsing water down the toilet and then to tie the bucket up in a plastic bag...She was little more than six when she learnt to do this...No one at school offered to help her on arrival, so she had to do it on her own if she were not to have me with her all the time, which would have been counter-productive. (p.205)

Governing Souls through Emancipating Selves

While Furedi (2003), like Foucault, connects modernity with the growing power of experts, he understands therapy as producing ‘diminished’ individuals who are weak, dependent on professionals, psychologically vulnerable and easy to control. Conversely, Rose (1999), building on the earlier work of Foucault, suggests that psychotherapeutics offer techniques for self-transformation. Through the re-training of thoughts and emotions, and

with expert guidance, the patient can purportedly achieve freedom, autonomy and wholeness. Diagnosis did more than provide a medicalised explanation for Csóti's (2003) daughter's problems and thereby construct her as a 'fragile' and 'at risk' child. Because the child now had a recognised 'mental disorder', she also had access to therapeutic techniques for managing the disorder, and the real possibility of 'recovery' (i.e. attending school without vomiting, crying or having panic attacks). Seen from this perspective, diagnosis and therapy is not 'diminishing' but offered Csóti's daughter a pathway from what she and others understood as dependency, sickness and maladjustment towards a socially acceptable mode of wholeness, independence and health.

It is true that interventions with school refusers can be blatantly manipulative and may involve force. However these 'heavy-handed' techniques are carried out within a wider therapeutic imperative that is often portrayed and understood as liberating by both therapists and their clients. Seen from this perspective, the therapist is not trying to crush the school refuser's individuality by enforcing conformity but instead seeks to make it possible for the school refuser to willingly return to school, function 'normally' at school, and take full advantage of all that schools have to offer. Rather than being seen as consciously resisting school as a function of individual choice or social critique, the school refuser is understood as unable to exercise her or his autonomy and make critical choices (that reflect her or his best interests) because s/he is locked into unhealthy dependency with parental figures, has maladaptive views of the world, and is subject to disturbing fears, phobias and anxieties. When school-resistant children are constructed in this way, therapy aimed at school return can be understood as an ethical, empowering and emancipating project.

Rose (1999) argues that behaviour modification therapies (frequently used with school refusers), which are often accused of being mechanistic and punitive, can be seen as consonant with profoundly humanistic values. Behaviour therapies are not just concerned with changing behaviour but also with teaching individuals skills of self-management that will allow them to take control of their own feelings and conduct. Hence they can be understood as more democratic, humanitarian and progressive than the disease and treatment model associated with medicine and psychiatry, which understands successful or unsuccessful social behaviour in terms of "some inner quality of the soul" (Rose, 1999, p.241). Clients are taught how to systematically manage their environmental circumstances

and response-contingent reinforcements and, most importantly, the methods they should use for self-inspection (e.g. recording occasions when a desired behaviour occurred).

In modern society, individuals are increasingly subject to what Foucault (1979) calls ‘disciplinary power’—a power that is hidden, monotonous and invisible. He argues that disciplinary power has been widespread throughout discourses, practices and institutions from the late eighteenth century onwards and stands outside the confines of state, law and class (Sawicki, 1991). In contrast to legal power, disciplinary power is primarily concerned with constituting identities and producing certain kinds of individuals (Marshall & Marshall, 1997) not with punishing offences. It works through disciplinary techniques based upon individualisation and normalisation, and makes specific use of supervision and surveillance. Disciplinary power is highly effective because it relies not on coercion but rather on creating in individuals a desire to submit to it. It operates through instilling a self-discipline that will insure people voluntarily submit to the regulations and norms of the hierarchal institutions that they inhabit.

Like Furedi (2003), Rose (1999) examines and questions the prominent place that psychotherapeutics has come to take in modern life. However, in contrast to Furedi, Rose understands the rise of therapeutics, not within a history of culture, but “within a genealogy of political technologies of individuality” (p.221). Psychotherapeutic technologies can be understood within this framework as allowing the modern state to govern social conduct through providing seemingly objective help to individuals who have deviated from the norm. By managing individuals through the apparently benign methods associated with psychotherapeutics, the modern state can effectively procure the commitment of selves to those behaviours and values supported by the authorities, and avoid the risk of provoking rebellion through more direct and obvious shows of force and coercion (Rose, 1999).

The classification and treatment of children who resist school can be seen as a form of regulatory practice which is all the more effective and subtle because it is not dependent upon coercive tactics alone (e.g. forced school attendance) but stems also from the school refuser’s desire to be ‘normal’ and ‘healthy’—a desire which may be the reason for seeking therapy or may arise out of the therapeutic encounter itself. As discussed in chapter one, the individualising and normalising power of psychotherapeutics is extremely useful for a democratic state as deviant individuals (like school refusers) represent a loss of potential

efficiency and a future burden upon the state. That is, by failing to take advantage of the opportunities that schooling supposedly affords children (and the adults that they will become), the school refuser is marked out as an individual who is lacking beneficial (and enhancing) opportunities and experiences. It is therefore necessary to know, monitor and regulate those children who might fall into this condition and if possible return them to a state of ‘normal’ functioning, preferably within the institutional machinery of the school.

Technologies of the Self

Foucault argues that ‘the self’ is a vital element in the networks of modern power. Governing society has become intrinsically tied up with managing subjectivity and this is achieved, not through centralised state control, but through a heterogeneous range of technologies at the micro level. Social institutions like the school and clinic function as what Foucault (1979) calls ‘disciplinary blocks’, that is, places where detailed knowledge about individuals is carefully collected, recorded, graded and adjusted for the purposes of controlling and transforming individuals (Marshall & Marshall, 1997). Within disciplinary blocks, individuals are constructed in both general terms (i.e. as ‘teachers’ and ‘students’) and according to more specific, historical categories (e.g. ‘school refuser’, ‘at risk student’, ‘school counsellor’) (Parker, 1995). However, Foucault suggests that the technologies associated with governing subjectivity need to be understood not just as “technologies of domination”, implemented and enforced by institutions and authorities, but also as “technologies of the self” (quoted in Elliot, 2001, p.84), that is, techniques that “permit individuals to effect by their own means or with the help of others a certain number of operations on their own bodies and souls...so as to transform themselves” (Foucault, 1988, p.18) for the purposes of attaining happiness, enlightenment, freedom or immortality.

Therapy can be understood as a technology of the self in that it offers the opportunity for focusing on the self—increasing self-awareness through self-discovery and reconstructing the self if one wishes by altering thoughts, beliefs and behaviours. Hence, it may be that (contrary to Furedi’s assertion), people have not abandoned the quest for liberation but rather that they understand and approach this quest differently. Rose (1999) states that for the modern individual: “Freedom comes not through slogans or political revolution but is a result

of slow, painstaking and detailed work on our own subjective and personal realities, guided by expert knowledge of the psyche” (p.258). Furthermore, Rose suggests that modern subjects are not just provided with the route to self-betterment through therapy but are *compelled* to undergo this process through a sense of moral and social obligation to be the best ‘self’ that they can be. In *Self Matters: Creating Your Life from the Inside Out*, Dr Phil states: “you don’t just have a right to find your way back to the authentic and true you; you have a responsibility to do it” (McGraw, 2001, p.21).

It is possible to see the self that is constructed in therapy as a product of the therapeutic dynamic. In confessing, the individual constitutes itself as a subject through the act of speaking words that are true to an inner reality and through the self-examination that precedes and accompanies confession. The passage through the therapeutic ideally brings the patient from one psychological state to another, for example, from ‘resistance’ to ‘compliance’. This process of change is not forced but is gently guided by the practitioner within the “subtle communicative interaction of the confessional scene” (Rose, 1999, p.250). The patient comes to identify with the self that s/he is within the therapeutic context and becomes attached to this ‘better’ version of her- himself, which appears to arise from her/his own needs and desires but is, Rose argues, a product of therapy, no more or less ‘authentic’ than other forms of subjectivity that the individual may take up. For the school resister, this ‘self’ might be the confident, independent and sociable ‘school attender’ who can effectively manage any school scenario because s/he has a repertoire of learnt and rehearsed ‘coping skills’.

The school refuser may be encouraged to confess, to speak the ‘truth’ about what it is s/he thinks and feels about school through research interviews, within support groups or during assessment and therapy. The child may be asked to participate in a clinical interview, indicate her/his level of anxiety in relation to school situations using a self-report measure (e.g. Children’s Manifest Anxiety Scale) and/or complete a daily diary. Such procedures can be understood as subjugating, for confession always takes place within a power relationship in which the “agency of domination” (Foucault, 1980, p.62) resides in the one who prescribes the form of the confession, listens, appreciates, judges, consoles or understands. The child’s confession is reinscribed and reinterpreted (through the discourse of the appropriate discipline) by the professional (psychologist, counsellor, doctor, teacher, etc.) who hears and

records it. Power works *through* confession as a ritual for producing truth. To the extent that the school resister accepts and acts upon this ‘truth’, s/he aids and abets the constitution of her/his own identity and turns her- himself into a particular sort of subject, that is, a maladjusted ‘school refuser’ who requires treatment or a rehabilitated ‘school attender’ who (with appropriate support) is able to cope with school.

Required to ‘Get Real’

Rose (1999) argues that the progressive principles of therapy have a down side. The promise of autonomy and happiness comes along with a constant self-doubt, self-scrutiny and self-evaluation. The self becomes not only committed to “its own technical perfection” (Rose, 1999, p.243) but also to interpreting ‘success’ and ‘failure’ as dependent upon its ability to know and proficiently manage itself. This assumption is strongly communicated by Dr Phil, for example, who argues that unhappy and unfulfilling relationships result from not “being true and right with yourself” (p.2):

...if you are in a relationship that has gone awry, a relationship that is laced with pain, confusion, or emptiness, then by definition I know you have lost touch with your personal power, your own dignity, your own standards, and your own self-esteem. (McGraw, 2000, p.2)

From a therapeutic perspective, informed by psychological discourses that promote certain values, attitudes and interests, not all meanings and forms of subjectivity can be considered equal. The self in therapy is faced with certain moral obligations that are intrinsic to the therapeutic process. Therapy is about improving one’s life through work on the self, achieving independence and autonomy, realising one’s potential, and moving from being ‘repressed’, and ‘constrained’ to being ‘free’ (Rose, 1999). In other words, it is about ‘getting real’ and “reconnecting with your core” (McGraw, 2000, p.1). In the case of the school refuser, successful therapeutic intervention creates a self that is free from anxiety, cooperates with authorities, *wants* to attend school in order to learn and socialise, and can competently employ the self-management skills that will get and keep it there. Hence, while the school refuser is required to conform to school attendance (even against her/his own will), s/he is also required, in therapy, to become independent, autonomous and self-assertive.

The psychotherapeutic discourses on/about school refusal insist on the importance of independence and autonomy for a child's or an adolescent's healthy psychological and social development. This is often discussed with reference to a school refuser's parent being too controlling or too involved. For example, Brand and O'Conner (2004) understand school refusal as often involving "a power struggle between one or both parents...an inability to resist a powerful parent or parents, fear of not measuring up, thoughts that love is conditional on meeting parental standards...and fear of criticism and failure" (p.60). Brand and O'Conner insist on "autonomy" and "choice" (para 18) as universal adolescent 'needs'. This may seem incongruent with the therapeutic imperative to return school refusers to school against their will. It could be argued that for the child or adolescent, resisting school *is* about making choices and asserting the self. However, when the therapist constructs school resistance as 'avoidance', a maladaptive behaviour commonly linked to immaturity, dependency and fearfulness, it becomes possible to see therapeutic work aimed at school return as compatible with progressive aspirations to promote self-awareness, individuation and autonomy.

Home Schooling as a 'Self' Project

While those with critical perspectives on school resistance generally understand home schooling as being the ideological flipside of therapeutic interventions carried out by 'experts' (which are understood as often repressive, narrow-minded and, in some cases, punitive and inhumane), it is possible to see home schooling as merely an extension of disciplinary power over school resisters. While the art of governing school children and those home schoolers who follow very structured school-like programmes may have a lot to do with technologies of domination (e.g. surveillance, training, the use of timetables), 'unschooling' (generally understood as unstructured, child-led home-based education) provides children with the techniques, opportunities and expertise required to liberate or reconstruct a 'better' self, a self who is autonomous, intrinsically motivated, socially proficient, independent and responsible. Grace Llewellyn, author of *The Teenage Liberation Handbook: How to Quit School and get a Real Life and Education* (1997) instructs teenagers in how to begin this therapeutic work on the self: "write stories or journal entries about your

past and your future...If you want to 'work' on anything, work on forgiving and forgetting. Forgive yourself for everything. Forgive your teachers for everything. Forgive your parents for everything...Detoxify. Purge" (p.132).

Unschooling appears on the surface to have nothing to do with the "regulation of selves" (Rose, 1999, p.261) or with achieving political, social or institutional goals. Llewellyn (1997) joins other 'radical' home schoolers in constructing unschooling as profoundly emancipatory: "There are lots of very good reasons to leave school but, to my idealistic American mind, the pursuit of freedom encompasses most of them and outshines the others" (p.32). Griffith (1998), author of *The Unschooling Handbook*, suggests that unschooling produces self-motivated individuals because it provides "authenticity" and "autonomy" (p.20), that is, the unschooler is "acting according to her own true self rather than merely internalizing someone else's values", and she is in "control of her own behaviour, deciding what to do and how to behave" (p.20). Griffith believes that who the unschooler becomes and how s/he lives is a reflection of an innate subjectivity and genuine freedom of choice. However, it is possible that unschooling can effect a governance that is both subtle and powerful.

In the home schooling literature, the unschooler appears to come (immediately or gradually) to take full responsibility for his/her education, conduct and mode of living as an autonomous individual in a democratic society. If the unschooler returns to some form of schooling, they do it willingly and wholeheartedly, because school return is understood as emanating from free choice and self-interest. Even unschoolers who never return to school appear to use their freedom to try and enhance their lifestyle and skills by seeking out the guidance of 'experts'. In this way, unschooling can be understood as producing a self-governance (and potential subjugation) that is the more profound because "it appears to emanate from...[the individual's] autonomous quest for...[self]" (Rose, 1999, p.260). Internal discipline, responsible behaviour, being successful, and even returning to school, appear to become a matter of freedom. In the following quote for instance an unschooler equates being 'free' with being productive, motivated, efficient, goal oriented and working hard to fulfill your potential: "I look forward to a very free year on several levels. My career goal is in sharp focus now, and I can see how everything that I am working on has a bearing

on what I want to be doing in the future; there is no nagging worry that I am in some way not doing as much as I could” (Llewellyn, 1993, p.219).

While unschooling not only specifically avoids the use of force, coercion and authoritarianism but is also careful about instructing, directing, evaluating and rewarding, this does not mean that unschooling practices are impervious to the infiltrations of power mechanisms. For instance, Griffith (1998) cites the research of Kohn who suggests that fostering a child’s “intrinsic motivation”, that is, “allowing individuals to understand the reasons for the requested behavior and to willingly cooperate” (p.19), is a much more effective way to achieve desired behaviour than typical reward systems (i.e. those systems used by schools that are based on operant conditioning—awarding stars, stickers, grades and certificates for desired behaviours). When carefully fostering intrinsic motivation in a child is understood as “the solution” (p.19) to the problem of overt rewards losing their effectiveness over time, intrinsic motivation begins to sound simply like another disciplinary technique for shaping conduct in the interests of power:

...while rewards instituted to influence people’s behavior may very well be effective in the short term, with continued use they become less effective for prompting the desired behavior and, in fact, may actually *discourage* that behavior...For Kohn, the solution is “intrinsic motivation”...this process is considerably more complicated and time-consuming than the typical reward system; [but] in the long run, it becomes far easier and more effective. (Griffith, 1998, p.20)

Assuming that home schooling can function as a technology of the self that promotes (or indeed requires) self-governance, it is perhaps not surprising that home schooling is tolerated by the state. If managing subjectivity and teaching individuals to self-discipline are “intrinsic to the operations of government” (Rose, 1999, p.217), then unschooling certainly seems compatible with the imperatives of the modern democratic state. Home schooling is individualizing—the child becomes more individual and experiences a greater recognition of his/her subjectivity than he/she might at school. Griffith (1998) describes unschooling as “a way to tailor learning to the specific needs of each child and each family” (p.ix).

Consequently, the unschooler, like the school attender, becomes the object and target of educational practices that seek to constitute his/her subjectivity in certain ways. This is not necessarily a bad thing, but there is a danger in obscuring the multiple and subtle ways that power works at the micro level to control individuals, behind a rhetoric of ‘emancipation’

and ‘freedom’, especially when home schooling is seen to channel some school resisters back into the school which they were so determined to escape.

Home schooling is disciplinary in that it is reformatory. It can be understood as a diffuse, grass-roots technology for modifying ‘deviant’ individuals, and without the use of force or coercion, bringing them back into institutionalised schooling (at best) or at least going some way towards ensuring that their potential is actualised. Within modern society, the effective and efficient utilisation of individuals has become critical in preserving and strengthening the state (Marshall & Marshall, 1997). It is clearly not productive to have individuals growing up unable to attend university or work, behaving anti-socially and requiring medication, therapy and hospitalisation. Knox (1990) acknowledges the power of home schooling, not only to avert debilitating mental illness, but also to bring resistant children back to school:

If we are given the freedom, encouragement and support to educate our children at home at the first sign of any disturbance at school, instead of allowing it to progress to the stage of mental breakdown...there would be more chance that the children, after a period of being educated out of school, should want to return to school. (p.194)

Home schooling can make it possible for the school refuser to *choose* to return to school, function ‘normally’ at school, and *want* to take advantage of all that schools (and tertiary institutions) have to offer. Thus, apparently, through home schooling, the needs, desires and behaviour of the ‘deviant’ (school refuser) can be brought back in line with societal norms and expectations. In a book called *Real Lives* (Llewellyn, 1993), sixteen-year-old Patrick shares his story of harrowing school experiences involving bullying and peer rejection and his transition to unschooling. When Patrick left school in the seventh grade to begin home schooling he “was ready to do ANYTHING [to leave school]. And...had no intention of going back” (p.199). However, by Patrick’s third year of home schooling he “began to feel the need to get into a formal class” (p.209). He returns to high school, as a “clandestine student” (p.211) in the guise of a volunteer, to develop his art skills. Patrick then spends the year attending art class all day, four days a week, completing assignments and conforming to classroom rules like the rest of the student body (but by choice). Even when the art class does not prove as useful as he hoped, Patrick continues to attend school, ironically, mainly for the experience of school “socialization” (p.214):

What really kept me going back to school...was the socialization, both positive and negative...My previous socialization at school had been as a victim. Then a spent two years

of home schooling choosing to limit my contacts...I used it as an *opportunity* to heal myself and control my exposure...Ms. Pelley [the art teacher] says that she was amazed how well I got on with everyone...after my childhood years of unpopularity, I am now anything but introverted. My three years of rest have provided me with the vital confidence and self-esteem that school had stripped from me. (p.215)

Thus, after two years of home schooling, Patrick, who was (according to his own narrative) a social outcast and nervous wreck when he left school, returns to school voluntarily in order to take up the educational and socialisation opportunities that it affords, and while at school functions in many respects as a 'normal' high school student. Home schooling appears in this instance to have allowed a 'maladjusted' individual to attend school willingly and to successfully manage 'normal', but potentially stressful, social situations and relationships.

Those critical theorists who insist on the need for radical educational alternatives for school resisters are not disapproving of therapy as such, but rather the way it is sometimes used with children identified as school phobics/school refusers. Knox (1990), for example, explains that it is not behaviour modification itself that she has a problem with but rather the fact that it is used with school-phobic children: "The fallacy of this approach rests not on the behaviour therapy as such, but on the assumption that a fear reduction in response to school is an abnormal reaction" (p.54). In fact, critical theorists and home schoolers frequently agree with mental health professionals that school resisters may likely *need* therapy in order to "recover" from their "school wounds" (Llewellyn, 1997, p.132). Llewellyn recommends counselling (in an egalitarian and democratic form) in cases where children are stressed and traumatised by school:

...if you find yourself tormented by guilt, school nightmares, or an inability to relax, get some help. Perhaps all you need is contact with other unschoolers. Maybe you need more intensive care, such as work with a counselor...I recommend co-counseling... (Llewellyn, 1997, p.134)

Summary

It would be easy to understand the labelling and classification of school-resistant children as 'school refusers' (and other types of pathological subjects) as a technology of domination, subjugation and normalisation which, it may well be, and hence a reason why psychotherapeutics function to oppress individuals. However, in this chapter I have argued that the technologies associated with school refusal therapy are primarily aimed at

recognising and shaping the subjectivity of school resisters. I have suggested that through prevalent therapeutic practices such as cognitive-behavioural therapy, school-refusers thoughts, feelings, beliefs and behaviours are systematically altered to conform to practitioner perspectives of what is socially 'normal', 'acceptable' and 'healthy'. This process potentially effects a profound subjugation over the school resister because it is enacted under the guise of 'helping' the child to rectify 'problems' (with the self) that are in fact artifacts of its own meaning systems. That is, these 'problems' that school refusers are commonly said to exhibit and embody are not located in the school-resisting child but are constructed within psychiatric/psychological discourses and point to certain therapeutic solutions (which the school refuser is then compelled to pursue for its own good).

I have suggested in this chapter that home schooling can also be understood as a form of governance that serves to control and regulate school resisters even once they have 'escaped' the school system. This occurs not only when dominant schooling ideologies and practices are transferred to the home school situation but also when discourses that are understood as radical and progressive are taken up by home schoolers. While certainly not promoting school return, these discourses do some similar work to therapeutic discourses in effectively shaping school-resistant children as responsible, independent, productive and autonomous individuals (who may very well choose to return to school if school return is seen to be in their best interests). This is not to say that school resisters should not be home schooled or that home schooling has no advantages over schooling. My data indicates that home schooling can provide a positive alternative to school that is acceptable (to children and their parents) and beneficial (in terms of the subjective experiences of children and parents) in some cases of school resistance. Rather I am saying that no educational practice is agenda free or power neutral, and despite the rhetoric of (especially radical) home schooling approaches, home schooling is not necessarily liberatory and emancipating. In the same way that some children understand and experience school as 'liberating' (perhaps a difficult concept for most school resisters to grasp), some children may potentially understand and experience unschooling as 'oppressive', for example, if they feel that they *must* be creative, resourceful and responsible. In the next chapter, I examine one child's journey through the therapeutic from a number of different and competing perspectives.

CHAPTER SIX

Case Study: Intervention with a School-Phobic Child

In this chapter I provide four different readings of one child's (Jonathan's) therapeutic journey. Regarding Jonathan's case, I did not want to tell a singular story. Rather, I wanted to capture the complexity of the situation, recognise the plurality of possible interpretations, and engage with the case in a variety of competing ways. The recognition of different perspectives on school resistance allows us to consider how different ways of understanding the world point to radically different actions and outcomes. I have not attempted to write myself out of the narratives put forth in this chapter but rather I consciously construct these accounts from within competing discursive and social locations.

The chapter begins by sharing an account of Anna's recollections of her son Jonathan's school attendance problems. In this section I have attempted to present Anna's story as much as possible as she told it to me, without analysing or critiquing her experiences, beliefs or actions. This is because it is important to me that her story is given discursive space and recognised as a legitimate perspective, even if it is not the only possible way of understanding events. However, I have avoided writing this section in the first person as I do not wish to give the illusion that this story is unmediated. This narrative provides a particular reading of Anna's data and in writing it I am the empathetic researcher who sat with Anna at her kitchen table eating chocolate chippie biscuits, looking at pictures of her son and sharing my own childhood experiences of hating school.

In the second section of this chapter I write from within the psychotherapeutic model. The purpose of this account is to indicate how the professionals working with Jonathan may have made sense of his history, symptoms and behaviour by drawing on dominant knowledges about school refusal. I present a 'sympathetic' reading of the practitioners' actions with Jonathan and his family which recognises the discourses that inform, allow and constrain their practice and ways of seeing the world. In this account, I have tried to stay close to the meanings expressed and the language used by the practitioners themselves, although in explaining and contextualising their assumptions and actions I sometimes draw

on the wider psychiatric/psychological literature. This narrative should be approached as a rendering of events recorded in medical and other documents.

In section three, I pull out another ‘self’—the part of me that is personally committed to making life better for school-resistant children by critiquing aspects of schooling and psychotherapeutics which I believe often function in oppressive and detrimental ways. I align myself here with the critical theorists discussed in chapter two and imagine how they might analyse and respond to Jonathan’s case, drawing on Anna’s interview data and various medical reports to support this new version of events. The critical perspective is important because it offers alternative ways of reading school resistance and constructing school phobia and school refusal which are largely ignored, unexamined and ruled out by mainstream society, but nevertheless do represent a political and ideological challenge to dominant meaning systems. The reader will note that in keeping with this body of work, my ‘critical’ account does not problematise the creation of a new ‘truth’ regarding Jonathan’s experiences.

The last account of Jonathan’s school resistance that I provide is labelled ‘a social construct account’. It takes a more distanced and analytical approach to events and focuses on the texts and technologies that constituted Jonathan’s subjectivity and experience. This perspective allows me to consider the socially constructed nature of Jonathan’s ‘problem’ at different points in his journey through the therapeutic. It also enables me to question the liberating capacities of home schooling, even though I am personally sympathetic to the movement, and to consider the meaning of Jonathan’s willing return to school.

Anna’s Account

The early years of Jonathan’s education were uneventful. He attended preschool and started school at age five. When Jonathan was seven years old, Anna saw some early signs of separation anxiety. Jonathan had started a new school where he did not know anybody and had a strict teacher he was afraid of. Two or three times he ran home from school and hid behind the garage.

In 2000, at age eleven, Jonathan started at the local high school (the district had no intermediate school). Jonathan never settled into form one and in August 2000, one week after his dad moved away to start a new job, began to resist going to school. Anna spent the

next week trying to return Jonathan to school but was unsuccessful. A male counsellor from the school visited Jonathan at home and attempted to quietly persuade him to return to school. The counsellor also offered to take Jonathan to school each morning, an offer which Anna declined, believing that getting Jonathan to school was her responsibility. In retrospect, Anna feels that this might have been a mistake. If the counsellor had taken Jonathan back to school early on, before his health started to decline, maybe he would have settled back into school and a phobia would not have developed. Jonathan stayed home from September till December of 2000 and was home schooled with the intention of making a fresh start at a new school the following year after the family moved in November. Anna contacted the Ministry of Education (MOE) and was advised that she did not need an exemption from schooling for Jonathan but could just try home schooling until February 2001 when he would hopefully return to school. She found that the Ministry was very understanding regarding Jonathan's situation and her decision to home school.

Jonathan first started refusing school as a result of a number of individual, family and school factors. These were: 1) a disruption to the family routine caused by Jonathan's father moving out of town for work and no longer being available to drive Jonathan to school in the mornings; 2) the class that Jonathan had been placed in where the boys were rowdy and ill disciplined; 3) Jonathan's anxiety about presenting a school speech in class, and his subsequent embarrassment and humiliation when the class was told that he had already given his speech in front of the deputy principal; 4) Jonathan being at an age which is difficult for some boys; 5) the stress of moving from the protected environment of primary school straight into a much larger high school; and 6) Jonathan's quiet and sensitive disposition.

Anna did not realise that Jonathan had school phobia until February 2001 after the family had moved and he failed to settle at his new intermediate school. She had heard of school phobia and, in retrospect, realises that Jonathan's phobia probably started to develop because of the rowdy boys and class speeches that Jonathan had been faced with at his old school. On the first day at the new intermediate school, Jonathan went to school willingly. He returned very unhappy and shut himself in his room for two hours, refusing to talk about what had happened. Jonathan attended school for a total of six days (intermittently) over a two week period. After the first two days, he stayed home from school and Anna started to think that he might have school phobia. The family had just moved and it seemed like

Jonathan could not cope with the school situation as well as getting used to his new home. Anna rang the school repeatedly to discuss the problems she was having with getting her son to school. While the office lady and Jonathan's teacher were very supportive, the principal was evasive and unhelpful, failing to take most of Anna's calls. Anna feels that if the principal had been more like a father figure to Jonathan, perhaps he would have returned to school sooner. A letter from the principal (received much later) revealed that he thought the family was to blame for Jonathan not wanting to go to school, which angered Anna, as she was working hard to find a solution to Jonathan's school phobia, and was herself stressed and unwell. Anna believes that if a child is unhappy at school, parents and school need to work together to resolve the problem.

Students' Support Services, a government agency called on by schools to work with students who are absent from school without a medical reason, became involved in Jonathan's case early in 2001. The Students' Support Officer, whom I will call M, met with Jonathan's parents to find out the background to his absenteeism. She suggested to Anna and her husband Ron that they try a rapid return to school with Jonathan, taking a very firm approach. Anna thinks that M perceived Jonathan's problems to be primarily behavioural and thought that staying home was a soft option for Jonathan. M arrived at the house before school and insisted Jonathan get dressed, get his bag and get in the car. This authoritarian approach caused Jonathan to retreat into his room and hide under the bed crying. Subsequently, impending visits by M caused Jonathan to run outside, jump over the back fence and disappear down the road. M then advised Anna that she should lock Jonathan out of the house and leave for the day. The second time that Anna attempted this, Jonathan wandered some distance from the house and ended up being picked up and returned by a neighbour. Anna did not want her twelve-year-old son wandering the streets (in an area that he was unfamiliar with) and feared that M's approach was turning Jonathan into a 'truant'.

Anna realised that a forceful approach was not going to succeed in getting Jonathan back to school and was only making him more fearful. She contacted Specialist Education Services (SES) and spoke to a psychologist³¹ about getting Correspondence lessons for Jonathan. The psychologist told Anna that school phobia was no longer a valid reason for

³¹ This psychologist was David Brown (a participant in this study), introduced in chapter three and discussed in chapter four.

receiving state funded Correspondence schooling owing to budget cuts and that only students in extreme circumstances (e.g. in hospital with cancer or pregnant) were eligible.

Nevertheless, Anna filled out a form applying for Correspondence schooling. She was concerned that she would never be able to pay for Correspondence lessons herself as it was going to cost five hundred dollars per subject.

Anna was worried that her son, who was already a skinny boy for his age, was losing weight and having difficulty sleeping. She took Jonathan to the family doctor and he was diagnosed with depression and an eating disorder. Jonathan's father is overweight and Anna reasoned that Jonathan had reached an age where he was becoming aware of body image and did not want to get fat like his dad. He would do lots of sit-ups and avoid eating fatty foods. The doctor was concerned with getting Jonathan out of the depression and told Anna that she should not try to force her son to attend school. The doctor was very understanding and thorough and, realising that Jonathan's anxiety and negative mood were affecting his health, quickly got him referred to the Burnside Child, Adolescent and Family Guidance Centre³².

At Burnside, two psychologists, S and J, met with Jonathan and his parents. They initially suggested a rapid return to school but Anna did not want to force Jonathan to attend school, she wanted him to go willingly as he had done in the past. S and J then advised Anna to gradually get Jonathan used to the idea of returning to school by talking to him about it during the school holidays. This resulted in Jonathan becoming very upset, throwing things, swearing and hiding under the table. Such behaviour was uncharacteristic for Jonathan who was normally a good and responsible child. It was obvious to Anna that Jonathan had a real phobia about school and was consequently highly stressed and emotionally fragile. Jonathan did not like going to Burnside, and found the sessions quite stressful, but continued to attend through March and into April 2001. By this time, Anna was considering ending Jonathan's therapy and trying Correspondence schooling or home schooling instead. At the time, she wrote down her thoughts about Jonathan's situation and her rationale for ending the therapy:

I want Jonathan to be happy—to wake up looking forward to the day, not to be fearful and anxious. It is important to feel a sense of belonging and to make new friends. I want him to have a good education—a balanced variety of learning, which I can facilitate through the Correspondence School. I'd like closure on the medical visits as soon as possible to enable him to move on and get on with life in a settled way. Jonathan is getting tired of all the

³² The name of the service has been changed to help protect the identity of everyone concerned.

questions. Reaction last night: “I just want to keep things the way they are”. (Anna’s personal record³³)

Anna felt that she had exhausted all of the psychologists’ methods for returning Jonathan to school and nothing had worked, so she decided as a last resort to home school Jonathan. She strongly believed that Jonathan needed to feel emotionally secure in order to regain his health and continue with his education. Anna’s mother (who was a school teacher) and sister were opposed to the idea of Jonathan being home schooled and kept telling Anna that she needed to do the ‘right thing’ and send Jonathan back to school. They thought that Jonathan was just manipulating Anna by refusing to go to school. But Anna knew that Jonathan was genuinely anxious, and his weight loss, insomnia and depression all indicated that he was not just being ‘naughty’.

Anna started home schooling Jonathan in June 2001. For the first couple of weeks Jonathan just wanted to sleep and was in no fit state to do any demanding academic work. Anna wanted Jonathan to follow a structured programme just like at school so, after a short break, Jonathan took up his schooling again at home. He worked a normal school day and studied the same subjects as his school peers. Anna hunted out resources for him, bought textbooks and talked with other home schoolers. She found the office lady at Jonathan’s school very helpful for pointing her in the right direction regarding resources. Anna recognised the need for Jonathan to socialise and have a sense of belonging similar to what school provides, so she enrolled him in woodwork classes and YMCA sports with other home-schooled children. Because of his phobia it took three attempts for Jonathan to enter the woodwork class, but he hit it off with his woodwork teacher right away. Anna believed that it was important for Jonathan to have mentors (like the woodwork teacher) and to build up his confidence by doing activities with other children in a classroom setting. While home schooling was a last resort, Anna found it a positive experience. Other home schoolers provided fantastic support for Anna, who felt accepted and understood. Being involved in home schooling helped Anna to broaden her views on education and realise that there are lots of different educational options for children with special needs—not just school.

³³ Two pieces of A4 paper on which Anna has written her thoughts, feelings, plans regarding Jonathan’s situation and recorded some statements made by Jonathan. Written April 1, 2001.

Home schooling allowed Jonathan to feel secure and gain his confidence back. Two years later he was ready to go back to school and be with his friends (he socialised with two boys who attended the local college). A deputy principal at the college met with Anna and Jonathan, showed Jonathan around the school and was very positive and encouraging about his plan to return to school for the forth form. Anna found that a gentle introduction to school and good first contact was helpful for her son. Anna is very grateful to the school for supporting Jonathan in returning to school because she knew that she could not provide Jonathan with the maths, science and social opportunities that school would. She feels that the school has a really good philosophy, taking a firm stand against bullying, treating children with respect, and encouraging students to accept and support one another. However, Anna realises that every child is different and some children with school phobia will not be able to return to school. Jonathan has not shown any signs of school phobia since his first day back at school. His confidence has increased, he has friends, loves school and has not missed a single day.

Overall, the three things that Anna found helpful in dealing with her son's school phobia were: 1) the sympathetic and supportive doctor; 2) the Burnside centre; and 3) the home-schooling classes that gave Jonathan a sense of belonging. Anna wants the true story about school phobia to be known, that is, she wants people to understand that children with phobias really suffer—they are not just being silly.

Psychotherapeutic Account

Jonathan was referred to the Burnside Child, Adolescent and Family Guidance Centre for assessment regarding difficulties associated with school refusal. Interviews with Jonathan and his parents conducted by a clinical psychologist and a clinical psychology intern revealed that a number of family factors and stressors were involved in the development and maintenance of Jonathan's school refusal.

Jonathan's school refusal appears to have been triggered by anticipatory anxiety around presenting a class speech. This was initially dealt with by the school allowing Jonathan to give his speech one to one with the deputy principal. Class members found out about this arrangement and this resulted in Jonathan experiencing feelings of embarrassment,

humiliation and tearfulness. Jonathan's father was unable to assist with getting Jonathan back to school due to work commitments and Jonathan's mother felt that without her husband's support she did not have the resources to insist on Jonathan's continued attendance. A decision was made to home school Jonathan until the end of the year.

The family moved cities in November 2000 and Jonathan was enrolled at Southpark Intermediate. He described some anxiety symptoms when thinking about his return to school such as nausea, tightness in the chest and difficulty sleeping. Jonathan attended for only six days at Southpark Intermediate and is described by his mother as "literally collapsing on his return from school" on day six (Burnside report³⁴). Jonathan's mother consequently considered her son to be emotionally unable to cope with attending school. The Burnside psychologists note that Jonathan successfully initiated conversation with other children at Southpark and remained keen to socialise with children in his neighbourhood. He also socialised well at primary school.

M, the Students' Support Officer, became involved in Jonathan's case in order to assist in reintegrating Jonathan back into school. M reviewed the case history with Jonathan's parents and decided on a rapid return intervention. M may have felt that a prompt return to school would avert secondary problems from developing (e.g. Jonathan losing contact with friends, feeling anxious about missed work or embarrassed about being away from school).

In Jonathan's case, the rapid return was unsuccessful. When faced with eminent exposure to school, Jonathan protested, cried and had a tantrum. This behaviour caused Jonathan's mother to become distressed and anxious, and she was unable to proceed with the intervention. Stopping a rapid return procedure midway threatens treatment progress as the child's resolve to avoid school is reinforced. Subsequent attempts at a rapid return resulted in Jonathan running away from M. M then took steps to prevent Jonathan from being inadvertently rewarded for staying home (e.g. by gaining attention and having access to television, pets, and free time), as secondary reinforcement can be a powerful factor in maintaining school avoidance. She instructed Jonathan's mother to lock him out of the house and go away for the day. Jonathan's mother was unable to follow through with this procedure, however, as she became anxious about her son wandering the streets. Jonathan's parents

³⁴ A summary of Burnside's findings regarding Jonathan's assessment and a discussion of recommendations. Written by the clinical psychologist at Burnside, addressed to David Brown, dated May 14, 2001. Copies sent to Anna and Ron, M and the doctor.

seemed unwilling to accept that the signs of distress shown by Jonathan were not necessarily indications that he could not cope at school. These symptoms are normally anxiety-based or ploys on the part of the child to break down the parents' resolve to work towards a school return. In most cases, once children are returned to school and left by their parents, they settle down quickly. Jonathan had demonstrated in the past that he was perfectly capable of coping with school, and that he had the social and academic abilities needed to succeed at school.

Jonathan was referred to Burnside with diagnoses of depression and an eating disorder. The Burnside psychologists did find evidence of some eating disorder symptoms that needed monitoring; however, clinical and diagnostic interviews revealed that Jonathan did not meet the criteria for a depressive episode. An examination of Jonathan's case history indicated to the psychologists that he had mainly managed to avoid facing school.

The Burnside psychologists met with Jonathan's parents in March 2001 and made a number of recommendations to facilitate a rapid return of Jonathan to school. The psychologists may have felt that exposure to school would not be initiated by Jonathan without parental management of his attendance. Jonathan's mother contacted Burnside in the first week of the new school term and advised that she had attempted to speak with her son about returning to school on three occasions, resulting in negative reactions from Jonathan. She stated that she did not want to physically force Jonathan to school and wished to avoid upsetting him. Parents who are ambivalent about using a firm approach to returning their child to school should be encouraged to consider whether any alternative action is likely to procure school attendance. Problematic behaviours are likely to occur (and may increase) when parents are being firm about school attendance. It is important that parents do not strengthen their child's refusal by offering comfort and reassurance at those times when the child needs to face the feared situation, as this can compound the child's problem and insecurity, and does not ultimately help the child to cope with the situation in a constructive way.

The Burnside psychologists met with Jonathan's parents again and discussed techniques for facilitating Jonathan's return to school. These are summarised below:

- The focus is on school return—Jonathan's parents are advised to avoid giving Jonathan the impression that Correspondence or home schooling is an option.

- Jonathan's parents are to carry out the intervention—the therapists have a directive and supportive role with the parents and will teach Jonathan 'coping' (self-management) strategies.
- Jonathan's parents are instructed to be firm, united and determined in dealing with their child.
- Positive reinforcement is to be given for school attendance.
- Jonathan's inappropriate behaviours—begging, pleading, negotiating, worrying—are to be controlled and limited.
- Anna is instructed to model confidence not anxiety.
- Jonathan's parents are to tell themselves and their son that he *can* cope with school and that they are going to support and help him through the school return process.
- The school is to be warned that Jonathan is returning and a 'buddy' arranged.
- Jonathan's friends will accompany him to and from school to provide additional peer support/pressure for school return.
- Jonathan's parents are instructed to instill more structure into his days in preparation for a return into the more controlled school environment.

Jonathan's parents indicated to the Burnside psychologists that they were considering home schooling or the Correspondence School as an option for Jonathan. Providing home tuition is usually contraindicated in cases of school refusal. The psychologists helped Jonathan's parents to evaluate the potential advantages and disadvantages associated with this course of action. They indicated that school withdrawal can be counterproductive for school refusers because they are not being encouraged to overcome their fears. Children who continue refusing to attend school may be at risk of developing long-term social and emotional difficulties. They warned that home schooling may result in Jonathan becoming more dependent on his family, instead of following the more normal pattern of separation individuation. They expressed concern that home schooling could increase family stress and thus aggravate Jonathan's low mood, eating disorder symptoms and negative cognitions. Also, there was concern that home schooling may mean Jonathan spending a lot of time alone, which could have a negative impact on his mood. For these reasons, the psychologists recommended that home schooling be an interim measure only and that the family's focus remain on returning Jonathan to school using a "graded exposure programme" (Burnside

report). In addition, they advised that family issues needed to be addressed and parenting support would be helpful in assisting Jonathan back into the school system. These recommendations were sent to the SES psychologist to assist him in making a decision regarding Jonathan's eligibility for state-funded Correspondence schooling.

The principal of Southpark Intermediate was notified by Jonathan's mother of the difficulties that she was having in getting her son to school. The teacher made herself available to talk with Jonathan's mother and offer support and encouragement; however, the principal felt that as Jonathan's attendance problem was psychological, it was best dealt with by medical and psychological experts. He was concerned that it would be inappropriate (and possibly counterproductive) for him to step in as an "authority figure" (principal's letter³⁵). In his letter to Jonathan's parents, the principal points out that there are many reasons why children stop going to school and that usually it has nothing to do with the school or with children at the school. The Burnside report does not indicate that any problems Jonathan is experiencing are specific to Southpark Intermediate. The principal suggests that Jonathan is unlikely to return to school if home is more interesting than school during the day or if Jonathan is being told that he is needed at home. When parents allow their child to stay home from school, the child can learn that home has many advantages over school. Thus, parents need to be encouraged to recognise and eliminate or minimise any aspects of home life that may be reinforcing their child's school avoidance. The principal also suggests that events in the family at the time of Jonathan's initial refusal have probably impacted on his ability to settle at Southpark. Once a pattern of school avoidance has been established, it can be very difficult to break.

It is desirable that the parents of school refusers and the school remain in close contact during intervention. The SES psychologist associated with Jonathan's case attempted to facilitate an opportunity for the school and family to meet and negotiate what arrangements might be necessary for reintegrating Jonathan into school. However, this meeting never took place as Jonathan's mother felt that her son would be too anxious to reenter the school grounds willingly.

³⁵ Letter sent by the principal of Southpark Intermediate to Anna and Ron regarding Jonathan's situation. Dated May 11, 2001 but sent some time later.

Critical Account

Trying to force children like Jonathan who have school phobia to return to school can be inhumane and potentially harmful. Jonathan's school anxieties manifested themselves in a variety of ways (as indicated by his mother Anna): he was unwilling to attend school; he was emotionally withdrawn; his school work had deteriorated; he had uncharacteristic emotional outbursts; he appeared extremely sensitive and vulnerable; he was depressed; and he was losing weight and having difficulty sleeping. The first time I met Anna, she showed me Jonathan's school photos taken in Year 6 (when he was happy at school) and in Year 7 (when his problems at school began). I was profoundly struck by the difference in his appearance and wrote this in my journal:

Anna showed me photos of Jonathan in Y6 and Y7. In the first photo he is smiling broadly, his eyes are sparkling. He looks relaxed and happy. In the second photo his face is drawn, he has shadows under his eyes, he is not smiling. The difference is incredible. (June 19, 2003)

When children are feeling stressed and unable to cope with school attendance, adults need to listen, and then respond to their thoughts about what would be the most helpful course of action. Such an approach may help prevent long-term problems from developing.

M (the Students' Support Officer) tried to force Jonathan back to school before he was ready and against his will. Jonathan had not even been examined by a doctor to determine whether his reluctance to attend school was related to any medical condition. The assumption was that Jonathan's problem was behavioural and stemmed from poor parental management. The approach taken with Jonathan by M was inconsistent with Anna's understanding of her son's behaviour as stemming from genuine anxiety and with her previous management of Jonathan. In choosing a course of action, M seems to have disregarded Jonathan's emotional state (highly distressed), personality (not a naughty or defiant child) and history (never a truant or a delinquent). Also, Jonathan's parents' perspectives and chosen parenting style (which favoured talking, reasoning and praising) appear to have been ignored. These factors made a rapid return to school an inappropriate and potentially damaging course of action for Jonathan and his family:

Having a total stranger come in and boss him around [was distressing for Jonathan]. We positioned ourselves—he was in his room, had the door shut, he wouldn't come down to see her. One of us was down here, I think M, and I went up to try and get Jonathan out of his room. He'd barricaded himself in there. [Ron] was on the stairs...It was like a military

exercise. Of course the child, it just made him more fearful. He was under the bed holding on to the—he was saying “no I don’t want to go!” (Anna)

It is interesting to note that while Anna believed that her son *was* genuinely anxious and not being ‘naughty’, she nevertheless *did* follow M’s instructions, only abandoning the intervention when Jonathan’s level of distress and anxiety became excessive. Parents often feel that they have to try the methods suggested by professionals, regardless of their own view, because they are the ‘experts’ and supposedly know what is best for the child.

Although M’s attempts at a rapid return had failed and proven highly distressing for both Jonathan and Anna, the psychologists at the Burnside centre recommend trying this method again. It is clear that the management plan for returning Jonathan to school did not result from a collaborative child/family/practitioner effort. It conforms precisely to a textbook school refusal intervention and does not recognise the specific desires, needs, history and temperaments of the family concerned. Such an approach indicates that the two psychologists are very familiar with the mainstream psychological literature and have internalised the dominant psychotherapeutic framework for understanding and treating school refusal. This model makes a number of questionable assumptions: school return is imperative; school refusers’ parents are ambivalent and inconsistent in their management of the child; school refusers tend to ‘worry’ (harass) their parents about not wanting to attend school; parents of school refusers (especially mothers) often exhibit high anxiety regarding their child which triggers or feeds the child’s anxiety; school refusers are likely to be socially isolated or lack social skills; school factors are not to blame for school refusal; school refusers and their parents may lack ‘coping’ skills; parents are the best people to escort a school refuser to school—this forces them to take responsibility for properly managing their child’s behaviour; and the problem is at least partly a matter of behaviour management.

It is probable that the psychologists in this case entered the assessment and ‘consultation’ process with very fixed ideas about what was wrong and how best to treat Jonathan based on the therapeutic model that they were trained in and familiar with. Some seemingly relevant information appears to have been ignored in the psychologists’ report. For example, they appear to downplay Jonathan’s distress, low mood and physical symptoms such as weight loss—perhaps seeing these as behavioural (related to avoidance and manipulation) rather than as symptoms of a genuine emotional distress (related to stress, anxiety and depression): “Jonathan’s mood is not pervasively low and he’s eager to socialise

with neighbouring children and accompany his father to model shops and on other outings” (Burnside report). Jonathan is not classified as ‘depressed’ by the psychologists, although he clearly describes symptoms that are consistent with depression: “Jonathan reported having low moods and feelings of irritability and tearfulness. He has made statements about hating his life and wanting to die” (Burnside report). Additionally, Jonathan is found to have some “eating disorder symptoms” (Burnside report) but the psychologists appear to see no relationship between these symptoms and school stress. Educational researcher Knox (1990) suggests that stress about school can be transformed by some school-phobic children into “worries about food” (p.38). Knox quotes one girl who died of anorexia at the age of twenty-two as saying: “The only way that I could make myself ill was to stop eating, and the only way for me to be allowed home [from boarding school] was for me to become ill” (p.48).

The psychologists do not acknowledge Jonathan’s extreme anxiety/distress and uncharacteristic behaviour in response to even discussing the topic of school:

Even when we did talk about it his reaction was very extreme...he broke a pottery container out there but that was when we tried to talk about it. Another time he got right under this table and he curled up in a ball...So any mention of school at that time was a total no-no, totally made him unhappy. Then he’d go up into his room and cry or be there for an hour. He went into himself. (Anna)

Instead, they appear to believe that Jonathan is *initiating* discussions about school—in the form of ‘harassing’ his mother: “When Jonathan tries to ‘wear’ Anna down about not returning to school...[Anna should] identify a specific ‘worry time’ with him...Discussion about his concerns will only occur during this time” (management plan³⁶).

Some incorrect information (apparently based on dominant assumptions about school refusers) has been included in the Burnside report. For instance, the psychologists suggest that Jonathan suffered from ‘separation anxiety’ at kindergarten: “At preschool Jonathan had some separation anxiety problems and would take 10-to-15 minutes to settle, with Jonathan giving the cue for his parents to leave”. It is highly debatable whether a very young child who is happy for his parents to leave him at preschool after a 10 to 15 minute settling-in period is exhibiting separation anxiety. Anna certainly did not understand her son’s behaviour at preschool as abnormal or concerning: “[the Burnside psychologists] said that he

³⁶ Written version of the plan for Jonathan’s school return discussed at a meeting between Jonathan’s parents and the Burnside psychologists. Written by the clinical psychologist, dated April 12, 2001. Sent to Anna and Ron.

had separation anxiety problems at kindergarten but he didn't, he didn't, he never had any problems at kindergarten. I can remember that quite well".

The psychologists seem to imply in their report and management plan that Anna was unwilling or unable to be firm, rational and consistent with Jonathan about school attendance, e.g.: "Anna [needs to] decrease her own anxiety...to show Jonathan she is confident, not anxious, about [school return] happening. However, it was not that Anna simply "did not want to" (Burnside report) force Jonathan to school or wished to protect him from any distress. In fact, Anna states: "we did try force...I didn't want to bow to the option of home schooling until we'd tried everything we could". The doctor had warned Anna against stressing Jonathan further by forcing him to attend school. Far from being a reactive emotional response, it was this warning, along with advice she had received from the Phobic Trust, Jonathan's class teacher and the SES psychologist—in conjunction with Jonathan's negative reaction to the initial rapid return intervention—that informed Anna's concerns about physically forcing Jonathan to attend school.

Rather than reflecting some psychological 'truth' about Jonathan's condition, the Burnside report can be understood as a highly constructed document. It is crucial that Jonathan was not diagnosed with depression by the Burnside psychologists but rather with a "specific phobia relating to school" (Burnside report). This diagnosis determined his treatment. It meant that 'avoidance' associated with anxiety was seen as the primary problem *not* depression. Rather than refusing school because it makes him feel profoundly unhappy, Jonathan is avoiding school because he has developed an irrational fear (phobia) of attending. This means that the focus of Jonathan's treatment will be on desensitising him to the school environment through exposure. In addition, The Burnside psychologists seem noncommittal regarding the *severity* of Jonathan's anxiety as he apparently was reluctant (or unable) to verbalise his feelings about school within the clinic setting: "the severity of these [anxiety] symptoms has been difficult to assess because of difficulties with eliciting the beliefs or fears and thoughts associated with exposure to the situation from Jonathan himself" (Burnside report). However, Jonathan did communicate his beliefs, fears and thoughts about school to Anna (on at least one occasion) and they do not appear irrational. He states: I am "Not going back because it's *too long*"; "No-one is going to force you to go back"; I "Wouldn't want to try at all because I hate it"; and "It's not my happy place" (Anna's personal record). His

rationale for refusing school is that he does not want to spend six hours of every weekday in a place that he hates and that makes him unhappy—and he is not prepared to be forced into compliance. Thus, Jonathan's school refusal can be understood as a rational response to aversive aspects of school. When Jonathan's reasons for refusing school are understood as rational and reasonable, it becomes more difficult to justify pressuring or forcing him into school attendance.

Individual and family factors as opposed to school factors are typically found by psychologists to account for the development and maintenance of school refusal, and Jonathan's case is no exception. The Burnside psychologists fail to acknowledge the role that school played in initiating Jonathan's school anxieties in the first place. According to Anna's account, Jonathan was very anxious about giving a speech in front of his class and humiliated when the other children laughed at him. It is possible that if this situation had been handled more sensitively by the teacher who was responsible for informing the class of Jonathan's circumstances, Jonathan would not have felt distressed about returning to school. In addition, we might ask why Jonathan felt unable to give a speech in front of his Year 7 class when he had experienced no difficulty giving class speeches the year before. Anna seems to believe that the anxiety about speeches was specifically related to the classroom environment in Year 7:

...it's strange but he went through this definite phase where he was fearful of making a speech in that classroom with the rowdy boys... We tried to get him to do it... 'cause he'd done it in Year 6, no problem. He felt afraid to do it [in Year 7]. Whereas in [Mrs P's Year 6] class, because it was a different atmosphere, she was very positive and things like that. And I think she was quite firm with them, too... I think some of them were getting away with a bit of naughtiness in the subsequent year, in Year 7.

It is possible that Jonathan felt intimidated and unsafe at his new high school or was, in fact, being bullied. Jonathan was one of the youngest children at the school and had a quiet disposition. Anna recalls Jonathan coming home from school one day and reporting that he had been pushed:

There were other things that happened just prior to the speech business. 'Cause he came home one day and said he'd hurt himself on the slide or something. He said somebody had pushed him, and I said, "Oh, who was that?" you know. He didn't tell me too much about it, but you see, there may've been other things that I didn't know about.

Further evidence that Jonathan did not feel safe, supported and accepted amongst his peers at the high school may be provided by a comment Jonathan made to his mother several years

after his initial school refusal: “He said to me, ‘Oh Mum...a lot of boys [at the high school] used to play rugby...they’re really aggressive...But they’re not like that at [my current school]...they’re much more genteel’...he found, generally, they’re much more accepting” (Anna).

The fact that Jonathan was willing to try a new school (after the family moved) and happily went off on the first morning with no apparent anxiety also indicates that, at this stage at least, it was the specific situation at the high school that was making Jonathan anxious, not the thought of school in general: “There was no problem the first day. He got up, got dressed, had his breakfast, came down, got in the car and when to school. But the first inkling of negativity was when he jumped in the car [after school]...he just said, ‘I hated it’”. Jonathan would surely never have agreed to give school another try (let alone a new and unfamiliar school) if he had been suffering from an irrational phobic fear of school that had been strengthened over the preceding months through lack of treatment and successful avoidance. It is not clear what occurred on Jonathan’s first day at Southpark Intermediate that caused him to return home in such a radically altered frame of mind. Anna seems to suggest that it may have been the general culture of Southpark Intermediate that Jonathan disliked: “We often wonder if we’d gone to [a different intermediate school], would it have been a different experience for him. ‘Cause I think a lot depends really on the way the school is run, their philosophy, and how they welcome a new pupil to the school, and how they help you when you need help”.

While the Burnside report tells only one possible version of Jonathan’s story, presented as official medical findings it contains the authority to shape Jonathan’s future. It is clear that emotional/psychological issues were involved in Jonathan’s school refusal—he was certainly not just being ‘naughty’. However, the way Jonathan’s school refusal was constructed at Burnside made it appear that he was not sufficiently ‘psychologically disturbed’ to warrant school withdrawal and would not benefit from learning at home. In fact, Jonathan’s problems and home situation were presented in a way that made school withdrawal look detrimental—socially isolating Jonathan, subjecting him to more family stress and anxiety, and allowing him to avoid facing his irrational fears. It is very unlikely that on the basis of this assessment the SES psychologist David Brown would have considered Jonathan a good candidate for state-funded Correspondence schooling. This is

because in order to qualify for state-funded Correspondence on psychological grounds, a child must be judged by a Ministry of Education psychologist (like David Brown) to have problems of “sufficient severity to prevent or seriously impede [them] from attending a local school” (MOE, 2006).

Jonathan’s response to home schooling, according to Anna, was very positive and similar to that described by others within the home-schooling community who have withdrawn children from school because their needs were not being met. Jonathan gradually transformed into a relaxed, happy, sociable and secure twelve-year-old: “he moved from that very fearful core, and he gradually got more confident...And then he embraced the larger sphere, he embraced more and more things, and he went out socially” (Anna). The Burnside psychologists reviewed Jonathan’s progress at a meeting in September 2001 and appear to have been satisfied that Jonathan had improved and that their fears regarding home schooling had not eventuated:

Jonathan was noticeably more relaxed and articulate than on previous occasions at Burnside. Jonathan and his parents all reported improvements in a number of areas since our last meeting...He has no problems with sleep disturbance or worrying thoughts and his mood is euthymic...We will close Jonathan’s file at this stage as Jonathan and his family are happy with his progress”. (progress review³⁷)

Like many other home schoolers, Jonathan made a successful transition back into school when he felt ready and at the time of his mother’s interview was attending school happily.

A Social Construct Account

This final account allows for an interrogation of Jonathan’s school phobia/school refusal as a social construct and an examination of the production of Jonathan as a ‘sick’ and ‘maladjusted’ subject within medical and psychological documents and practices. This account challenges a straightforward rendering of Jonathan’s case.

Anna predominantly sees Jonathan’s problematic school behaviour as an individual and family problem consistent with the dominant psychiatric/psychological approach. When explaining the development of Jonathan’s school phobia, she focuses on events that were

³⁷ Report that discusses the Burnside psychologists’ findings at a meeting with Jonathan and his parents to review Jonathan’s progress. Written by the clinical psychologist, addressed to Jonathan’s doctor, dated October 1, 2001. Copy sent to Anna and Ron.

taking place in the family at the time of his school resistance, the relationship between Jonathan's personality and his emotional reactions to the school situation, and her belief that he was developing a 'real' phobia (irrational and exaggerated fear) about school. She does not understand Jonathan's aversion to school as a 'normal' response to negative aspects of school, as some critical theorists have argued, but positions Jonathan within the psychiatric discourse as a sensitive, quiet and intense child who was perhaps not coping as well as other children with the transition from primary to high school: "it's changing...from the security of primary school into the next stage...some children can cope with change, and others are more sensitive". By constructing Jonathan as a 'sensitive' child who developed a 'real' anxiety disorder, Anna contributes to the way in which Jonathan understands his school resistance as a 'loss of confidence' on his part (not as a school problem).

I asked Anna to talk with Jonathan about his reasons for not wanting to be at school when he was younger and he told Anna that "initially he lost his confidence and this was due to lots of little things" (personal communication, July 15, 2003). This way of understanding the 'problem' marks an important shift in meaning for Jonathan who, according to Anna's account, as an eleven-year-old believed that he just needed a fresh start (at a new school), and as a twelve-year-old appeared to attribute his school resistance entirely to school factors: "Not going because it's too long"; "I hate it. It's not my happy place" (Anna's personal record). The eventual internalisation of responsibility for his school resistance makes it possible for Jonathan to return to school willingly, believing that the problem has been resolved because *he* has changed (i.e. grown up, gained confidence and worked on improving himself). After speaking with fourteen-year-old Jonathan, Anna writes: "He thinks he has more fun times now [he is back at school]—fun with friends, he's more sociable" (personal communication, July 15, 2003).

Anna's construction of Jonathan as a school-phobic child begins when Jonathan fails to settle at Southpark Intermediate. Anna draws on dominant psychiatric/psychological meanings to explain Jonathan's behaviour, perhaps made available to her through her teacher training. As Anna journeys (with Jonathan) through the therapeutic, the meaning of Jonathan's school resistance as 'phobia' emerges more strongly, crystallises and becomes fixed as the 'truth' of the matter. We can track the discursive construction of Jonathan's

school resistance as ‘phobia’ fairly easily if we examine the events, letters and medical documents connected with his case.

M, the Students’ Support Officer, gave Anna an educational document called *What Parents Should Know About School Phobia* (Conway, 2000³⁸), a self-help book for teenagers with anxiety disorders called *Scary Thoughts* (Read, 2000), and referred her to the Phobic Trust. These texts and the Trust all take a standard psychiatric/psychological approach to understanding, explaining and treating ‘phobias’. Conway (2000), for instance, states in the opening line of *What Parents Should Know About School Phobia*: “School Phobia is an exaggerated and irrational fear of attending school” (p.2). When I asked Anna what her understanding of school phobia was, she stated: “It’s fearfulness of the unknown...It looms very large in their minds...it starts very small, and it’s a very real fear”. She then mentioned receiving and reading the book *Scary Thoughts*. Thus, M appears to have played an important role in reinforcing Anna’s belief that Jonathan’s school resistance can be constructed as psychological (i.e. school phobia), and contributed to the way Anna would understand school phobia as a ‘disorder’ or ‘illness’—an ‘irrational’ and ‘exaggerated’ fear of what might happen at school—rather than, say, as a legitimate anxiety response to the (often aversive) school environment.

The medicalisation of Jonathan’s school resistance continued with the visit to the doctor’s clinic, where he was diagnosed with ‘depression’ and an ‘eating disorder’. The diagnosis of depression marked an important shift in the meaning of Jonathan’s school resistance for Anna, constructing Jonathan as ‘sick’ and ‘unhappy’ as well as anxious: “I didn’t know that he was *depressed* until the doctor sort of said, ‘well, we’ve classified him as being depressed’”. This new understanding of Jonathan’s behaviour as stemming (in part) from depression, fuelled Anna’s belief that her son needed support and protection, not ‘discipline’, and provided her with a legitimate (medically endorsed) reason for calling a stop to M’s behavioural intervention: “I said [to M] we’ve decided not to try that way...some people say, ‘Well it’s discipline.’ But not if—it got to the stage where he wasn’t eating and wasn’t sleeping, and depression was the diagnosis, Dr P wrote that”. Once a diagnosis of ‘depression’ had been made it became paramount that Jonathan (as a child suffering from a diagnosed psychiatric illness) receive professional psychological help—hence the doctor’s

³⁸ Unpublished educational handout.

prompt referral to the Burnside centre: “Initially, Dr P realised that we had to be referred very quickly, so she got us an appointment within a week” (Anna). Hence, while the medicalisation of Jonathan’s school resistant behaviour as ‘sickness’ did enable a halt to punitive and forceful practitioner interventions, it also committed Jonathan and those responsible for him to a journey deeper into the therapeutic.

The Burnside report marked another important discursive shift in the meaning of Jonathan’s school resistance. As mental health professionals, and especially as ‘experts’ on the mental health of children, adolescences and families, the psychologists can make authoritative claims to knowing and understanding Jonathan. The report repositions Jonathan as suffering from “a specific phobia relating to school”. This diagnosis constructs Jonathan’s problems as *specific* to school, *not* related to general or widespread psychological dysfunction or depression. In this way, the doctor’s diagnosis of depression and Anna’s understanding of her son as depressed, vulnerable, stressed and unable to cope with school are effectively written out, and the new ‘truth’ about Jonathan’s condition is that his mood “is not pervasively low” (Burnside report), “that he is not vulnerable” and that “he can do it” [return to school] as he “has coped in the past” (management plan).

Evidence for the psychologists’ interpretation of the situation appears to be provided by the finding that Jonathan’s responses to the Kovac’s Children Depression Inventory Scale “fell into the normative range” (meaning that Jonathan is ‘normal’, i.e. not depressed), as did his responses to the Manifest Anxiety Scale for Children (Burnside report). The results of these apparently objective and scientific psychological measures appear to reify the ‘specific phobia’ diagnosis and point to certain treatment protocols, i.e. combating ‘avoidance’ and the use of exposure-based treatments aimed at extinguishing anxiety. The Burnside diagnosis also rules out some other possible treatments and responses. As the psychologists do not understand Jonathan as depressed, severely anxious, or ‘at risk’ if returned to school, Jonathan is not understood as requiring Correspondence schooling.

While Anna may be implicated along with the professionals in constructing Jonathan as ‘phobic’, her perspective on the ‘problem’ differs from the dominant psychotherapeutic paradigm in a number of important ways. During the assessment and treatment process, Jonathan’s family can be understood as subjugated in that they are positioned alongside Jonathan as patients that require therapy: “We also believe that there is work with family

issues and parenting support that would be needed...in order for Jonathan to be assisted back into the school system". However, from a subjugated position, Anna was able to challenge the ways that Burnside constructed her son, her family and the 'problem', and reassert her own values and meanings.

Anna was uncomfortable using an authoritarian approach with Jonathan and stated in our interview: "I know [Jonathan] doesn't respond to that sort of approach". She did not want to force Jonathan into attending school and believed that her son was physically and psychologically fragile and unable to cope with pressure to return to school. Nevertheless, Burnside in the first instance suggested a rapid return and subsequently devised a plan for returning Jonathan to school that (arguably) implied a high degree of parental coercion (if not actual physical force). For example, Jonathan's father is to have the first four days of the new school term off work in order to "assist Anna in getting Jonathan to school". Anna and Ron are to "present a united front" in their "determination" to get Jonathan back to school. And they are instructed to "provide an incentive for Jonathan to return to school" by paying off a certain amount of his stereo time-payment for each day/week he spends at school (management plan).

It appears from the written management plan sent to Jonathan's parents in April 2001 that Burnside expected Anna and Ron to put pressure on Jonathan for a school return: "[it is important that you both give] Jonathan a clear message that correspondence is not an option and that returning to school, is a matter of 'when' not 'if'" (management plan). While evidently giving some impression of conceding with this plan to the Burnside psychologists, Anna can also be seen to resist the implementing of the treatment plan. Rather than impressing upon Jonathan the clear message that school return is eminent and unavoidable, and that home education is "not an option" (management plan), Anna indicates that she told Jonathan the Burnside appointments were necessary as a step towards home schooling: "He'd say to me, 'Oh do I have to [go to Burnside]?' And I'd say, 'Well, yes, if you want to be home schooled, we have to keep these appointments'". Hence, there was a clear understanding between Anna and Jonathan that returning to school was not inevitable and that home schooling was a real option that they were working towards together.

Shortly after receiving the written management plan from Burnside, Anna and Ron sent a letter to the two psychologists and the doctor stating that Jonathan was to be home

schooled: “We have decided to home school our son”. This letter reasserts Anna’s (and perhaps Ron’s) understanding of Jonathan’s situation and mental condition, and justifies an approach to helping Jonathan that undermines and challenges the psychotherapeutic perspective and directly contradicts the Burnside management plan. In this letter, Anna and Ron take charge of Jonathan’s treatment, suggesting that the therapeutic methods recommended by the Burnside psychologists have been “unsuccessful” and “caused much stress and worry for both Jonathan and [themselves]”. They implicitly challenge the psychologists’ belief that Jonathan is “not vulnerable” (management plan) and can successfully cope with pressure to return to school by stating that Jonathan has “shown signs of tearfulness, crying and becoming withdrawn as well as distressed” throughout the intervention and that this constitutes “emotional trauma” that they wish to discontinue: “We do not wish to subject him to any more emotional trauma, as has been apparent during the past two months”. The letter also reasserts Anna’s (and perhaps Ron’s) understanding of Jonathan as ‘depressed’, stating that Jonathan has indicated school makes him “feel depressed” and that “His depression seems to have eased somewhat” (around the time the letter was written).

Anna and Ron do not indicate in their letter any intention of complying with the psychologists’ treatment plan for managing Jonathan’s school resistance but instead outline their own ‘management plan’ for Jonathan that reflects Anna’s (and perhaps Ron’s) values and beliefs. These include the belief that Jonathan is highly stressed and needs support and gentle treatment: “We only want to find an amicable solution to allow him to continue learning in a calm, peaceful environment”. The belief that forcing children to go to school does not work and is “not right” (Anna’s interview): “The only way we could get him there is by force, which we do not wish to do, as we would rather he went co-operatively and willingly”. The belief that the family is not the ‘problem’ and is capable of meeting Jonathan’s needs and providing a healthy learning environment for him: “[recently, while being taught at home] he has shown more positive behaviour and attitude and has been helpful at home. He is willing to continue with a daily learning routine”. And the belief in a holistic approach to education that recognises the need for Jonathan to be happy, healthy and relaxed in order to learn: “his father is going to take him to golf lessons with the view to joining a club...which Jonathan is very happy about. He intends to do other sports such as

cycling, swimming and ice-skating, which he enjoyed recently”. Finally, in the closing sentence of the letter, Anna and Ron request from the doctor a “medical certificate or statement verifying [Jonathan’s] inability to continue at school”. Hence, they are effectively asking the doctor to validate their understanding and constitution of Jonathan as genuinely ‘sick’ and unable to cope with school attendance. Anna’s success at positioning her son clearly within the psychiatric discourse as ‘mentally ill’ and requiring a break from school may be indicated in the doctor’s certificate that, while stopping short of saying that Jonathan is *unable* to attend school, is consistent with Anna’s perspective, indicating that Jonathan is being home schooled because he has “features of a school phobia” and “separation anxiety”.

Another of Anna’s actions that can be read as resistance to therapeutic authority is her physical altering of the Burnside report. Anna wrote on her copy of the Burnside report ‘corrections’ to the psychologists’ text³⁹. This can be understood as an attempt to reposition herself as the ‘expert’ regarding Jonathan—and to write back in her knowledge and meanings omitted or obscured by the psychologists in their report. For instance, the psychologists quote Anna describing Jonathan as “literally collapsing on his return home from school”. Anna has crossed out the word ‘collapsing’ and replaced it with “tearful/withdrew into his room”. While this may seem insignificant, it does put a less emotive and more credible spin on Anna’s statement hence, perhaps, giving it more authority. At the same place in the text, the psychologists’ state that as a consequence of Jonathan “literally collapsing”, Anna “considered that Jonathan couldn’t cope emotionally with attending school”. However, Anna writes: “We encouraged him to continue and he attended after Jan 31st”. Anna is perhaps trying to emphasis that she had *really* tried to return Jonathan to school and had not immediately, emotively or flippantly decided that school was just too much for her son after one emotional outburst.

At another point in the letter, Anna puts an asterisk above the psychologists’ comment that she “did not want to physically manoeuvre Jonathan to school”. She writes in the margin: “not advised by the doctor, the teacher, the psychologist⁴⁰ and the phobic trust”. Here Anna draws on the authority of the (other) ‘experts’ involved in Jonathan’s case to

³⁹ I am not sure if this was done for my benefit or at the time that Anna received the report.

⁴⁰ The “psychologist” in this case is almost certainly David Brown, the SES (now GSE) psychologist involved with Jonathan’s case. Anna indicates in her interview with me that David Brown had advised against the use of force with Jonathan. As discussed in chapter four, David Brown believes that force is inappropriate in cases of ‘genuine anxiety’.

legitimate and justify her decision not to use rapid return or forced attendance methods. Anna has also underlined a section of the report that refers to Jonathan's "changed eating habits". She has written in the margin "during last year also lost 4kgs". This piece of information that is not contained within (or has been omitted from) the report is meaningful for Anna because it indicates that Jonathan's problem is genuine, serious and taking a toll on his health. Hence, he is really 'sick' not just being 'willful'. The belief that Jonathan's health is suffering because of his 'anxiety' (and the pressure on him to return to school) informs and justifies Anna's decision (stated in her interview) to "act more as a mother rather than as a teacher", that is, to put Jonathan's happiness and health before the need for a school return: "the first thing was his happiness, then his health and well-being, and then his education" (Anna's interview). In this regard she parts ways with Burnside, who see Jonathan's best chances for health and happiness as dependent upon him being successfully reintegrated into the school system, and aligns herself ideologically with the home schooling movement: "the home-schooling group believe that [children must be happy and comfortable to learn] passionately too".

It is interesting to note that, despite Anna's apparent resistance to Burnside's attempts to position and treat Jonathan within the behavioural discourse as physically and emotionally capable of returning to school but, resistant for a number of reasons including Anna's anxiety and ambivalence, Ron's work commitments, family stress, etc, Anna seems to understand the Burnside psychologists as helpful and collaborative: "they were helpful in talking to Jonathan but we couldn't get him to go back to school". At the same time, Anna clearly came to question whether therapy was in fact in her son's best interests: "He was not coping with all these strange people asking him questions over and over [laughs]. It was quite sort of emotionally draining". She seems to realise that Jonathan cannot be both a 'school refuser' receiving psychological help at Burnside and a 'happy', 'healthy', 'normal' boy: "I'd like closure on the medical visits as soon as possible to enable [Jonathan] to move on and get on with life in a settled way. Jonathan is getting tired of all the questions" (Anna's personal record).

I have argued elsewhere that it is in the interests of the modern state to procure the commitment of selves who have deviated from the norm, to those behaviours and values supported by the authorities, using methods that avoid the risk of provoking rebellion through

direct and obvious shows of force and coercion. Jonathan's case demonstrates the dangers of using overt shows of force to try and control individuals. M's authoritarian approach gave Jonathan and Anna something very concrete to resist. Rapid return and forced attendance became objects of direct physical resistance for Jonathan and a more ideological resistance for Anna, while more subtle techniques for shaping thoughts and behaviour (e.g. modelling confidence, peer pressure, parental training) were not understood and experienced as aversive or confrontational, and hence did not provoke direct rebellion. Jonathan resisted being taken to school by M by refusing to come out of his room and running away if he knew she was coming to the house. He resisted being locked out of the house by walking up to the local shops (thus thwarting M's attempts to eliminate any possible non-school sources of diversion or entertainment during school hours and causing enough concern to ensure that he would not be locked out again). Anna resisted M's intervention on the first day by calling a halt to the procedure when Jonathan became highly distressed and it was clear that physical force would be necessary to get him out of his room. She resisted the 'lock out' technique by returning to the house after three hours (instead of staying away for six hours, i.e. the length of the school day): "I was [at the shops] for probably three hours. I didn't want to stay six hours. I thought, you know, I didn't want to spend the whole day down there".

Jonathan's movement from 'school refuser' to 'home schooler' to 'school attender' demonstrates the efficiency of modern power to rehabilitate individuals and reincorporate them into normative social institutions without having to rely on coercion and force. If we understand home schooling as sometimes functioning as a technology for governing and reforming individuals, then we may see Jonathan's home schooling as a very efficient means of restoring Jonathan to 'normality'. Jonathan did not escape the disciplinary mechanisms of schooling by being home schooled. He still studied subjects from textbooks, followed a timetable, sat exams, attended classes and was closely monitored, evaluated and compared with his peers by his mother who, it could be argued, acted in lieu of the state—exercising a much more constant surveillance over her son than school ever could. This is evident, for example, in Anna's decision to have Jonathan participate in the Australasian Schools Competitions. This meant that Jonathan sat exams that allowed Anna to evaluate his progress compared with a large number of 'normal' school children. The exam papers were marked

and sent back to parents with detailed information about their child's performance and abilities:

...they don't just give you a number and say it's such-and-such percent. They'll tell you the strengths and weaknesses of your child. So you know which areas you should be focusing more on. That same competition is done in schools as well...that's one way of knowing that you're sort of on the path, you're doing the same curriculum work as what they're doing in schools.

While Anna appeared to be the one controlling Jonathan's education and lifestyle as a home schooler, in fact, Anna was caught in a kind of metaphysical panopticon constructed by the state. The Panopticon was a type of prison building that Foucault (1979) refers to, designed by Jeremy Bentham in 1785 (although never built). It consisted of a tower surrounded by a ring-shaped building composed of cells, each containing an inmate who was permanently visible to the 'invisible' guard in the tower. That is, it was designed to be constructed in such a way that inmates could not know whether they were being observed at any particular moment. In this way, "surveillance is permanent in its effects, even if it is discontinuous in its action" (Foucault, 1979, p.201). The perception of unremitting surveillance by prison authorities would develop in the inmate the ability to constantly monitor his or her *own* behaviour, rendering him/her docile and eliminating the need for force (McHoul & Grace, 1993). Anna was firmly fixed within the gaze of the Education Review Office (ERO), and although ERO never visited in body (and was therefore truly the 'invisible' guard), this was in a sense both immaterial and rendered unnecessary as the knowledge that ERO *could* visit at any time and hold Anna accountable for how Jonathan had been spending his time, caused her to carefully monitor Jonathan's time, activities and learning and call herself constantly to account as his 'teacher':

Well, I thought if the ERO come, I'd have to be accountable, you know. They might say, "What's he done for maths? And what's he done for language?"...what I did every day, I wrote down what he did...that was me being accountable for what I'm doing...I mean, you're committed to doing the best you can...so that's my diary there.

The home school in this case did not just function as a kind of 'disciplinary block', that is, an institution in which disciplinary punishment techniques were used to systematically adjust Jonathan's "abilities and resources, relationships of communication, and power relationships" (Marshall & Marshall, 1997, p.132), but also as a means for Jonathan to work on reconstructing a 'better' self, a self who was independent, confident, socially competent, healthy and self-controlled. This self would desire 'normality': "he

seemed eager [to return to school]. He seemed quite eager to fit it” (Anna). It would want to take advantage of school opportunities and resources (such as specialised science equipment): “Learning for him is not continually learning out of a book, but is visual and tactile, involving more doing which helps understanding, especially in science, etc.”⁴¹. It would prepare itself for reintegration into school: “he decided to learn the periodic table before he went [back to school]” (Anna). And it would function at school as a motivated, responsible, independent, sociable and self-monitoring student:

...he says to me, “I don’t want to miss school, Mum...I don’t want to be late for school”...he loves school now. And his report was really good...he’s quite happy. He’s got mates and he’s flat out every weekend now, socialising...as a student, he does his work conscientiously, seventy-five percent of his work he starts early. (Anna)

In this way, home schooling can be understood as producing a more profound normalisation of Jonathan than all the therapeutic methods used by the professionals, because it functioned to bring Jonathan gently and willingly into a place from where the desire to be a ‘normal’ school attender appeared to arise.

Despite Jonathan’s resistance to some aspects of therapy, certain elements of the psychiatric/psychological discourses have seemingly been successfully transmitted and internalised. Jonathan comes to take responsibility for his school resistance and constructs his aversion to school as ‘a loss of confidence’, which “required him to build his confidence back up”⁴². The activities that Jonathan engaged in as a home schooler can be understood as ‘therapeutic’ and ‘remedial’ in that they were not primarily about learning, but were undertaken for the specific purpose of building up Jonathan’s confidence and preparing (or repairing) him for ‘normal’ life. For example, Jonathan makes a connection between the need to ‘build confidence’ and his involvement as a home schooler in structured activities with other children: “[Jonathan stated that] to increase his confidence he liked working in small groups, e.g. at woodwork class, and enjoyed sports and physical activities e.g. YMCA sports”⁴³. Similarly, Anna indicates that Jonathan’s involvement in ‘extra-curricular’ home schooling activities was intended as a ‘confidence building’ activity that would prepare him “to face whatever’s ahead”: “I really do believe in lots of extra-curricular things for

⁴¹ ‘Jonathan’s comments on home-schooling’ recorded by Anna. Personal communication, July 15, 2003.

⁴² See footnote 11.

⁴³ See footnote 11.

them...Because that all helps with their confidence. Like all the time he was being home schooled, he did cycling and running”

Anna’s approach to home schooling her son is essentially therapeutic and it is possible to understand Anna as taking up where the psychologists left off regarding Jonathan’s therapeutic management back into the school system. Anna’s ‘management plan’ is aimed at making it possible for Jonathan to cope with school attendance and to return to school willingly through building up his confidence and improving his social, academic and physical skills. That Anna always had as her aim Jonathan’s willing return to school was clearly evident. She told the Burnside psychologists in their follow-up session with the family to review Jonathan’s progress that “she was continuing to encourage Jonathan to attend a high school next year but was not going to be forceful with Jonathan regarding the issue” (progress report). She also indicated during my discussions with her that she would frequently encourage Jonathan to imagine going back to school, being with his friends and enjoying school activities.

The woodwork class seems to have been pivotal in providing an appropriate location for Jonathan’s therapeutic work on the self to commence, that is, for him to work on ‘building up his confidence’. It can be understood as a kind of miniature, friendlier school—a training ground for Jonathan to relearn the skills of being a successful school attender. It was here that Anna and Jonathan sought to address Jonathan’s school aversion through the informal application of a behavioural technique called ‘graded exposure’ (i.e. progressive exposure to a feared object or situation):

The first time I took him he was in the car, and he wouldn’t get out of the car...the next week...we got out of the car...we walked up towards the classroom...On the third attempt, he said, “Can we go a bit earlier”...’cause I think he wanted to go in there and meet the teacher when there was no one else...So on the third attempt...he got right into the classroom...so the next week he was, “Can we go to into woodwork”. (Anna)

While Anna and Jonathan were perhaps not consciously using behavioural methods to modify Jonathan’s feelings and conduct, it could be argued that the value of ‘exposure’ and the technique of systematic desensitisation had been transmitted to Anna and Jonathan by M and the Burnside psychologists. While Jonathan rebelled against the use of rapid or gradual exposure as a method for overcoming his aversion to school (when external force was applied), he appears to have internalised a therapeutic understanding of exposure as necessary for his recovery from ‘school phobia’ —“he knew he had to face [his fear of

school]]” (Anna)—and applies the technique to himself with positive results (i.e. he is able to attend and enjoy woodwork class): “Jonathan has attended a woodwork class...was proud of his accomplishments there and was looking forward to participating in this class next term” (progress review).

Summary

This chapter has presented four different accounts of Jonathan’s school resistance. I have attempted here to understand my research data as ‘narratives’ that advance a certain version of the social world and function in ways that not only describe but also actively construct and explain social phenomena like school resistance. This way of approaching Jonathan’s case indicates how different representations of school resistance serve very different functions and point to very different responses. Anna’s account is a realist narrative in which Anna comes to the gradual realisation that her son has ‘school phobia’, an anxiety disorder that prevents him from attending school. This narrative is intended to help others in similar situations by drawing attention to the ‘real’ suffering of school-phobic children and the need for better understanding of this debilitating disorder within the community. This account suggests that the solution to school phobia is for the vulnerable, frightened and insecure child to be treated in a gentle and compassionate way that builds his confidence and self-esteem, giving him the strength to want to return to school.

The second account constructs Jonathan as manifesting a ‘specific phobia’ of school, that is, an irrational anxiety response that is focused on (and largely limited to) the school situation. Within this account, Jonathan is understood as perfectly capable of coping with school but unwilling because of unpleasant feelings of anxiety he experiences in association with school attendance. Consistent and firm management of Jonathan’s ‘avoidant’ behaviour through requiring him to face and deal with school is understood as the path to recovery from this perspective. A part of the work in this chapter involves exploring the ways Jonathan’s school resistance was managed by educational and health professionals within the New Zealand context. As this account indicates, Jonathan’s school resistance was understood and managed by professionals in concordance with dominant psychiatric/psychological meanings.

The next account provides a critical perspective on this case that sees Jonathan as a victim of institutionalised schooling, laws that require and enforce compulsory school attendance, and misguided and often punitive and damaging therapeutic practices carried out with school refusers. This account is concerned with disrupting the dominant assumption that Jonathan's anxiety about school is irrational and that being pressured or forced to face school is therapeutic. From this perspective, Jonathan needs the care and support of adults while he is unable to cope with school and should be protected from stress and pressure until he has fully recovered from his school-induced traumas.

The final account approaches Jonathan's school phobia/school refusal as a social construct and allows for an examination of the discursive production of Jonathan within medical and psychological documents and practices. This account challenges a clear-cut interpretation of Jonathan's case in terms of professionals possessing power and using it to victimise the vulnerable school refuser and its family. It also provides an alternative reading of home schooling that suggests that in Jonathan's case home schooling may have served a variety of functions (to do with rehabilitation, normalisation and governance) beyond simply providing Jonathan with an educational alternative to school that he found acceptable, enjoyable and helpful. I would suggest that these functions of the home schooling process remained hidden from Jonathan and his mother, who assumed, like most home schoolers, that home schooling is necessarily an emancipating and power-free process because it takes place outside formal institutions and is not dependent upon the knowledge and skills of 'experts'. In the next chapter, I continue my analysis of the multiple discursive and social functions of home schooling through an examination of what home schooling means (and can mean) to and for mothers with school-resistant children.

CHAPTER SEVEN

Mothering the School-Resistant Child

In this chapter I focus primarily on mothers. I am interested in the ways mothers understand and practise mothering when their child's attendance at school becomes seriously problematic. I begin this chapter looking at the idea of the 'good mother' as a social construct. I then present the school-resistant child as a 'problem' that the 'good mother' must resolve if she is to maintain her positive self-image and public status. I discuss two ways mothers may position themselves in response to the problem of school resistance and discuss these positions in terms of the mother's 'defence' of her maternal competency. I then turn my attention to 'natural mothering' discourse and examine how this ideology intersects with and informs the 'nurturing' approach taken by the mothers I spoke with towards managing their school-resistant children. Next, I examine the discursive positionings of the Margolin (1998) mothers (introduced in chapter three) and the mothers I interviewed, and consider how these different positionings informed and shaped the mothers' experiences of school resistance and home schooling. I discuss how those mothers who embraced home schooling as a legitimate solution to the school 'problem' were able to constitute themselves as the 'good mothers' of 'functional' children, and thus successfully defend their maternal identity. The chapter ends by pointing to the potential dangers of uncritically taking up natural-mothering and home-schooling discourses that constitute power in terms of relations of dominance and autonomy and claim to be 'liberating' and 'empowering'.

It is not my intention to provide a gendered analysis of school resistance, home schooling or of home schooling the school-resistant child, although in this chapter I will suggest that schooling, home schooling and mothering the school-resistant child are tied up with ideologies of 'good mothering', 'natural mothering' and 'intensive mothering', and with a long tradition of women's involvement in and responsibility for childcare and education. There is a wide literature on mothers and schooling/education which I have not addressed (e.g. David, 1993; David, West & Ribbens, 1994; Griffith & Smith, 2005; Luttrell, 1997). While this work may be of interest to the reader, I have chosen through my examination and discussion of the Margolin study to retain a strong focus on mothering the school-resistant

child—a task which I think raises some unique, interesting and challenging problems for mothers.

The Evolution of the Mother: From Indifference to Intensive Mothering

Our babies charm us so utterly that it doesn't matter about the agonies they put us through. We are caught up in a bubble of baby magic...that sort of magic is the preserve of people who earn it...who do the hard graft of broken nights, tired days and endless mess... (*Little Treasures*, June/July 2002, p.7)

The above quote is one representation of the 'good mother' produced by *Little Treasures*, a popular New Zealand parenting magazine. Most people (especially mothers) can easily describe the 'good mother'. While the concept of the 'good mother' is always actively constituted within discourse, as this quote suggests, in Western societies (and perhaps elsewhere) the ideal mother is often portrayed as someone whose enjoyment of mothering overrides the disadvantages and stresses it places on her. This is a traditional notion that has persisted throughout decades of social changes (see Ehrenreich, 2005). The 'good mother' is selflessly devoted to her children and puts their health, happiness and welfare before all else.

While the good mother's selfless devotion may seem obvious to contemporary Westerners, Badinter (1981) argues that it was not always so. According to Badinter's account of maternal attitudes and behaviour during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries in Europe, the young child born into an aristocratic or middle-class family was considered a problem rather than a pleasure: "Children interfered not only with the mother's conjugal life but also with her amusements. To busy oneself with a child was neither enjoyable nor chic" (p.70). Badinter argues that women of this period did not feel guilty about failing to look after their own children or consider themselves to be 'bad mothers' if their children got sick or died. In fact, maternal sacrifice and being interested in children was considered unnecessary and unfashionable:

All these women had clear consciences; social life was considered a necessity for women of a certain rank...According to the worldly idea of the period nothing was less fashionable than to "seem to love one's children too much" and to give up one's precious time for them. (p.71)

Badinter's (1981) account of pre-nineteenth-century European maternal attitudes may be unduly harsh. Her purpose is to argue against the existence of a biological 'maternal

instinct' and she does this by portraying mothers as often indifferent, preoccupied, neglectful and even hostile towards their offspring: "The young infant, an annoyance to his parents, was placed in the hands of a hired nurse until his weaning. But the mother did not stop there, for she rejected children of all ages" (p.70). A very different account of parent-child relationships comes from historian Wrightson (1982). He argues that most infants were nursed at home and by their mothers—as advised by the moralists and doctors of the period—and that few mothers would have considered any alternative. Poor, illegitimate and orphan children were sometimes cruelly neglected, but Wrightson argues that this was considered inhumane even at the time. Furthermore, Wrightson claims that the majority of parents were concerned for their children, took pains over their education and were prepared to invest financially in them: "most parents appear to have done their utmost to provide for their children's physical welfare, to feed and clothe them while still in their charge and to provide for their maintenance when possible long afterwards" (p.108). The discourses surrounding motherhood, including Badinter's and Wrightson's very conflicting accounts of mothering in pre-nineteenth-century Europe are, of course, social and cultural productions. These maternal discourses do particular work at particular times and can be seen as both constraining and liberating for women.

Notions of total altruism have been inherent in the ideal of the 'good mother' since at least the turn of the twentieth century, when mothering was elevated to a 'noble calling' and full-time commitment (Ehrenreich, 2005). But good mothering now involves more than giving up one's own needs and wants in order to feed, clothe and watch over children. Contemporary ideals of maternal altruism assume that the child desires and requires "deep, exclusive and full attention" (Coward, 1992, p.81). The child needs an adult who is there just for them, to "listen and hear and play" (Coward, 1992, p.81). The perceived need to stimulate the child (which may start prior to birth) through providing it with new and varied experiences and *quality* (child-centred) time with adults, commits mothers to a particular type of mothering which is constant and intensive. Social science researchers, Croghan and Miell (1998), cite Dingwall, Eekelaar and Murray as arguing that "mothering has traditionally been associated with high expectations of individual maternal responsibility for the well-being and functioning of children within 'normal' family settings" (p.446). A 'good mother' must manage her family environment in order to facilitate her child's personal

growth, even if she is not physically present all of the time. This involves, among other things, creating a nurturing environment, finding time for child-centred talk and play, developing the child's self-esteem and, perhaps most importantly, organising and facilitating children's education (Coward, 1992). Feminist researchers Stambach and David (2005) state that "the ideology of intensive mothering⁴⁴ has grown more extensive and elaborate in education, where the trend towards mothers' participation in their children's schooling is undeniable" (p.1646). At the same time, women have new and extended economic and professional responsibilities within the family and community.

Because home schooling is not the norm, it is often treated as suspect and perceived as an implied criticism of those parents and educators who school. McAlevey (1995), a New Zealand researcher who investigated the educational perspectives of home schoolers in Otago and Canterbury, states that "In challenging the system, home schoolers may also unwittingly be challenging many of the ideas about education held by others. In reaction to this other people may turn home schoolers into 'others'" (p.146). However, as well as being seen as 'deviant' (because it differs from the norm), home schooling can be seen as a logical extension of 'good mothering'. Indeed, I would argue that this *is* often how home schooling mothers understand and justify taking their children home to educate. In this way, home schooling mothers position themselves and their educational practice within existing frameworks of 'good mothering'.

One of the home-schooling mothers participating in my study sent me this description of a visit to the beach with her son. It is an excellent example of how the ideals of 'good mothering' can be enacted through home schooling. Good mothering and home schooling blend into one in this story and are portrayed as idyllic and deeply satisfying. Such a construction points to the conclusion that the pleasure associated with mothering/home schooling outweighs any personal sacrifices a woman might have to make and thus reproduces traditional notions of maternal altruism:

A GLORIOUS AUTUMN DAY

This Thursday, (12/6/03) I dropped the twins at kindy and Jamie and I headed down to Sandy Bay, which was exquisite on this sparkling autumn day. The air was cold and crisp, the sun

⁴⁴ The 'ideology of intensive mothering' here refers to the notion that it is concentrated parenting on the part of mothers rather than fathers that leads to healthy, well-adjusted families (and communities).

brilliant and the water was sparkling like a million diamonds. We ambled along the path, noting birds and plants and made our way onto the beach. We explored the rocky shelves encrusted with barnacles and little blue mussels, and peeked under the overhang to see the red beadlet anemones [sic] hanging like little raspberry jellies... We collected shells, pebbles and dried seaweed to make a seashore collage back at home. We discussed erosion and read the signs about riparian planting to preserve the stream banks and wetland habitat... As we were heading back, I realised all over again why I made the decision to educate my son at home. I would not have missed out on today for all the 'time to myself' in the world! (Karen)

The Problem Posed for the 'Good Mother' by the School-Resistant Child

Mothers with 'problem' children may be under suspicion from the time that their child starts to exhibit 'abnormal' behaviour. In the following excerpt the mother of a child (later diagnosed with autism) describes her feeling that the staff at her son's preschool are watching her, judging her maternal competency and lifestyle choices, and blaming her for her son's difficulties:

Everyone in the school appeared to be preoccupied with the fact that I was leaving my child in a nursery school as I went off to a library to research a book, and with the fact that the child's father or a babysitter sometimes dropped him off at the school or picked him up after his three hours there. Did they think that because I was an English teacher, I was putting undue pressure on my child to speak, or that because I spent several hours a day in the library, I was neglecting my child? Could I have been imagining all this? Imagining also the pursed lip, the head turned aside, the glance away from me to Paul, then uneasily back to me again? But I knew they never asked these same questions of Paul's father. (Ladd-Taylor & Umansky, 1998, p.221)

In the case of school resistance, as indicated elsewhere, suspicion may be particularly intense owing to the well-entrenched historic connection between school phobia/school refusal and maternal pathology. The ways in which school resistance is discursively constructed within mainstream society often function to position the mothers of children who resist school very negatively. Such a position may have profound personal and social consequences for these women as Croghan and Miell (1998) indicate:

Because of the way in which female identity has become closely associated with women's identities as mothers and because of the strong expectations surrounding women's responsibility as mothers, the designation of 'bad mother' is likely to carry with it not only social stigma but also a profound threat to the self-esteem and identity of these women. (p.445)

While all mothers may feel guilt and frustration at not being able to meet culturally produced and perhaps unrealistic maternal ideals, mothers with 'abnormal' children must feel this more intensely and may find that they are forced to defend and justify themselves as

mothers. Croghan and Miell (1998) state that the insinuation of 'bad mothering' "carries with it the connotation of a 'spoiled identity'⁴⁵...and as a result is likely to be strenuously resisted" (p.445-446). Paul's mother (quoted above) writes: "But more than anything else, of course, I wanted to be recognised as a *good mother*" (Ladd-Taylor & Umansky, 1998, p.222). In their study involving fourteen women living in the United Kingdom who had suffered childhood abuse and were now identified as 'problem mothers' by social services, Croghan and Miell found that the mothers actively employed strategies to resist the inference that they were 'bad mothers' and "parry the assault upon their self-esteem" associated with this designation, for instance, by "offering examples of their exemplary parenting and by constructing and positioning themselves within a framework of 'normal' mothering" (p.450).

A study by Prout (1988) reveals the importance of child health to a mother's ability to understand and present herself as a 'good mother'. For mothers with 'school aged' children, the school is one point where the internal workings of the family come under the gaze of authorities. Prout argues that the responsibility for taking actions to maintain and restore child health generally rests with parents, and with mothers in particular. Similarly, Prout suggests that it is usually the mother's responsibility to ensure that children get to school, and that a child's regular attendance at school (or otherwise) can be understood as a visible measure of maternal competence (p.783). The maternal claim to having "'normal healthy children' emerges as an important index of and resource for maintaining one's public identity as a good mother" (p.782).

Prout's (1988) ethnographic study was carried out in an English primary school in a predominantly working-class, white neighbourhood. Because this study involved working-class English mothers and was conducted nearly twenty years ago, we must be careful about applying Prout's findings to contemporary New Zealand mothers. Nevertheless, the study does provide some interesting insights into the difficulties mothers face in negotiating and managing their children's sickness and sick absence from school while at the same time producing themselves as 'good mothers'. It also points to the difficulties that school resistance necessarily poses for mothers wishing to maintain a private and public image of themselves as competent.

⁴⁵ Croghan and Miell (1998) have taken this term from Goffman (1963).

The importance of child health to ‘good mothering’ became evident to Prout (1988) when he was attempting to recruit mothers for his study. Mothers responded by expressing an interest in and willingness to participate in the study, but suggested that their families would be of little interest to Prout as their children were rarely sick or “just normally healthy children” (p.770). It turned out however that the children in these families actually exhibited frequent symptoms of illness and the mothers themselves later came to admit that managing their children’s health was an ongoing and intensive responsibility. Prout suggests that the mothers’ declarations that their children were hardly ever sick served the function of establishing and maintaining their view of themselves as ‘good mothers’ (and communicating this to the researcher). He felt that the mothers’ involvement in his study was dependent upon his implicit agreement “that they had normally healthy children, like all good mothers do” (p.770).

Prout (1988) found that the mothers in his study were concerned with managing “the impression of themselves” (p.783) that the school and teachers had with regards to their competency as mothers responsible for providing ‘appropriate’ health care for their children. Some of the mothers expressed a sense of being under surveillance by the school. They felt that teachers were judging and evaluating their performance as mothers and that if their child was sick more often than other children, teachers would see this as a sign of maternal incompetence or neglect. They went to some lengths to detect “feigning” (p.771) and to encourage children to be “stoical” (p.776) in the face of minor complaints. At the same time, mothers feared that if they sent their children to school when they were really sick, they would be seen as uncaring and irresponsible. Prout’s research indicated that mothers are placed in a paradoxical situation of needing to represent their child to the outside world as healthy and robust in order to maintain a positive maternal image, and at the same time having to interpret and manage a stream of child symptoms that are understood as potentially indicating a real threat to the child who is culturally constructed as ‘vulnerable’.

Child illness or deviancy requires that any mother who wishes to maintain her status as a ‘good mother’ has to mount a defence of her competence (Prout, 1988). School resisters are frequently understood as both ‘sick’ and ‘deviant’ children and therefore mothers of school resisters may need to “execute complex manoeuvres in defence of their claim to be a ‘good mother’” (Prout, 1988, p.783). In this chapter I look at two very different approaches

that mothers of school resisters take to understanding their children's problematic school behaviour, and defending their maternal identity. The first involves the mother in constructing herself as a 'responsible mother' who accepts that her child's behaviour is pathological, seeks and complies with conventional therapeutic treatments, and remains committed to helping her child achieve 'normal' school attendance. This is the path taken by the three mothers who participated in the Margolin (1998) study described in chapter three. The second approach is that taken by the mothers I interviewed, who have all (to a greater or lesser extent) resisted dominant meanings of school resistance, withdrawn their children from school and positioned themselves as 'good mothers' (of various types) within marginal critical, home schooling and child-rearing discourses. I am characterising these mothers as 'nurturing' because they consider their children's emotional security to be of paramount importance⁴⁶. I have outlined below the main beliefs associated with these two discursive positionings, drawn from my reading of the Margolin data and my interviews with home-schooling mothers.

The 'responsible mother':

- Attributes school resistance to her child's personality and/or family dysfunction/stress.
- Understands school resistance as a disorder or disease requiring professional treatment.
- Does not consider school (as an institution) to be a problem or 'the' problem.
- Retains her 'school faith'—does not question the assumption that a 'school-aged' child should be in school—school is 'good' and 'necessary'.
- Retains a belief in helping professionals and institutions as the primary, proper or only source of help for the child.
- Sees her role primarily as getting the child to school and accessing/cooperating with systems and professionals.
- Equates school resistance with abnormality and long-term detrimental consequences.
- Understands all nonattendance, including home schooling, as failure.

The 'nurturing mother':

- Believes that school and education are not the same thing.

⁴⁶ Margolin (1998) uses the terms 'responsible mother' and 'nurturing mother' to refer to the internal dialogue of one particular mother with a 'school-avoidant' child. It is important to note that although I have adopted Margolin's terms, I am talking about discursive positionings not 'conflicting inner voices'.

- Attributes school resistance at least in part to the child's negative experiences within the school system.
- Understands school resistance as a natural fear or avoidance response triggered by an aversive or threatening situation.
- Is critical of school or aspects of the school system.
- Places a high priority on the child feeling secure (in order to learn, develop, etc.).
- Decides that conventional interventions and advice is not working—breaks ties with the professionals—gains faith in her own ability to know what is best for her child (maternal intuition).
- Understands home schooling as the best (or only) solution for the child.

Defending the 'Good Mother'

Margolin (1998) interviewed three American mothers with children she classified as 'school avoidant' (a term which Margolin treats as synonymous with traditional notions of school phobia) for her PhD research at New York University. The mothers in the Margolin study are what I am calling 'responsible mothers' who assert their claim to maternal competence from within the dominant psychiatric/psychological paradigm. Each mother was interviewed in person twice by Margolin and contacted on other occasions by phone. Their children, at the time of interview, were eight, twelve and fourteen years old. The eight-year-old, 'Caroline', had been persuaded to return to school with the assistance of the school psychologist. Once Caroline had returned to regular school attendance, her mother 'Barbara' purportedly had a mental breakdown and realised that she was "clinically depressed" (p.104) as a result of stress. Twelve-year-old 'Alex' was attending a special class for school-avoidant children. His mother, 'Coretta', was hopeful that the worst of Alex's problems were over, after an eighteen-month struggle with educational authorities to have Alex accepted into the special class. Fourteen-year-old 'Jim Jr.' was still resisting school, complaining of various physical ailments and had been prescribed anti-depressants. His mother, 'Renee', had enrolled him in a special programme for school refusers within a mainstream public school.

The Margolin (1998) mothers can be seen to mount a defence of their maternal competence in two respects. Firstly, they emphasise their determination to return their

children to school and to find the ‘right’ help for them under extremely difficult circumstances and in the face of repeated failures and setbacks. Coretta(M)⁴⁷ states: “He could cry, scream, throw a tantrum. I didn’t care. I let him know he could do whatever he needed to, but he was going to school...I never gave up” (p.69). Margolin was impressed by the mothers’ single-minded and increasingly desperate efforts to return their children to school and obtain professional assistance. She concludes that the mothers did not fit the stereotypical personality type described in the school phobia/school refusal literature and were not condoning or facilitating their children’s non-attendance in order to meet their own emotional needs:

...they did not wallow in self-pity or passively accept nonattendance as an option, but rather applied their efforts and energy to help their children in a variety of proactive ways...[they] were persistent in their efforts to get their children to school...even in the face of their children’s increasingly desperate and frightening behavior. (p.147-148)

Secondly, the Margolin (1998) mothers defended their claim to being ‘good mothers’ by indicating that they were not responsible for causing their children’s school avoidance. Barbara(M) argued that a specific trigger within the family had initiated Caroline’s problems. This was a fight between Caroline’s father and his brother, who was also his business partner. The feud continued for three years during which Caroline’s uncle terrorised the family. Coretta(M) suggested that Alex’s temperament predisposed him to developing difficulties at school. She indicated that he had a problem with anxiety from birth, although she did not fully realise this until he had to attend school. Renee(M) was unsure why Jim Jr. started resisting school. In her conversations with Margolin, Renee(M) constructs her husband as a highly dysfunctional individual and inept parent, and suggests that perhaps his two-year addiction to cocaine may have been the catalyst for their son’s school avoidance.

The Margolin (1998) mothers all mobilised dominant psychiatric/psychological meanings to make sense of their children’s problems and positioned themselves within these discourses as ‘responsible mothers’ who wanted professional help and accepted that their children must return to school. Hence, while they may have felt like ‘bad mothers’—“I felt like such a failure as a mother, that his childhood was ruined” (p.69)—for having a child who would not attend school and may have sought to resist this social position, they did so within the dominant psychological paradigm. The same cannot be said for mothers who decide to

⁴⁷ To help distinguish the Margolin mothers from the mothers I interviewed, I will henceforth place an (M) beside their names.

home school their school-resistant child. The ‘nurturing mother’ may find it more difficult to justify and defend her ‘unconventional’ actions and present herself to the world as a ‘good mother’. For the mothers I spoke with, the home schooling discourses provided ways of framing school problems and school withdrawal that were experienced as positive and affirming, although they did not necessarily find the transition to, and process of, home schooling a school-resistant child unproblematic and did in some cases feel conflicted about it.. The home schooling discourses that are informed by and inform the critical perspectives discussed in chapter two, locate children’s school (and other) problems in the mainstream education system and construct mothers who do not send their children to school (but make other provisions for their education) as enlightened, caring, responsible and committed, in other words, as ‘good mothers’.

In contrast to the Margolin (1998) mothers, the mothers I spoke with were able to mount a defence of their identity and social position as ‘good mothers’ by using home schooling discourses to critique schooling (or aspects of schooling) and construct learning at home as a positive, enriching and therapeutic activity—a ‘natural’ extension of ‘good mothering’. Thus the ‘nurturing’ mothers, like the ‘responsible mothers’, can be understood as defending their maternal identity by positioning themselves within existing frameworks of ‘good mothering’. Karen explained how exposure to home schooling philosophies and practices lead her to realise what she had always known to be ‘true’, that is, “that the family is the most fantastic learning environment”. This ‘realisation’ allowed Karen to ultimately understand Jamie’s home schooling, not as a last resort or duty, but as the very ‘best’ educational option for him and a “lifestyle” choice for her:

It’s my passion. Like I say, I started out home schooling Jamie because he didn’t like school. And the more I looked into it, the more I found out that here actually, deep down inside, what I believe, is that the family is the most fantastic learning environment.

The ‘nurturing mothers’ adopted three main strategies to managing their “spoiled identity” and dealing with “issues of blame and accountability” (Croghan & Miell, 1998, p.449). The first strategy was to emphasise that the decision to home school arose out of a commitment to their children’s education and well-being. They drew attention to the fact that they were prepared to take a high degree of personal responsibility for ensuring that their children’s ‘needs’ were met. For example, Vicky stressed the enormous amount of time and

effort she devoted to trying to make sure Liam's special educational needs were recognised and catered for by the school:

I paid for an advocate to come in from the ADHD association. I gave them videos. I bought books to leave in the staffroom for them to read. I printed things off the Internet about basic classroom techniques of how to help. I paid for lots of things, like a pro-ed assessment privately...

The second strategy that the mothers used was to argue that home schooling was not an easy option and meant suffering and sacrifice on their part: "it's an easy choice to enroll a child in school and send them there every day. That's the easy path" (Vicky). Thus, they presented their mothering as exemplary in that they were prepared to set their own needs aside for the sake of their children. As the quote below illustrates, the mothers drew attention to the personal, social and financial sacrifices that home schooling entailed:

The time commitment is huge; planning, reading, checking and correcting. It means doing without a second income...I find that I am held far more accountable than I ever would be if she went to school...But for Amanda it was the only option. (Julie)

The last strategy the mothers employed was to describe incredibly positive changes that had occurred in their children as a result of their home schooling efforts. These accounts perhaps provided the most compelling defence of maternal competency as they seemed to 'prove' that the mothers had made the 'right' decision in withdrawing their children from school. The changes in the children apparently brought about by home schooling that were reported by their mothers, are discussed in detail in the next chapter.

Natural Mothering

One ideology that appears to infiltrate the philosophies and practices of some home schoolers, and may provide a possible framework for exploring and understanding the thoughts and feelings of the 'nurturing mothers', is the discourse of natural mothering. 'Natural mothers' are a group of women who reject 'culture' and seek to embrace 'nature'. They enact this ideal through 'holistic' lifestyle practices such as homebirth, extended breastfeeding, family bed (i.e. children sleeping with their parents), eating whole foods, using natural medicines and home schooling. They are suspicious of technology, institutions, consumerism and anything that appears to be in conflict with nature. Natural mothering is about reclaiming authority over mothering from institutions and experts, and bringing about

positive social change through grass-roots practices that are child-centred and earth-friendly. In this way, natural mothers individually and collectively resist mainstream culture (Bobel, 2002).

The Process of Becoming a 'Natural Mother'

Bobel (2002) interviewed 32 American women she labels 'natural mothers' and discusses in her book *The Paradox of Natural Mothering*. She states that the majority of women she spoke to did not become 'natural mothers' overnight. They clearly understood their transformation from conventional, 'mainstream mothers' into alternative, 'natural mothers' as an on-going journey or *process*. This process involved both discovering the 'truth' about conventional living and finding a 'better' alternative. The 'natural mothers' came to see mainstream cultural practices as materialistic, insensitive to individuals and repressive. They believed that they had moved from uncritical conformity to a more sceptical and realistic view of society, and a more balanced, authentic and ethical lifestyle:

Characterizing her evolution from unblinking acceptance of social norms to critical evaluation and blanket skepticism, the natural mother seems almost smug in her self-analysis. She leads the enlightened life, she implies. She has come a long way, and now, proudly, she has arrived...Now less afraid to question, she boldly stands for every principle or practise that operates in the best interest of her family and her planet. (p.105)

For Bobel's (2002) 'natural mothers', the transformation process typically commenced when they had a negative experience (or a series of negative experiences) with 'mainstream culture':

For most, the progression from a typical 'mainstream mom' who patiently subscribes to society's dictates to an 'alternative mom' who 'takes nothing for granted' (as one put it) was a slow evolution marred by a series of disillusioning encounters with mainstream society... (p.126).

The mothers recounted to Bobel their frustrating and disappointing interactions with doctors, school personnel and childcare workers. These encounters were considered educational and revelatory because they led the mothers to question and re-evaluate 'normal' cultural conventions formerly taken for granted and to develop a newfound understanding of what 'good mothering' was all about.

‘Natural Mother’/‘Nurturing Mother’

The mothers I spoke with seemed to draw on natural-mothering ideals and meanings to construct themselves as ‘good mothers’ and to help explain and justify how they came to the decision to home school their school-resistant child, often in the face of social criticism and in defiance of ‘expert’ advice. They shared with the ‘natural mothers’ a feeling-based epistemology, where ultimately the decision to home school was explained in terms of what ‘felt right’ at an instinctual level. In the following excerpt Anna rationalises her decision to home school Jonathan with reference to ‘maternal instincts’ and ‘intuitive knowledge’ located ‘within the heart’. This feeling-based rationale gives her the confidence to withdraw her son from school and teach him herself, even though her mother, sister and the psychologists treating Jonathan had all expressed disapproval and concern regarding home schooling:

...it felt, for me as a mother, very instinctively, that [home schooling] was the right thing to do at the time. That was what [Jonathan] needed, was to feel secure. And it was a very strong instinctive feeling that that was the right thing to do...So I stopped worrying and being anxious, and...I thought, well, I’ll go back to my instincts, and I’ll teach him myself. I went back to my heart, I sort of went into myself and thought, right, well, if this is what he needs, I’ll have to do it. Even though my sister kept saying it’s not the right thing to do, but I thought, it *feels* like it is the right thing...I think you have to sometimes follow your heart.

Karen expresses similar sentiments to Anna when she describes how she made the decision to home school five-year-old Jamie. Again, Karen claims to have ‘searched her heart’ for the ‘right’ answer and appears to have tapped into a instinctual, body-derived wisdom—a ‘gut-feeling’—that convinced her home schooling was ‘right’ for her child. This supposedly intuitive knowledge allowed her to resist the cultural imperative to separate from Jamie and send him off to school. As with Bobel’s (2002) ‘natural mothers’, this knowledge is claimed to be *felt* rather than reasoned, and appears difficult to define or explain:

...that was another thing that was really fundamental in my decision to home school. I just really got that, y’know, when I was really asking me—what, what should I do? And it just sort of came to me, and I thought, yeah—I want him with me for the first seven years.

Elizabeth explains her decision to withdraw Peter from school with reference to ‘maternal intuition’ and the ‘instinctive’ devotion of mothers to their children’s physical and emotional welfare. She emphasises the close bond between mother and child, drawing on the idea of a mother and child being both emotionally and physically connected:

My son, flesh of my flesh, bones of my bones, was unhappy. As a mother, y’know what is needed. You will do what is needed. You have to jump over a twenty-foot raging river to save your son—you will do that. Y’know, that maternal instinct that you’d—the kid was unhappy.

One of the primary areas where natural-mothering ideals and the philosophies and practices of the ‘nurturing mothers’ overlapped was the supreme importance attributed to the child’s sense of security and emotional connectedness. Karen states: “I believe that a child’s probably fundamental right is to feel incredibly secure and very loved”. In contemporary Western societies babies and young children often sleep, sit, play and eat on their own, and many are physically separated from their parents for much of the day and night. Natural-mothering aims to make the child feel safe and secure by responding sensitively to his or her signals of distress or pleasure. Although the ‘nurturing mothers’ were not concerned with ‘natural’ infant care practices (extended breast-feeding, family bed, etc.)—an important aspect of natural mothering—their parenting style often reflected similar values and concerns for their school-resistant children.

The mothers I interviewed interpreted their children’s distress at school as (in part) a sign that they needed to feel more ‘secure’, and understood the family and home as able to provide the kind of nurturing and safe environment that was needed, thus demonstrating a very different understanding of the school resister’s ‘needs’ from that arising out of the dominant psychiatric/psychological paradigm. Karen, for instance, argued that at home Jamie, who was uncomfortable and withdrawn in group situations, found the security and support he needed to practice and improve his social skills:

...the most powerful social environment for a child is their family...he’s actually developing leadership skills with his two younger sisters. He would not develop leadership skills in a school environment, or a mass group environment. He would have become the bottom of the heap. He would have become a withdrawn, remote child.

Most of the mothers had adopted a relatively relaxed approach to home schooling, “just living”, as Karen put it, typical of ‘natural mothers’ and other ‘radical’ home schoolers who are concerned with individual freedom and with resisting the ‘institutionalisation’ of society. They trusted that their children could and would learn all they needed to know without pressure, competition, intensive teaching or structured curriculums and timetables. In some cases, the mothers did not start home schooling in this informal manner but had modified their philosophies and practices after experiencing home schooling, mixing with other home schoolers and, undoubtedly, being exposed to discourses that construct a relaxed,

child-driven, life-based approach to home schooling as the ‘best’ way to foster children’s learning and development. Elizabeth stated that she tried ‘doing school’ (i.e. structured home schooling) for one week and “almost sent the children to school” because she found the experience so “noisy”, “restrictive” and “intense”. Vicky had begun home schooling using Correspondence lessons but at the time of interview stated that she was mostly “unschooling” as Correspondence had proven to be too prescriptive:

...there might be days when we didn’t actually want to do any book work at all, you know. We’re gonna go to the museum or art gallery or whatever...we have quite an eclectic curriculum. There still might be days where we don’t do any bookwork of a formal nature. But we’ll read, you know, everything else around us. So it just gives it that flexibility that we need...we can decide what we’re going to do and how we’re going to do it each day.

It is not surprising that the mothers I spoke with sometimes expressed natural-mothering ideals as many ‘natural mothers’ choose to home school their children and many home schoolers are sympathetic to the natural-mothering philosophy. That is, there is considerable ideological overlap between these two movements. Aspects of natural-mothering philosophies are also circulated via anecdotal discourse, that is, they inform the ways in which we commonly think and talk about mothering (e.g. as a ‘natural’, ‘intuitive’, ‘inherently rewarding’ and ‘sacrificial’ practice). This is evident in Karen’s approach to managing Jamie’s resistance to kindergarten, which was informed by ideas about children needing close, nurturing and highly responsive relationships with their parents in order to feel secure and develop normally, transmitted via her mother:

I suppose I grew up with a very powerful image from my Mum...she would say if you want to grow a big oak tree—do you plant it on a cliff with a gale-force wind, prevailing wind? Or do you plant it in a sheltered place and wait till it’s strong and then take away the shelter? I just grew up hearing that. That if I want a strong child, I don’t just assault them when they’re developing. I protect them and encourage them and foster them while they develop. And then as they gain strength, I can begin to withdraw the structure and support.

Later, Karen read books and attended home schooling courses that confirmed and validated the beliefs and values that her mother had passed on:

I suppose what I’ve read, I mean especially Steve Biddolph, I mean I find his writing very powerful. He talks about the fact that, basically what happens is your child begins to shut down emotionally because...they felt there was this particular place in their life where an adult just said, “It doesn’t matter how much you need me, I can’t be there for you right now”...I just thought, whoa! I suppose what I want is my children to, to hear me saying often enough to them, “If you’re not happy, if you’re not safe, then I will be there for you. And when you feel safe, then you will be ready to face that sort of situation”.

Although the decision to home school a school-resistant child appears to be informed by a variety of discursive influences as well as material circumstances, for most of the mothers in this study, home schooling was understood as an ‘intuitive’ rather than ‘intellectual’ decision. That is, while some mothers credited books and home schooling advocates with naming and expounding dearly held and intuitively felt beliefs—the decision to home school was generally described as a necessary, natural and instinctive response to their child’s specific circumstances and emotional state. This emphasis on feeling (rather than reasoning) your way to what is ‘right’ and ‘natural’ is prominent in natural-mothering discourse.

Another aspect of the ‘natural mother’s’ experience that seemed relevant for understanding the ‘nurturing mothers’ stories was the perception that a process of transformation had taken place that had resulted in a profound shift in perspective. For both groups the transformation process is constructed as involving the mother in making an ideological shift from uncritical and unreflective acceptance of social norms, to embracing an alternative belief system and unconventional practices that she believes are authentic, progressive, ethical, and ‘right’ for her and her children. For both ‘natural mothers’ and ‘nurturing mothers’, the process is understood as ‘illuminating’ and ‘intuitive’, and appears to be initiated and powered by disillusioning experiences with mainstream institutions and the ‘experts’ associated with them.

The transformation process is exemplified by Vicky, who describes how she went from being a very involved ‘school mother’ who never questioned that her ADHD son would attend a mainstream school, to an ‘unschooling mother’ who now believes that the school system is not only ill equipped to deal with children with ‘special needs’ but is “not working” for many children. Vicky describes her attitude towards conventional schooling at the time that she enrolled her son:

Everybody went to kindy—everybody just went on to school...I said...“he’s five, he’s going to go to school and be like everybody else”. And it was a big build-up for the fifth birthday and I just expected that he would go, that we’d get the support we needed because [the school] promised that, you know...we were naive about how the school system even worked. We just went in and thought, Okay, here he is—at school!...we were so focused on school...

After being told by the principal that Liam was likely to be excluded from school, Vicky withdrew her son and started teaching him at home. Through this process Vicky’s attitude towards Liam’s problems underwent a major shift—from understanding his

behaviour as a ‘disorder’ that needed to be identified and fixed or managed—to accepting his differences as naturally occurring human variations that only become ‘problems’ when confronted with rigid, one-size-fits-all educational policies:

...every time we had a little breakthrough...I realised that [home schooling] worked for us, I’d think, God, that must’ve been so hard at school. And I began to realise why school didn’t click for him at all...[I began] to think back in my mind of all the other children that I’d seen sitting in the classroom that were displaying lots of other symptoms of lots of other things. And thinking, you know, there they are still in the classroom, and that’s not going to work for them...I guess in the early days I knew he couldn’t help the ADHD behaviour. But some days it didn’t make it any easier, and I would still tell him off, and there would be a punishment for behaviour. Because the teachers kept reiterating to me, “He’s broken—we’re going to fix him. He’s broken, we have to fix him. We have to all work together and we’re going to fix him”. And it wasn’t till I came out of the school, I saw there’s nothing to fix!

This shift in her thinking appears to have given Vicky a new (and radical) perspective on living and learning with ADHD:

I think our brains are all wired differently in some way, and I have—more since we’ve been home schooling—I have come to see it as just something that’s there. You know, the focus used to be on ADHD at school because that was the cause of problems at school. And now it’s the other way around, it’s in the background, and it’s still there, but the rest of life comes first...But I certainly don’t see—I don’t even see it as a disadvantage...there’s learning difficulties and there’s things like that, but there’s also a heck of a lot of advantages and bonuses to having bright, busy kids.

Discourse and Experience

The ‘Responsible Mother’s’ Experience of School Resistance

For the Margolin (1998) mothers, who positioned themselves as ‘responsible mothers’ within the psychiatric/psychological discourses, having a school-resistant child was constructed as an extremely negative experience. In chapter five of *The Stories of Some Mothers of Children Who Avoid School*, Margolin identifies four ‘metathemes’ drawn from her data. Metatheme #3 is entitled: “Having an anxious child who avoids school has been a trauma for us and our families” (p.145).

Margolin (1998) discusses the “profound impact” (p.145) that school resistance had on the three mothers. They felt responsible for getting their children to school and when this was not possible, they experienced intense feelings of guilt, failure, frustration and anger. For these women, normal life was put on hold until school return was accomplished. It is clear

that the approach of the Margolin mothers, informed by medical and psychological meanings, was the antithesis of 'natural mothering'. Rather than relax and trust (in themselves and their children), these mothers were convinced that their children were self-destructing and that they could not help them. This led to a frantic search for outside sources of (expert) help.

According to the Margolin (1998) mothers, school resistance also placed an immense strain on their families. The mothers described how their children's behaviour had compounded marital problems, distressed siblings, restricted family life, and generally created a feeling of doom and gloom within the house: "Alex's problem going to school became a problem for the whole family. The tension from his behaviour ruined the mornings for everyone and even the weekends were ruined by his anxiety" (p.70).

The three mothers indicated that they had tried everything they could to return their children to school but nothing had worked and, in fact, their children's problems had worsened. Certainly, they had employed many techniques of persuasion, including punishment, bribery, cajoling, talking, force, and even prayer. When their children continued to display strong anti-school sentiments and resistant behaviour, these mothers felt angry, resentful and powerless: "[my daughter would] grab onto me and cling. It felt like the life was being sucked out of me. I couldn't breath. I'd be prying her off thinking, 'Let me go'" (p.102).

Margolin (1998) interprets the mothers' persistent and desperate attempts to persuade their children to return to school and find professional help and support as evidence of their personal strength, maternal dedication and commitment to solving the 'problem'. Coming from a school psychology background, Margolin accepts the dominant assumption that children who persistently resist school have a 'disorder' and that this requires assessment and treatment from competent professionals. She does not question the necessity of school return or the wisdom of the mothers' focus on reintegrating their children into a system that had apparently consistently failed them. Indeed, as mentioned earlier, within the dominant psychiatric/psychological approach to understanding school resistance, these mothers were thinking, feeling and doing all the 'normal' things.

Another way of constructing the Margolin (1998) mothers' experience, might be to argue that once positioned firmly within the dominant discourses and necessarily seeing and

understanding the world from this viewpoint, these mothers were locked into a paradigm that limited the range of responses and feelings they had available to them in the face of their children's school resistance. Rather than being constructed as "proactive" (p.147), the mothers' "persistent", "desperate" (p.148) (and ineffective) attempts to return their children to school could be understood as a kind of tunnel vision—an uncritical, conditioned adherence to social norms and expectations. For example, Coretta's(M) statement—"I knew it is important for him to come in [to school]. That is all that I knew" (p.148)—indicates that she has internalised the dominant belief that school attendance is absolutely necessary, and she seems both incapable and unwilling to reflect on or question this belief in the face of her son's distress and resistance.

Committed to an ideology that insists children need to be in school in order to be healthy, happy and well adjusted, these 'responsible mothers' had no option but to continue seeking ways to get their children back in school—a new therapist, a different programme, another school district. As each attempt ended in failure, it became increasingly difficult for the mothers to defend their claim to being 'good mothers' against the 'charge' of maternal incompetence that school resistance, when understood as 'sickness' and 'deviancy', necessarily represents:

...for the first time, I started to question myself as a mother. I tried to help him. You stretch yourself to the point where you think it's what a mother should do and you want to do the right thing, but you're not sure what is the right thing anymore. And when I got advice, everybody told me something different, and no matter what I tried, I couldn't help him—my own son. I started to wonder if I knew anything about being a mother. (p.63-64)

It is interesting that unlike the 'nurturing mothers' I spoke with, the Margolin (1998) mothers do not talk about receiving guidance from 'maternal instincts' and 'intuitive feelings'. This perhaps highlights the constructed nature of such 'instincts' and 'feelings'. These mothers appear to have no innate internal reference to tell them what is the 'right' thing to do with their unhappy child. Instead their hope rests on external sources of professional help and guidance. This involves them in an uncertain, and for these mothers, largely unsatisfying, process of negotiating with systems and professionals. The mothers were caught between the necessity to procure 'expert' help (and qualify for this help), the need to manage the ways their children were constructed and treated by professionals, and the desire to defend their maternal position and right to speak by constituting themselves as responsible, blameless and committed to their children's welfare.

The 'Responsible Mother's' Experience of Home Schooling

For the 'responsible mother', 'success' is school attendance. The Margolin (1998) mothers did not accept home schooling as a solution to their children's problematic behaviour. From the psychiatric/psychological perspective the child is only 'cured' when s/he becomes a 'normal' school attender. Barbara(M) demonstrates this understanding when she proudly states: "[Caroline] even loves to play school now. She's made it" (p.110). Caroline's apparently wholehearted acceptance of school indicates to Barbara(M) that her daughter has been successfully rehabilitated.

Within the dominant paradigm, children who are understood as anxious and unhappy at school *need* to be exposed to the school environment until they adapt and learn to cope with 'normal' school experiences. The Margolin (1998) mothers 'knew' that their children would not be 'normal' until they attended school willingly like the majority of other children. And 'normality' was important to these three mothers. Hence, the mothers resisted home schooling their children. Renee(M), for instance, was reluctant to try home schooling even after being advised by Jim Jr.'s therapist to attempt this approach:

[Jim Jr.'s] therapist has recommended this Cable TV show which is like home schooling without the teacher...but I don't see how the therapist's plan is going to help the school phobia. It might even encourage Jim Jr. to stay home...I'd much rather see him in school where he belongs. (p.91)

For the Margolin (1998) mothers, home schooling was never a real choice. While these mothers were legally free to withdraw their children from school and home school them, they were 'bound' to a hegemonic ideology that insists the child is not 'normal' and 'healthy' until it returns to school. This meant that although they saw their children respond positively to home schooling (when they had responded positively to little else), these mothers could not accept home schooling as a legitimate solution to school resistance (see Margolin, p.154). Given this scenario, it is hardly surprising that Coretta(M), Renee(M) and Barbara(M) appear to have found the home schooling experience unrewarding: "For Barbara, teaching Caroline at home was a chore borne from necessity and she said she was relieved when a school environment was found that could meet Caroline's needs" (p.155).

Despite their mothers' misgivings, Jim Jr., Caroline and Alex appear to have responded very positively to home schooling. For example, according to his mother's

account, Jim Jr. “blossomed” while working with a home tutor: “Jim really liked that, working with Mr. Earl at home...It was too easy” (p.88). Renee’s(M) comment that home schooling Jim Jr. was “too easy”, indicates her belief that Jim Jr. needs to face school in order to truly overcome his ‘anxiety disorder’. Home schooling is understood as a ‘cop-out’ not a ‘solution’ by Renee(M).

The ‘Nurturing Mother’s’ Experience of School Resistance

Like the Margolin (1998) mothers, the mothers I interviewed initially reacted to their children’s school resistance with concern and confusion. Julie stated that it was very difficult watching her daughter “sink into despair every morning as ‘time to go to school’ approached”. Clare was concerned about the psychological implications of leaving Brittany “screaming” in the classroom every morning. A major concern for all the mothers I spoke with was the perception that their children were suffering a loss of confidence and self-esteem in relation to school problems. Karen, for instance, described the worrying personality changes she saw in Jamie after he started kindergarten: “I saw this incredibly outgoing child, who among family, friends, one-on-one, people who we met in our own home would stand on a table and do an impromptu ‘look at me’ performance, to somebody who was sort of getting quite nervous”.

Also like the Margolin mothers, the ‘nurturing mothers’ reported many unsatisfactory and disillusioning interactions with educational and medical practitioners whom they experienced on the whole as insensitive, unprofessional, incompetent and unsupportive. Clare claimed that a pediatrician told her that Brittany “would never amount to anything else than an animal that shat in a corner of the room”. Vicky recalled a similarly unsatisfactory conversation with a school official who told her that Liam “would end up in prison because that was just what happened to these children, they were bad little eggs”. Elizabeth remembered feeling extremely frustrated when a speech therapist diagnosed one of her children with dyspraxia and then dismissed her concerns regarding the accuracy of the diagnosis: “[the speech therapist] gave him a label, which I don’t agree with. But she wouldn’t listen to me...she would spend this amount of time actually doing some speech

work with him, and the rest of the time telling me he had dyspraxia...I'm just smiling and sitting there, knowing there's nothing I can say or do".

Despite commonalties with the Margolin (1998) mothers in initial feelings and disillusioning experiences with professionals, the mothers I spoke with did not seem to see their children's problems with accepting school as wholly negative. They appeared to understand school resistance as more of a catalyst for change and growth rather than a setback or trauma. Anna constructed school resistance and home schooling as valuable learning experiences for her as a person and as an educator—experiences that were 'meant to be':

I believe that I was meant to follow this path...Because it's been a big learning experience for me...if I go back into the classroom now, I will have much greater awareness...I think it's broadened my whole perspective of education...I'm more concerned about...the holistic aspect. The way that children treat each other. I don't like to see children being intimidated, or bullied.

Karen reasoned that Jamie's problems with kindergarten and her subsequent concerns that he would not cope well with school had provided her with the motivation and opportunity to reassess personal and family values and priorities:

But I suppose the fact that he didn't [fit into kindy] forced me to confront what was going on in me...the fact that [going back to work] hasn't been an option for me has, in a sense, forced us as a couple, and us as a family, to really confront what we really do believe a family is and what we want our family to be and do. What we value and so in a sense it's probably been a real strengthener...

The 'Nurturing Mother's' Experience of Home Schooling

For the 'nurturing mothers', home schooling a school-resistant child required a shift from being *reactive* to *active* agents in their children's education. McAleve (1995) describes home schoolers as "skilled active theorists who act as political agents rather than political subjects" (p.148). By this she means that home-schooling parents *act* on their dissatisfaction with the schooling system and thereby make "overt political statements" (p.148). As 'school mums', the mothers focused on reacting to what happened (or failed to happen) at school and on meeting legal and institutional demands. Vicky describes the stress of worrying about what was going on at school during the day: "Oh, it was a huge strain before...every time I went in after school, I'd be thinking, 'Oh god, you know, what's going to happen today?"

What am I gonna face today?” As ‘home-schooling mums’, they were able to position themselves alongside other home schoolers as actively asserting their right and responsibility to protect their children from harmful influences (at school), as exercising control and choice regarding their children’s education, and as informed critics of institutionalised schooling:

I truly think that a trained principal and school teacher think that the majority of children should be locked in a classroom six hours a day, with thirty other children of their own age. They think that’s normal. I think that’s conditioning...most home-schoolers are really thinking way outside the box, to home-school in the first place. (Vicky)

After withdrawing their children from school the mothers were faced with creating a learning environment that reflected their values and worked for their child. For most mothers this involved drawing on home schooling discourses that construct children’s learning needs as unique and highly individualised. This philosophy, which has its roots in the teachings of educational radicals such as John Holt, Ivan Illich and A.S. Neill (Baldwin, 1993), was sometimes used to explain why their child did not fit into the school system. Vicky, for example, like many home schoolers, had come to see state schools in New Zealand as pedagogically unsound. She stated that mainstream schools do not cater to children’s individual learning styles:

Schools are all round holes, and if you have a square peg that comes along and doesn’t fit into it, the school system as a whole will just try and hammer them into it, and round their edges, to get them to fit what they think is the norm, instead of going with how they naturally are.

Clare expressed the same belief that schools only accommodate certain ‘types’ of children: “If the kids don’t fit inside the square, then you’re screwed. And the square seems to be getting smaller and smaller and smaller”. Karen, like Vicky, believed in a range of different “learning styles” and felt that state schools in New Zealand only suit a small portion of these ‘styles’ while “other [educational] systems are excelling and producing far better results”.

Most of the mothers I spoke to had developed a view of schooling as both prescriptive and insensitive to individual needs, and used this argument to point to the advantages of an individually tailored home schooling programme for their children. Vicky described how she adapts pedagogical activities around Liam’s short attention span: “kids with ADHD just completely close off when they see a whole workbook...[I] pull the books apart and I take one page at a time”. Julie expressed a similar criticism to Vicky of the school’s inability to meet her daughter Amanda’s special learning needs. However, Julie mobilised a home schooling discourse that understands the school’s curriculum as not

catering for 'bright' pupils, and thus placing their learning and motivation at risk. Julie's view appears to be informed by ideas associated with what Baldwin (1993) calls the 'New Right'. She constructs the school as failing to encourage individual excellence and standing in the way of Amanda's right to excel and pursue her own interests: "The school admitted that Amanda was working as much as 2 years ahead of her age group but said it was not policy to allow this, and that she must work in age appropriate math books and read the 'right' level books".

The ability to accept and then re-interpret their child's problems as arising from individual 'needs' and 'differences' (that had been ignored or poorly catered to in school) or from traumatic and unacceptable school experiences, rather than understanding these problems as stemming from personal or familial 'dysfunction', distinguished the 'nurturing mothers' from the mothers in the Margolin (1998) study. Elizabeth, for instance, stated that she did not see Peter's problem as 'school phobia' but as "a violent [school] environment—that is not usually found in the adult world outside Paremoremo⁴⁸". Karen explained how she came to the conclusion that Jamie's aversion to group activities was just a part of him that she needed to accept, respect and work with:

I went there [group sports] for quite a while and felt very sorry for myself that I had a child that was so needy of my input. And then I just realised that that was just gonna waste my time because nothing was going to change my child. Wishing he was something different wasn't going to change him. And really, I had to take a good hard look at myself and say, "Okay, so this is the child that I have, and what can I do as his mother to give him what's absolutely going to be the most enriching life for him".

For all these mothers the decision to home school was not easy. While they understood their children as needing the security, protection, support and individualised attention that home schooling could provide, some of the mothers feared their children becoming too dependent. Clare states: "I always knew [home schooling] was an option, I sort of put it off cause I felt Brittany needed to learn stuff from other people, as opposed to being too reliant on me". Anna similarly deferred home schooling because she did not want Jonathan "clinging" to her and felt that at thirteen "he really should be at high school". In addition, many of the mothers experienced doubts about their ability to cope with home schooling: "I wasn't very keen on home schooling initially because I thought *I* couldn't do it" (Vicky). Anna recalled feeling overwhelmed at the thought of adding to her maternal

⁴⁸ The main Auckland prison.

responsibilities by becoming Jonathan's primary teacher: "I thought, I can't do this, I can't be all things to him as well as a mother". Elizabeth remembered initially being appalled at the idea of home schooling Peter: "I said, 'No! We couldn't home school—he'd drive me crazy!'"

Despite these initial reservations, the experience of teaching their own children was experienced as affirming and empowering for most of these mothers. When they perceived their children to be responding positively to home schooling, the mothers felt validated because they attributed this improvement to their personal choices and efforts. They had successfully defended their claim to being 'good mothers' in the face of explicit or implicit social criticism and were no longer the mothers of 'sick' and 'deviant' children but of 'normal' home schoolers. Vicky expressed a sense of triumph at having proven the 'experts' wrong: "[the SES psychologist] said, 'No, you'll never be able to do it [home school]...But it didn't take me long. I said to my husband, you know, I should ring them up and say, 'Well, ha ha ha, here we are, we're doing it!'" Anna explained how after months of focusing on treating Jonathan's 'phobia', once the decision to home school was made, she "just thought of him as a ['normal'] home-schooler". And Karen indicated that watching her son become more willing to involve himself in group activities was "an amazing affirmation" for her (personal communication, July 6, 2005).

Strongly contrasting with the Margolin (1998) mothers, the mothers I interviewed described the experience of home schooling as bringing them closer to their children. Home schoolers from diverse ideological backgrounds believe that home schooling leads to family unity and bonding (Arai, 2000). Julie described her relationship with Amanda as "much closer to 'ideal'" than would be possible if Amanda was in school. Vicky stated that Liam was "a lot more affectionate" as a home schooler and that she had "become a lot closer" to her son since withdrawing him from school.

Another area where the experiences of the Margolin (1998) mothers and the mothers in my study contrasted dramatically was in feelings of social and emotional isolation resulting from having an 'abnormal' child who was not at school. The mothers I spoke with seemed to have found acceptance and support in the home schooling community, whereas the Margolin mothers expressed ongoing (and at times unbearable) feelings of being alone, misunderstood and unsupported. Anna described her first meeting with local home schoolers,

where she felt she could talk openly about having a school-phobic child without being judged or criticised. At the meeting, Anna is positioned as a ‘good mother’ via the collective assumption that deciding to home school indicates a parent cares “passionately” about their children:

They accepted you because they realised you wouldn’t have come to their meeting unless it was for a good reason...And because of the one thing we all had in common, is that we all cared passionately about our kids. We all cared about them as people, and cared about their education.

For Anna, this positive sense of being understood and belonging to a community who perceived school resistance to be a ‘school problem’ and home schooling to be a compassionate and enlightened response, seemed to mediate the negative feelings and worries associated with having a ‘maladjusted’ school-phobic child:

...initially, in the early stages [of Jonathan’s school phobia], I really felt that we were out on a limb. Because I didn’t know anyone who’d had this before. So I felt quite isolated. And I felt quite daunted and all those sorts of negative things. And then when I joined the [home schooling] network...we suddenly belonged somewhere. We suddenly had our little family, our little school, you know, set up in a different way.

Vicky had a similarly positive experience with the home schooling community. She indicated that amongst home schoolers, unlike at school, Liam’s ‘special needs’ were not automatically constituted as problematic: “I have not found one person to date that has had any comment to make about [Liam’s] behaviour that they might see or any difficulties”. Vicky indicated that other home schoolers would take the time to try and understand Liam’s behaviour rather than negatively judging or excluding him:

The thing that we never ever found happened at school, happens with the home-school families, in that Liam might be in a hurry to run somewhere, and he’ll accidentally tread on someone’s foot when he runs past. Someone who knows the situation can sit down with their child and say, you know, sometimes Liam’s in a hurry and he just races forward and does things. And they actually talk about ADHD and how it affects people and sit back with the kids.

In addition, Vicky found the home-schooling community to be a great source of personal support: “I have found them to be a lot more supportive [than school personnel] in everything...apart from my own family, this is the closest community I’ve ever had around me...I’d be lost without them”.

Both the Margolin (1998) mothers and the mothers I interviewed desperately wanted to help their children and, I would argue, to protect their maternal identity by constituting themselves as ‘good mothers’. They wanted their children to be happy, healthy and

functional. The ‘nurturing mothers’ mobilised ‘internal’ resources and searched for alternative sources of support when they perceived mainstream institutions and experts to have failed them. A belief in naturally bestowed ‘maternal instincts’ may have allowed these mothers to be self-sufficient, decisive and radical in their approach to helping their school-resistant children: “I realised that they [the experts] didn’t really know...then I realised I had to go with my gut instinct, turn on the intuition and go with it” (Clare). By deciding to go with their ‘gut instincts’ and home school, these mothers were enabled to position themselves as caring, committed, informed and self-sacrificing home schoolers, rather than being positioned, by virtue of having a school-resistant child, as ‘bad mothers’.

Like any set of ideals/ideas, natural mothering and home schooling can be understood as ‘limiting’ as well as ‘liberating’. Embracing natural mothering uncritically may lock a mother into a situation where she must surrender her own agency in the interests of her family. Bobel (2002) argues that women who buy into the ideology of natural mothering may free themselves from conventional authority but at the same time make themselves slaves to ‘nature’. Failure to do this would make them ‘bad mothers’. Baldwin (1993) and McAlevey (1995) make a similar argument regarding the potentially oppressive nature of prescriptive discourses taken up by parents who home school. Here, they are perhaps referring primarily to fundamentalist Christian discourse; however, the argument applies equally to ‘liberal’ home schooling discourses that commit parents (usually mothers) to a certain type of intensive, child-focused, autonomous and all-consuming educational path. Home schoolers cannot escape the exercise of power/knowledge by ‘unschooling’, i.e. rejecting formal, compulsory education. As I argued in chapters five and six, home schoolers are still necessarily enmeshed in educational and psychological discourses (albeit different ones from schools) that control and define their practice.

While the mothers all described feeling anxious and conflicted over the decision to withdraw their child from school and start home schooling, they did not appear to question the naturalness of the responsibility for making and enacting this decision residing primarily with them, nor did they question their role in carrying out the day-to-day ‘work’ of home schooling. Stambach and David (2005) point out that the home schooling literature assumes “women’s positions within families as caretakers and educators” in its uncritical and seemingly automatic “association of homeschooling with maternal parenting” (p.1645).

For the mothers in this study, the decision to home school their school-resistant child seemed to involve both the surrender of personal agency and a commitment to a certain type of very intensive full-time, stay-at-home mothering. The mothers talked about feeling *forced* to home school because the child's 'needs' demanded it. That is, home schooling seemed to involve a kind of 'personal surrender' for these women. Anna stated that home schooling was what Jonathan wanted but that she "didn't want to bow to the option of home schooling". She explained her decision to home school as born of "necessity" and not of "choice". Vicky also stated that home schooling "wasn't really a choice" but rather that she was "pretty much forced...to do something". Clare suggested that she "fought" against the prospect of home schooling but in the end had to give in as things at school "got too bad". These statements may raise questions regarding the degree of agency involved in mothers' decisions to home school children who resist school, although all the mothers felt that the decision to home school had been the right one to make.

Summary

In this chapter I have discussed the meaning of school resistance and home schooling for mothers involved in these processes. I have suggested that school resistance poses a potential threat to a mother's identity. A child who persistently resists school attendance is often perceived as 'abnormal', 'deviant' and potentially 'at risk'. For the contemporary Western mother, who is generally understood as being personally responsible for her children's welfare, school resistance may result in a social designation of 'bad mother'. Women who are positioned as 'bad mothers' must manage their 'spoiled' maternal identity and deal with issues of blame and accountability. This chapter has examined the ways that some mothers resist being designated as 'bad' by attempting to position themselves within the existing framework of 'good mothering' as either 'responsible mothers' or 'nurturing mothers'. Such resistance can be seen as "deeply enmeshed in the existing culture" (Croghan & Miell, 1998) because mothers accept uncritically the culturally dominant ways that 'good' mothering is constructed.

I have argued that the Margolin (1998) mothers and the mothers I interviewed drew on opposing discourses about education and school resistance to make sense of their

children's problematic school behaviour and point the way to appropriate responses. I indicated that these discourses and the ways that the mothers discursively positioned themselves and their children had profound consequences for the mothers' self-perceptions and experiences of their children, school resistance and home schooling. The mothers I interviewed who decided to embrace home schooling as a positive choice, as opposed to the Margolin mothers who remained focused on school return, seemed to constitute school resistance as a 'challenge' that they had to overcome rather than as a 'trauma' that they had (barely) survived, and consequently felt 'empowered' as opposed to 'victimised'. These mothers experienced educating their children at home as a positive alternative to schooling and through home schooling were able to draw on critical and other discourses to justify, legitimate and explain their child's school resistance in ways that shifted blame from the 'personal' to the 'social'.

I have also considered natural-mothering discourse as providing one possible framework for interpreting the ways that the mothers I interviewed understood and constituted their maternal practice and the experience of having a school-resistant child. I have suggested that contemporary maternal ideals that insist that the 'good mother' takes responsibility for her child's psychological and educational welfare, and always puts her child's needs before her own, may appear both compelling and inescapable when they are judged to arise from 'nature', 'instinct' or the 'inner voice' rather than being seen as socially constructed and hence amenable to change. The following chapter addresses the mothers' claims that their school-resistant children were positively transformed through the home-schooling process. I approach these claims as 'stories' that set out to achieve certain personal, political and social ends.

CHAPTER EIGHT

Storying School Resistance

In this chapter I consider more closely my participants' accounts of school resistance as 'stories'. While these stories were delivered to me as 'truthful' and more or less accurate descriptions of 'real' events, I am approaching them as unique contextually embedded constructions that attempt to make sense of school resistance by drawing on socially and culturally available discourses. The first section of this chapter deals with the mothers' stories about their children's experiences. The second section looks at two divergent accounts of school experiences given by children I interviewed and considers some possible ways of understanding and explaining these narratives. The third section returns again to the work of Yoneyama (1999), who has constructed a novel and fascinating story of *tōkōkyōhi* drawn from students' autobiographical reports of school resistance. I consider in this section the main theme of Yoneyama's *tōkōkyōhi* story that constructs *tōkōkyōhi* as a process of self-discovery, empowerment and social criticism. I examine my own data in light of Yoneyama's findings with *tōkōkyōhi* students for evidence that the children had developed new perspectives on 'self', 'school' and 'society' as a result of their school-resistance experience.

From Sad and Sick to Happy and Healthy: Transformation Stories

In chapter seven I discussed how the mothers in my study frequently understood their experiences of school resistance as personally transformative. In addition, the mothers offered spoken accounts of their children's transition from school to home schooling that could be taken to indicate that they also had engaged in a process of positive personal transformation. By means of a miraculous change or gradual profound change, the mothers described their children as going from being 'sad' and 'sick' to being 'happy' and 'healthy' individuals. The dramatic transformation in the children's moods, attitudes and health reportedly began only days or weeks after school withdrawal, and was sustained until the time of interview—six months to thirteen years later. Furthermore, the positive changes

occurred *without* conventional psychiatric/psychological treatments (i.e. drugs, counselling, behaviour modification or reintegration into school).

Mothers' Accounts of their Children's Behaviour Prior to School Withdrawal⁴⁹:

Jonathan: Jonathan was very sad during his school problems. It was quite a down in his life. It wasn't just the behavioural thing, he wasn't eating and wasn't sleeping, and he'd lost a lot of weight. The doctor said he was depressed. He was very fearful and would retreat when faced with any threatening situation.

Jamie: Jamie was really scared and freaked-out about being left at kindy. When we drove past, he would screw up his face into a nasty look and say, "I'm making a fox-face at that kindergarten!" By four years old he would reluctantly participate in indoor activities but had no interest whatsoever in playing outside with all the other children. I was concerned that Jamie was starting to see himself as no fun as a person because he did not enjoy group activities.

Liam: As a school attender, Liam was like a tight spring, coiled and just ready to pop. He was a very restless sleeper and worried about lots of things related to school. It was no wonder he was often sick with asthma. He had no respect for authority at the school and his behaviour was often disruptive and impulsive. He liked to play with his friends at school but he didn't like to do the work. It was too hard or boring. He would never, ever put his hand up in class to answer something because he thought he wouldn't know the right answer. At home, Liam was very highly-strung and non-compliance was a big problem. His impulse answer to every question would be "no", even if I just said, "do you want a biscuit?"

Brittany and Sam: I watched Brittany and Sam basically fall apart while they were at school. Brittany just shut down, would have panic attacks, cry and be physically ill at the thought of going into school. Sam was withdrawing and taking his frustration out on his sister at home. They were both losing their willingness to learn. Their self-confidence really did take a battering at school.

⁴⁹ I have rearranged and paraphrased some sentences for easy readability.

Peter: After only one week at school, Peter had become morose and sullen. He was more like a stereotypical teenager than a six-year-old boy. He told me that the kids were bullying him, and he wouldn't go 'round the corner of the school building without going really carefully because he was afraid of being jumped on by some kid. It wasn't just on school days that Peter was unhappy, he was apprehensive and miserable the whole time.

Amanda: Before we started home schooling, Amanda was deeply unhappy. She had nightmares, incredible tantrums and deep circles under her eyes at the end of each school day. She was often outraged and angry (at things which happened at school) and was inclined to be clingy. Amanda's teacher didn't think there was a problem as Amanda was quiet, compliant and top of the class. But Amanda had started to say "I dunno" whenever asked a question, and was embarrassed (to the point of denial) to do well at anything.

Mothers' Accounts of their Children's Behaviour During and Following Home Schooling:

Jonathan: After school withdrawal, I saw Jonathan move out from that very fearful core and gradually gain confidence. He slowly embraced more and more things and started to go out socially. He loved his weekly woodwork classes with Mr P. He just blossomed.

Jamie: We have taken a very relaxed path in home schooling so far. We meet with other families on a semi-regular basis, and Jamie is much more relaxed and confident now. He is still better in small groups, but that real fear has gone. In fact, we did a field trip at the Botanic Gardens with an education officer, and it was so awesome, because Jamie volunteered to be the one who stood up and spoke about the life cycle of trees to the whole class.

Liam: Liam changed instantly when we took him out of school. It was like a total unwinding of the spring. He just relaxed, began to sleep in till later in the mornings and started to talk about all the things that had been happening at school. Also, his asthma improved and he had the chance physically to catch up. We noticed a great improvement in his behaviour, especially noncompliance. His personality changed, he was nicer to be around and a lot more affectionate. Socially, Liam's friendships have really grown and developed and he now has a lot more friends than he ever had at school. Even the ADHD behaviour has

improved a lot, coming out of school. Home schooling certainly hasn't been a backward step for us in any way.

Brittany and Sam: Since my children have been home schooled, I've noticed their willingness to learn has come back again. Monday morning, Brittany does a double art class, Monday afternoon Sam does kiwi sports, Tuesday we do drama and Wednesday, they do trampolining. Brittany would never ever do sport at school. But she wants to; she wants to do it. I see that already as a big thing. She has a really great sense of humour and she's happy most of the time. Sam's confidence has picked up in a lot of areas. In the beginning it was like, "Oh, I can't spell these words", and now it's, "Oh Mum, I can't wait for the spelling test". He has learnt to ride a bike and is going ahead with a hiss and a roar.

Peter: Peter took about a week to change back to his happy self, after we took him out of school. Home schooling worked very well and it was the ideal option. While he was being home schooled, Peter spent a large chunk of his time reading both fiction and non-fiction and as a result his general knowledge is awesome. He has also excelled at maths and science, and enrolled at university when he was sixteen years old. People often ask, "How did Peter do, going from home to university?" Fine, good, actually better than school kids, I would say. Because he's got an enthusiasm for learning.

Amanda: Amanda blossomed almost immediately following school withdrawal. Her fears of being left alone disappeared and she became friendly, outgoing, talkative and inquisitive. Her natural pride in a task well done reasserted itself. She started asking questions and listened to the answers. As a home schooler, Amanda is responsible and self-motivated. She volunteers knowledge and enjoys new facts and skills, sets high standards for herself, and sees no problem with adding to her curriculum.

The Salvation Narrative

According to these maternal accounts, the children changed from unhappy, anxious school resisters who were underachieving, into happy, relaxed home schoolers who were doing well emotionally, academically and socially. Such accounts can be seen as constituting a challenge to dominant psychiatric/psychological claims of school resistance signifying internal pathology and the belief that children who stop going to school require prompt and

comprehensive evaluation and treatment in order to overcome and/or prevent anxiety, depression, learning and social problems. They also defy the common psychological assumption that school withdrawal is *necessarily* contraindicated in cases where children find school aversive and persistently resist attending.

The meaning of post-school changes in school resisters can be seen as highly contestable. The mothers I talked with clearly understood the changes in their children to be the result of finding an educational approach that better met their ‘individual needs’ by freeing them from compulsory institutionalised conformity and placing them in a nurturing and highly responsive learning environment (i.e. the home). However, in cases where children are avoiding school, mental health practitioners often attribute improvements in mood, attitude or health following school withdrawal to the child no longer having to confront its school fears, separate from its parents, face peers or negotiate the challenges of therapy. Hence, from a psychotherapeutic perspective these changes in behaviour are not understood as a sign of successful rehabilitation and recovery but rather as an indication that the pathology underlying the school problem has gone ‘underground’.

While we could certainly accept the mothers’ stories about their children at face value as accurate (or otherwise) descriptions of real events, it is also possible to understand these maternal accounts of child behaviour as discursive constructions which serve various purposes for the mothers producing and transmitting them. I would suggest that we approach these stories as ‘salvation narratives’. The salvation narrative is a marginal discourse that tells a straightforward but compelling story about a sick or unhappy child who is ‘healed’, ‘restored’ or ‘saved’ through home schooling. The salvation narrative is compelling because it takes the form of a personal testimonial or confession usually recounted by the main character in the story or their parent. This discourse is common within the home-schooling literature but is not widely disseminated within mainstream society.

The salvation narrative has a predicable structure and sequence. First, the child’s experiences at school are described in terms of a descent into psychological, social and educational dysfunction and misery. Then, in an act of desperation, following innumerable parental attempts to find ‘help’ for the child and ‘work’ with the school, the child is withdrawn from school. A dramatic pause in the story often follows in which the child and family prepare themselves for home schooling and it is unclear whether the child has been

‘saved’ in time or how the story will end. This period of suspense is followed by a relatively smooth and steady ascent into health, happiness and wholeness for the whole family as home schooling gets underway. The following story taken from the MindAlive⁵⁰ website is typical:

My son struggled for six years, having enormous difficulties in an environment that did not accommodate his own individual challenges. His self-esteem was dropping rapidly, depression took a hold, and severe migraines became all too frequent. At the on-set of adolescence, my son needed rescuing...My son felt, from the beginning [of home schooling and starting at MindAlive], an enormous weight had been lifted from his shoulders and, although hesitant to contribute fully for the first term, blossomed in the second...As a parent, I am delighted to have found this opportunity...I believe now that my son will be able to contribute to society as a free thinking individual... (Kay, n.d.)

The salvation narrative does not simply describe experiences that are common to many home-schooling families; it can also be seen as providing a template for individuals to construct their own transformation stories and thus make sense of their experiences. An examination of the concept of “the vacation” (Llewellyn, 1997, p.131), a common element of the salvation narrative, may illustrate this point. Within home schooling discourse, ‘the vacation’ is a period of inactivity following school withdrawal and preceding home schooling in which the (often ‘stressed-out’ or ‘traumatised’) child does nothing academic or socially demanding. ‘The vacation’ is often assumed to reflect the needs and experiences of families transitioning to home schooling. Llewellyn (1997), author of *The Teenage Liberation Handbook*, for instance, constructs ‘the vacation’ as crucial to successful home schooling: “Before you start your new way of life, you have to let go of the old one...If you don’t take a vacation, you may start unschooling with the same frenzied guilty complexes with which you’ve been schooling” (p.131).

However, it is possible to understand ‘the vacation’ as a discursive construction that, rather than arising from experience and out of the ‘needs’ of individuals, actually produces experience and a (perceived) need. ‘The vacation’ concept has become an accepted and apparently self-validating transition practice among some home schoolers and as such is talked about in home-schooling books, magazines, on websites and in chat rooms. Home-schooling organisation Education Otherwise, for example, states that children with “school anxieties” who are withdrawn from school “need time to recover fully”, and hence, “There is usually a need for a quiet period initially for the child to settle down” (*School Anxieties*,

⁵⁰ MindAlive is an Auckland-based private learning centre that offers a variety of classes for home-schooled children.

2004, p.4). Thus, people may come to believe that children transitioning to home schooling from school, especially those who have had negative experiences in ‘the system’, need ‘the vacation’, and to understand, explain and talk about their child’s (or their own) transition to home schooling in terms of ‘the vacation’. Patrick, who is discussed in chapter six, claims that he spent most of his first year home schooling “woolgathering [daydreaming] and sleeping” (Llewellyn, 1993, p.204). While this experience was evidently unsettling for him and distressing for his mother at the time, he comes to make sense of and justify his “‘dreamy’ phase” in terms of ‘the vacation’ after reading *The Teenage Liberation Handbook*:

...I did suffer a bit of guilt. But I would say to any prospective homeschooler: don’t let such pressure bother you. Woolgather with impunity. (Grace describes this phenomenon accurately in *The Teenage Liberation Handbook*. Reading what she said made my mother and me feel considerably better). (Llewellyn, 1993, p.204)

Two of the mothers I spoke with specifically explained their child’s behaviour and their maternal/educational practice during the transition to home schooling in terms of ‘the vacation’, although, like Education Otherwise quoted above, they did not use this term. Vicky reported that Liam had several months following school withdrawal where he “just took a complete break” from academic work. He continued to socialise with his school friends but did not become involved in any new activities. Vicky understood this “settling down” time as allowing Liam the chance to physically recuperate and mentally unwind. Similarly, Anna described the weeks immediately following Jonathan’s school withdrawal as a time for him to get “sorted out emotionally”, and for her to organise an appropriate home-schooling programme. According to Anna, during this period, Jonathan “certainly wasn’t in a fit state to receive intense instruction” and “would just want to go and sleep”:

In the early days of him being home-schooled...he wasn’t well enough to really be in a receptive frame of mind...He was so embroiled in the trauma of it...He wasn’t ready to be receiving a lot of mental, you know, like a lot of language, a lot of maths...But he didn’t go for weeks and weeks and weeks like that...what I had to do, once I realised that he was going to be home-schooled, was to set myself up with a programme. So I had to go and actually shop and find the books for his level. So that took quite a bit of setting up as well.

Storying Experience

An unexpected finding from my interviews was that two children, Liam and Jamie, when recalling their younger years, claimed that they had happily attended and enjoyed

school⁵¹. Jamie's only negative statement about kindergarten was: "I don't like kindy anymore". He was adamant that as a preschooler, he had enjoyed and willingly attended kindergarten. Liam's criticisms of school appeared relatively trivial. He said that he was tired most afternoons and that on one occasion a child had fallen off the adventure playground and there had been no teacher present. He also stated that he disliked art because they "always did the same thing". With probing he admitted that he was teased at school by a "couple" of children and that he was pushed off the swing into the mud on one occasion. During his mother's interview, Liam stated that sometimes he would not want to do what the rest of the class were doing (e.g. sitting on the mat), and would carry on doing his own thing (e.g. cutting up paper). He seemed to be saying that he did not like having to engage in teacher-initiated activities.

When recalling his time at school during our conversation, Liam constructed school as an enjoyable, friendly and stimulating place. This contrasted dramatically with his mother Vicky's account of his experiences at school (see above):

What was school like?

Cool.

Cool? Going to school— this is Sandy Bay Primary?

Mm.

So you liked playtime?

Mm—and lunch as well.

What were your favourite subjects?

Maths, Science and English.

And you still like those subjects?

Mm.

What about the teachers?

Good.

What about the other children whom you weren't friends with? What were they like?

Good.

So, how did you feel when you were at school?

Good...

Did you get bored at school ever?

Mm-mm [meaning no].

It was always interesting?!

You got that one right.

How did you feel before school, in the mornings?

Good as well.

⁵¹ I am using the word 'school' to include preschool unless specifically talking about Jamie for the sake of simplicity.

As with Liam, Jamie's description of his feelings and behaviour at kindergarten were not compatible with his mother's story:

[What was kindy like?]

I liked it.

You liked it?

Yeah.

And you had fun there?

[nods]

Did your Mum have to leave you at kindy?

Yeah.

How did that make you feel?

Um, all right.

It didn't bother you?

No, because I had Alex there.

Was there ever a day when you didn't want to go to kindy?

No.

You always wanted to go?

Yeah.

So if Mummy said, "it's a kindy day", how did that make you feel?

Good.

Jamie's preschool teachers, Mrs Kate and Mrs Mary, offered a third account of Jamie's kindergarten experience, indicating that in their opinion Jamie appeared uncomfortable and withdrawn in the kindergarten environment compared with at home⁵², although they did not see him as distressed or resistant:

Mrs Kate: I wouldn't say that he was unhappy. I wouldn't say that he was necessarily where he wanted to be.

Mrs Mary: He could join in fine but it was always with a lot of encouragement.

What were your impressions of him in the home environment?

Mrs Kate: ...I saw a completely different child from the child that we'd seen previously at kindergarten...The difference between the two was remarkable...

From a realist worldview, one might evaluate Liam's and Jamie's memories of school and their mothers' accounts in terms of their truth-value. After checking school records and interviewing eyewitnesses we might conclude that the mothers' accounts are true and hypothesise that the boys are 'repressing' their traumatic memories of school. Or we might believe that the boys' stories are the more accurate and the mothers' accounts are a product of maternal neuroticism, anxiety and paranoia. Alternatively, from a constructionist perspective we can understand Liam and Jamie (and their mothers) as putting together events in a way that makes sense to them.

⁵² Mrs. Kate had visited Jamie at home and spent time getting to know him in preparation for Jamie's return to kindergarten as a four-year-old.

In *Pathology and the Postmodern: Mental illness as Discourse and Experience*, Burr and Butt (2000) state that we naturally ‘story’ our experience. When we remember the past, we selectively recall events so as to construct a story of the past that is personally meaningful. Accounts of school can be understood as an inseparable mixture of construction and event. It is not surprising then that the boys’ accounts radically differ from their mothers’, as they would be expected to approach and recall events with a very different set of assumptions, understandings and life experiences. For Liam and Jamie, the school story that makes sense may be the one that fits smoothly with the socially dominant view of school as a ‘good’ and ‘safe’ place for children. Facts about school that fit the dominant story “emerge and are reinterpreted, those that do not are forgotten” (Burr & Butt, 2000, p.201). This is what Spence (cited in Burr & Butt, 2000) refers to as ‘narrative smoothing’. Burr and Butt state:

The ‘facts’ of the past are not like mushrooms, waiting to be collected; they are picked out with shifting narrative searchlights. When a new story emerges, new facts are remembered...Memory is thus not a simple matter of accuracy, but one of construing afresh in the present. (p.201)

If we understand remembering as a process of ‘construing afresh in the present’ rather than of accurately recalling events, the boys’ responses to my interview questions may make more sense. In Jamie’s case, the process of attaining an autobiographical account of his experiences at kindergarten was both difficult and perplexing as my field notes indicate:

We came back inside and I attempted to engage him in conversation about kindy. He was quite adamant that he didn’t remember anything about kindy and reiterated this a number of times. However, as we talked he seemed to remember quite a lot—all of it good! He kept trying to turn the conversation back to his own interests and away from kindy/school.

Jamie’s initial insistence that “he didn’t remember anything about kindy” can be read as ‘I don’t have a story about kindy to tell’. The story that Jamie eventually does tell is a unique construction arising out of his social interactions with me as I probed and questioned him. This story selectively draws on events from his history to construct a narrative that is in keeping with the dominant social understanding of kindergarten as fun.

A person is not determined by her/his history, but rather by the way s/he stories it (Burr & Butt, 2000). Like Csóti’s (2003) daughter (discussed in chapter five), Liam and Jamie appear to have internalised their parents’ and society’s message that school is basically ‘good’. However, they have come to understand and account for their resistance very differently from Csóti’s daughter. They do not recognise or own any of their feelings or

actions related to school and certainly do not see themselves as ‘anxious’, ‘mentally ill’, ‘school phobic’ or even as having a ‘problem’. Although Liam and Jamie did not remember their school behaviour as abnormal or problematic, they were clear about not wanting to return to school. In fact, Jamie’s first exposure to kindergarten after turning five (while dropping off his younger sisters) indicated that his feelings regarding kindergarten attendance were still extremely negative:

When the twins started kindergarten—so Jamie was now five and a quarter—and the first day—and he was absolutely aware of the fact that *they* [not him] were going to kindergarten—he literally just got incredible nervous as we drive up to the kindergarten. He held onto my arm and began sort of simpering “Don’t leave me, don’t leave me”...This physical change just came over him and he was just like a limpet. He was just so scared. I just thought this is obviously not just a young child who needs to grow up. (Karen)

When we approach memories as contextually embedded constructions rather than factual records of the past, we can see the events an individual recalls at any given time as influenced by their particular goals, such as whether they wish to support a specific self-view, regulate emotions or establish intimacy with others (Pasupathi, 2001). The above quote may indicate that Jamie was indeed highly anxious about being left at kindergarten but for some reason chose to construct kindergarten as fun in his conversations with me and resisted any other interpretation. An example of how memories can be constructed to serve certain personal and social purposes comes from my conversations with Liam and Sam about school work. At the time of interview, Liam and Sam expressed a positive perception of themselves as learners. Sam stated that as a home schooler he was “a lot smarter” and did “a lot harder stuff”. Liam thought that he was learning more at home than he had at school because his Mum and Dad were teaching him “everything every day”. In contrast, according to their mothers, these boys had experienced significant learning difficulties at school resulting in low confidence, frustration and teasing. Sam struggled with handwriting and other tasks requiring fine motor skills and had been diagnosed with dyspraxia. Liam had difficulty concentrating, sitting still and thinking quickly, and was unable to read or write when he left school. He had been diagnosed with ADHD and dyslexia. So, I was a little surprised when both boys recalled school work as being easy—even *too* easy:

How did you find the work at school? Did you find the work hard?

Pimps [easy].

Were you bored or what?

Yip. We had to do the same maths equations. Like the hardest was—teacher gave it—25 x 1. (Sam)

How do you find Correspondence?

Sort of hard but sort of easy. Sort of hard, sort of easy.

What was it like compared to school?

Harder than school. (Liam)

One explanation for the boys' claims that the work at school was easy is that they were recalling their school experiences in a way that supported a current view of themselves as competent learners. Memories of academic success at school may well boost their confidence and self-esteem, and simultaneously present them in the best possible light to their listeners. Sam in particular is likely to have listened to and participated in many family discussions where his mother and high-functioning sister expressed the opinion that school is under-stimulating and does not cater for more capable students, as Clare (Sam's mother) and Brittany (Sam's sister) were very forthright in sharing this view of school with me during our conversations. These family discussions may have helped shape Sam's assumptions about school and his autobiographical memories.

Co-constructed Stories

When people talk about events in their lives they often omit some information, focusing on particular aspects of an event depending on the situation and listener. Burr and Butt (2000) state that "story-telling is not a simple individual-level phenomenon" (p.201):

...stories are good examples of 'joint action'—they are not principally individual productions. Though they require a basis in the lives of tellers, they also need encouragement and the articulation of others to produce them. It is also necessary to have audiences willing to accept them, and perhaps recognize their own experiences within them. (p.201)

Memories, as stories, are not just constructions but 'co-constructions' in which both speaker and listener influence when and how an event is talked about and interpreted, and the types of emotions that are connected with the event (Pasupathi, 2001). School resisters' memories of school, and the stories they tell about school, are shaped by the conversations that they have with others.

With regards to Liam and Jamie, who remembered school as fun and interesting, we may wonder why their mothers' significant critiques of schooling were not apparently influential in the children's narratives. A possible explanation is that Liam and Jamie had not been exposed to their mothers' (or anyone else's) 'anti-school' ideas. Therefore, they made sense of their school experiences using dominant social meanings about school that were

readily available to them through television, books and conversation. In the process of storying our experience we can only draw on discourses that are available to us, and these discourses frequently reflect dominant, 'objective' knowledges that enjoy widespread social acceptance as 'truth'.

Vicky (Liam's mother) and Karen (Jamie's mother) sought to protect their children from recognising the negative aspects of institutionalised education by intentionally discussing school in positive ways or alternatively avoiding discussing it at all around their children. Despite Karen's serious misgivings regarding conventional education expressed throughout our conversations, she has attempted to instill in Jamie a positive attitude towards kindergarten and school:

We tried really hard not to make it traumatic...We did everything we could to make his experience [at kindy] one that was good for him the second time. Cause I really felt that up until then he had a very disturbed memory of kindy...I would love to think that he viewed school as something that was neat, if he ever got to go.

Karen's desire to protect her "little child" from the negative realities of school (as she understands it) extends beyond just choosing to home school; also shaping the ways in which she discursively produces school in conversations with and around her son. This seems in part to be a reaction to being raised by an 'anti-establishment' mother who openly shared her negative opinion of state schools with her children:

I don't want to fill his mind with—I felt that happened to me a little bit as a child, that Mum was so 'anti' the state curriculum, that state schools had a connotation of state penitentiary to me...I went there assuming it was going to be prison fences and corporal punishment...

Karen has been successful in producing and transmitting to Jamie an idealised picture of school. Jamie stated that he wanted to go to school when he got "bigger" (i.e. ten years old), and believed that going to school would be "better" than being home schooled. He also appeared to believe that at school he would have opportunities that home did not afford, such as the opportunity to pursue his (scientific) interests: "I really want to go to a scientists' lab. It's a big building [at school] where children go to learn how to do science...they have a table with springs and heat up water and bottles".

By the time that Vicky withdrew Liam from school, her relationship with school personnel was very adversarial and she felt let down by the whole school system. Although she believed that Liam's experience at school had also been fraught, Vicky deliberately avoided letting him know how she felt about the school and its staff members:

I was very careful not to get personal about certain parties at the school because they had gotten very personal with me, but I didn't want him to know, you know, that things had—what sort of things had gone on. I just said to him that Mum and Dad didn't feel that school was the best place for him right now and that he wasn't coming back to the school.

The desire to protect her son, who she understood as “at risk”, from further school-related distress leads Vicky to carefully avoid transmitting her ‘negative’ feelings and critical ideas about school to Liam. As a result, Liam attaches a very different meaning to his school withdrawal from the one that Vicky understands as ‘factual’ and ‘true’ (see below), that is, that she was forced to take Liam out of school because the school refused to accommodate his needs and threatened to exclude him:

Why do you think your Mum and Dad are home schooling you?

Because they like me—around [mother laughs]

And they don't want to send you away all day?

Nope. (Liam)

Further evidence that Liam and Jamie had taken up a socially dominant view of school came from the apparently conformist attitudes they expressed regarding school and school attendance. They seemed to accept that in the classroom the teacher is in charge and individual needs and interests are subservient to the group. Liam stated that he felt “sad” when he was asked to stop doing his own “stuff” and join in with the other children in his class. Although he says he resisted joining in, he appears to believe that the teacher should have forced him to comply rather than ignoring his behaviour:

When you had to do stuff that you didn't want to do, how did you feel then?

Sad, cause I wanted to do my own sort of stuff. Like I said last time, if I was doing something and the other children wanted me to come to them and listen to the book, I wouldn't, I would carry on what I was doing.

And would you get in trouble for that?

No.

What would the teacher do?

Just let me do what I was doing.

And what do you think the teacher should have done?

Made me come down and read the book.

Five-year-old Jamie indicated that once enrolled at school, nonattendance was no longer an option for him:

And what about if you went to school and you didn't like it? What would happen then?

I don't know.

Do you think you would have to go to school or could you come back home?

No, I would keep going.

Even if you didn't like it?

Yes.

Why?

Well, because...I think that's just what I would do...

With a philosophical resignation that seemed to belie his age, Jamie indicated that although he did not like reading, at school he *would* learn to read, and he *would* learn to like it:

Well there's definitely a lot of things that I can do at school.

Like?

Um, reading.

But you said reading wasn't really one of your favourite things.

Well, no but I *will* learn it. Slowly I *will* like it. Mostly I like cuddling Smokey [the rabbit].

It is interesting to note that while Jamie insisted that he liked kindergarten and wanted to attend, he was adamant that his twin sisters did *not* like kindergarten and in fact stated: "we forced them to go...Because they have to". This would seem to suggest that Jamie has assimilated a socially dominant understanding of kindergarten and school as 'inevitable' and 'necessary', even for those children who do not like them. Actually, according to Karen, Jamie's sisters both settled quickly into kindergarten and were quite happy to attend. Jamie's authoritarian and uncompromising attitude towards his sister's supposed desire to avoid kindergarten may reflect his own experience of feeling pressured to attend against his will.

Following the interviews with Liam and Jamie, I spoke to Vicky and Karen about their children's responses. Both mothers were surprised that their child remembered school as a happy, fun place. In both cases, the mothers took their child's positive account of school to mean that he was no longer distressed by his school experiences. Vicky explained Liam's positive school memories by suggesting that he had "blocked a lot of [the bad memories] out" and had a poor short-term memory due to ADHD. She seemed quite pleased that Liam evidently did not remember what had 'really' happened at school:

I'm surprised...he was very upset on a day-to-day basis, but he obviously doesn't remember...We always said that was a good thing, cause he never held a grudge...So, in a way it's good that he doesn't remember...Yes, that's rather enlightening. It's rather pleasing really that he's forgotten most of those feelings.

Karen argued that it was "logical" for children to assume that kindergarten is a 'good' place, as adults clearly want them to be there. She attributed Jamie's positive account of kindergarten to "selective memory", but also took this as affirmation that she had succeeded in minimising the traumatic impact of stressful kindergarten experiences on her son:

...we tried not to make it traumatic...Cause I really felt that up until then he had a very disturbed memory of kindy...He felt very defeated and very frightened and very unhappy about something that had happened...I don't have to hear him say that. For me, if anything, it's awesome to know that he doesn't have trauma associated with that...

It may seem surprising that Vicky and Karen, who both understand school as a highly problematic and potentially destructive educational and social environment, should be happy to hear that their boys have positive memories and perceptions of school that are so at odds with their own feelings and beliefs. The mothers seem to interpret their sons' 'naivety' regarding their school experiences as evidence that they have not been emotionally traumatised. Hence, Vicky and Karen may have a vested interest in their children taking up and expressing dominant meanings about school. In protecting their children from 'what really happened' (as they understand it) and constructing and transmitting a view of school as 'good', Vicky and Karen are ensuring that their children's memories of school are positive—rather than disturbing, traumatic or self-effacing—and may thereby be protecting their own self-concepts as competent mothers with 'well-adjusted', 'happy' and 'confident' children. I consider the other children's memories and perceptions regarding school, and their school resistance, in the following section.

The Child's Critical Process

In chapter two, I described Yoneyama's (1999) theory of the *tōkōkyōhi* process, what she calls the 'student discourse', which constructs *tōkōkyōhi* as an inner journey of self-examination, philosophical reflection and social re-evaluation. Yoneyama understands *tōkōkyōhi* students as 'alienated' from their 'true' selves, and constructs the *tōkōkyōhi* process as involving a move from 'false consciousness' towards an authentic and completed (stable) subjectivity. As a process that can lead to de-alienation and healthy nonconformity, Yoneyama understands *tōkōkyōhi* as a potentially "positive and empowering" (p.235) (although very distressing) experience:

[*Tōkōkyōhi*] is a process of reconstructing one's subjectivity, which is often accompanied by the emergence of a critical approach to school. *Tōkōkyōhi* is a painful process of de-alienating oneself from various social understandings learned at school and in society at large. (p.246)

Although I was born and educated in New Zealand, Yoneyama's (1999) story of *tōkōkyōhi* resonates deeply with me. As a school-resistant adolescent, I was like the majority of Yoneyama's subjects, taking "substantial time off school...staying mostly at home in a self-imposed state of isolation", and I experienced what could be described as a "long and hard process of self-doubt and self-questioning" (p.231). My experiences could indicate that

the transformative process Yoneyama describes is a universal psychosocial reality among school resisters. It is also possible that Yoneyama's account of *tōkōkyōhi*, rather than describing my experiences, gives me a framework within which to 'recognise' my experiences and construct my school resistance as profound, transformative and, ultimately, rewarding in terms of 'personal growth'.

It is possible to 'story' *tōkōkyōhi*, not as a psychosocial process, but as a discursive process in which the meaning of *tōkōkyōhi* is transformed by bringing a different set of assumptions to it. If, while doing *tōkōkyōhi*, students are exposed to alternative ways of understanding *tōkōkyōhi* (and/or education/life/society) that appear to represent their interests better than dominant meaning systems, then they may take up these philosophies, perspectives and values as personal 'truths'. Given that critical perspectives on *tōkōkyōhi* appear to be more widespread in Japan than in Western societies (disseminated by *tōkōkyōhi* schools, organisations and support/action groups), it seems reasonable to assume that *tōkōkyōhi* students may come in contact with anti-establishment ideas about school/school attendance at some point while they are absent from school.

When I first came across Yoneyama's (1999) work, I expected to see signs that the New Zealand children I interviewed had rejected a "school-centred way of thinking" (Yoneyama, 1999, p.234) and developed a more independent, self-conscious and critical approach to school because this was how I had come to understand my responses to school. Such an expectation assumes that there is a universal process involved in school resistance that can be identified and used to describe and make sense of individual cases. However, we cannot assume that children experience school or school resistance the same way in New Zealand as they do in Japan, or that all Japanese students who do *tōkōkyōhi* will have the same experiences as those whose stories inform Yoneyama's research. It may be that New Zealand school resisters, or at least the ones I spoke with, do not have access to the meaning systems that Yoneyama's *tōkōkyōhi* students use to make sense of their experience. These meaning systems may be culturally specific or age specific and therefore only accessible to certain individuals, in certain places, at certain times. The children included in my study were all under the age of twelve years at the time of their school problems: Jamie was a preschooler; Jonathan was in his first year at intermediate school; and Peter, Liam, Amanda, Brittany and Sam were at primary school. This contrasts with the students in the Yoneyama

study who were mostly teenagers. It is possible that young children, for various biological and social reasons, lack exposure to critical perspectives on school and society and therefore would be unlikely to take up these ideologies and the modes of subjectivity which they imply.

Only two of the five children who agreed to speak with me were fervently critical of school. Sam complained of “bullies” and “grumpy teachers”, and described school as “a horrible place”. He stated that the work was “pimps” [easy] and that he felt “bored”. Brittany also complained of “real mean teachers”, being bullied, and boredom in the classroom: “I would just do these little scribbles in my book, I was that bored...[laughs]”. She stated that the only good thing about school was the library. Although described as academically gifted by her mother, Brittany said she “was glad to get out of [the classroom]”. Both children indicated that they believed there was something ‘wrong’ with the school system. Brittany’s criticisms seemed to focus on schools failing to teach basic skills and not sufficiently extending students academically: “some of the schools, they don’t teach the older stuff...they [friends who attend school] didn’t even know what a vowel was, not even a compound word—which we knew. That’s how the schools are failing”. Sam suggested that some of the school rules “weren’t very good” and the students were not “disciplined very well”.

I agree with Yoneyama (1999) that the critical stories that school resisters like Brittany and Sam tell about school can be attributed to a “re-construction of the perception of school” (p.239). However, I do not see this process as necessarily linked to a “reconstruction and de-alienation of the self” (p.240). Rather, it may be that children’s critical perspectives on school are directly related to their exposure to anti-school and anti-establishment ideas. From this perspective, the critical awareness demonstrated by Brittany and Sam may still be understood as involving a shift in consciousness, but this shift is not due to discovering the ‘truth’ about school through introspection and self-analysis, rather it results from bringing a different set of assumptions to bear on the school experience, assumptions that, among other things, construct schools as poorly managed, teachers as incompetent and unprofessional, and an aversion to school as ‘natural’.

Clare (the mother of Brittany and Sam) was passionate about the absurdities, injustices and inadequacies of mainstream education, as she saw it. Her story can be understood as informed by critical discourses about schooling that see conventional schools

as largely inept. These discourses and the ways she positions herself within them as a ‘dissident’, ‘advocate’ (for her children) and ‘protector’ (of her children) informs her maternal practice with regards to having children at school. Clare recalled two explosive encounters she participated in with school personnel, in which Brittany was present. In the first story, she confronts a ‘bully’ in the playground who has been scaring Brittany by playing monsters, telling him, “If you continue to [scare Brittany], I will make sure you are so scared, you can’t do it”. Clare’s behaviour in this instance quickly attracts a number of teachers who attempt (unsuccessfully) to intervene and stop her. The account ends with the ‘bully’ becoming Brittany’s ‘protector’. The second story describes Brittany as having a panic attack outside her classroom and her teacher yelling out, “Brittany, if you do not get into this class now—you are just being a disobedient little girl”. Clare, outraged at the teacher’s insensitivity and intending to make a complaint to the deputy principal, takes Brittany into a neighbouring classroom and tells the teacher, “I am going to make a complaint about that bitch in there”. Brittany is subsequently moved into a different class while other children whose parents have also complained about the teacher are not shifted.

It is possible that through her ‘militant’ words and actions, Clare not only provided a powerful model of ‘resistant’ behaviour for her children but also made certain critical perspectives regarding school available to them, which they subsequently took up. Since these were children who intensely disliked school and wanted to stay home, these perspectives may have seemed to address their interests more directly than the dominant stories about school (that construct school as ‘good’ and ‘necessary’ for children). It is not surprising then that Brittany and Sam were forthcoming in their anti-school sentiments and were able to articulate ‘what is wrong with school’ in terms that sometimes seemed beyond their years. In the following exchange, ten-year-old Sam tells me that he is being home schooled because his mother is “tired of fighting the system”. Here he demonstrates both a familiarity with the terminology used by some critical theorists and home schooling activists (including his mother), and a perception of power as structured according to relations of dominance and subordination. Sam understands his mother’s actions at school in terms of her resisting (i.e. “fighting”) the power of educational authorities who are constructed as in the wrong:

Why do you think your Mum decided to home school you?
She got tired of fighting the system...

What was she tired of fighting? Who was she tired of fighting?

Um, I'd say the principal and all of the rules of the school. Some of them weren't very good rules.

Like Brittany and Sam, Peter had little positive to say about conventional schooling. He was nineteen years old at the time of interview and (not surprisingly) could remember very little about his school problems that had occurred thirteen years ago. He recalled school being a "disappointing experience" because he was too young to borrow books from the school library and found maths "really boring". He stated that there is nothing "inherently good about school", although he acknowledged that schools do provide access to national examinations which act as gateways to higher learning opportunities. Peter admitted that he rarely discussed home schooling with people outside the family but seemed to have happily adopted a pragmatic pro-home schooling stance, stating that home schooling was the "optimal" choice. He pointed out that at school he would not have had the same freedom and flexibility to work at advanced levels in the subjects that interested him. He appeared to neither embrace nor reject his 'difference' as a home schooler and did not consider it to be a "hurdle", suggesting that being a home schooler was no more meaningful in terms of defining his identity than being a teenager who had chosen the relatively unusual sport of cross-country running.

While Elizabeth (Peter's mother) had a well-developed critique of schooling and was very proactive in the home schooling arena, Peter apparently had not deeply analysed the ethics of compulsory, coercive education and, unlike Yoneyama's (1999) *tōkōkyōhi* students, did not appear to have struggled with issues of 'personal identity'. Rather, he seemed to have happily accepted his social position as a home schooler and focused on pursuing his academic and sporting interests. Peter understands his home schooling experience as more about learning at home for 'positive' reasons than about fearing, disliking or rejecting school. Thus, the discursive field for Peter is very different from that within which Yoneyama's *tōkōkyōhi* students understand their experience. While for Yoneyama's students, doing (or having done) *tōkōkyōhi* becomes a vital part of their identity and sets them apart from 'normal' students, Peter does not see himself as a 'school refuser' but instead takes up a position as a 'normal' home schooler, who is in most ways no different from other teenagers.

The remaining children involved in this study did not say much about disliking school. Amanda failed to return the questionnaire sent to her but according to her mother "is

certainly happy to be at home” and often comments “about how much better off she is than all the children who have to go to school”. Jonathan did not want to be interviewed (what views he has expressed about school to his mother are examined in chapter six). And, as discussed above, Liam and Jamie claimed to have liked school and enjoyed attending.

While we may assume that young children like Liam and Jamie, who can be considered (from a psychological perspective at least) to be socially and cognitively immature, will have difficulty freeing themselves from ‘a school-centred way of thinking’, we might expect older school resisters to display a more developed critique of school and society akin to Yoneyama’s (1999) notion of the ‘student discourse’. However, my child participants (admittedly a small sample) did not fulfil this expectation. Fourteen-year-old Jonathan, for example, was the antithesis of the Stage 4 *tōkōkyōhi* student despite being absent from school for two-and-a-half-years. He was the only child participant in my research who had returned to school. But unlike Yoneyama’s *tōkōkyōhi* students, Jonathan did not return to school with a new critical awareness or nonconformist attitude. He was obviously working hard to fit in at school and to be a ‘good’ student in the conventional sense (much to his mother’s delight). In the following interview excerpt, Anna (Jonathan’s mother) describes how her son refused to visit the doctor on a school morning because he did not want to arrive late for school. Far from being a ‘school refuser’, Jonathan could now be described as a child who is ‘anxious’ to *attend* school. Anna, however, evidently interprets Jonathan’s concerns about being late for school as confirmation that he “loves school” and hence has made a complete recovery from his ‘school phobia’:

...this morning...I wanted him to get...some asthma medication...And I booked him in to see Dr P because she only works mornings...I couldn’t get him in after school. But he says to me, “I don’t want to miss school, Mum”. He said, “I’d rather go. Can you make it in the holidays or something?” So I had to ring up this morning. I thought, fine! This is a complete turn around, isn’t it? (LAUGHS)...But anyway, I thought, well, this is great! Here I give him, you know. I was gonna quickly get him to see the doctor, get that done, and then whiz him up to school, but he didn’t want to miss anything. So I thought, it’s completely—he loves school now.

Jonathan’s desire to be at school during school hours expresses a subjectivity that arises out of dominant discourses about school that construct children as ‘normal’ and ‘functional’ when they comply with institutional demands. Anna admitted that when Jonathan started resisting school she felt “upset” because she “wanted him to fit in” and “be like every other kid”. Jonathan’s desire to ‘be like every other kid’ is understood and treated

by Anna as ‘appropriate’ and ‘healthy’, as indicated in Anna’s account of Jonathan’s Orientation Day⁵³:

He put his uniform on and he went up [to the school]...And when we got in there, there’s all these people sitting down...And he looked around and he realised he was the only one in school uniform...he just said to me...“Can we go home and get changed?” He said, “I don’t wanna go all around the school in my uniform!”...And I could tell that he was anxious about it...But he just wanted to be normal. He wanted to feel like everybody else in their ordinary clothes and he felt that he stuck out like a sore thumb, you see, in his uniform (LAUGHS)...I knew he was worried about being the odd one out. He didn’t want to be odd.

Jonathan’s compliance regarding school return may relate to Anna’s desire for him to “try and go back to school” in order to take advantage of school-based resources (e.g. experienced math’s teachers, science equipment) and free her up to work more: “Jonathan was aware...[that] I wanted him to try—even if it didn’t work—I wanted him to try and go back to school”. As Anna points out, Jonathan was well aware that she wanted him to ‘fit in’ at school, that she felt inadequately prepared to teach him secondary school maths and ‘hard’ sciences, and that she was under financial pressure to return to work. These maternal concerns probably informed Jonathan’s decision to return to school and position himself as a ‘normal’ school attender—highlighting the power of parental beliefs and desires over child subjectivity and experience.

The school narrative Jonathan constructs that informs his decision to return to school and adopt certain ‘conventional’ attitudes and behaviours can be understood as a co-construction in which both Jonathan and Anna have influenced when and how school and school attendance was talked about, interpreted and understood. I would argue that the ways mothers talk about school around and with their school-resistant children are pivotal in determining how a child makes sense of his or her aversion to school. Although Anna claims that the decision to return to school was Jonathan’s, it was clear from our discussions that she was very proactive in encouraging school return and presented school life to Jonathan as stimulating, fun and full of opportunities: “So I kept saying to Jonathan, ‘If you could imagine going to school and you’ll be able to use all the equipment and they have bunsen burners’”. Anna transmits to her son a dominant educational discourse that understands school as the *best* place for teaching and learning to occur. At the same time, Anna constructed the option of continuing with home schooling as highly problematic and limiting

⁵³ An informal introductory day for all pupils new to the school.

(in terms of social and academic opportunities): “But when it comes to chemistry, I mean, I couldn’t [teach Jonathan] that”.

Anna’s insistence on school being the best place for Jonathan to continue with his education seems inconsistent with other beliefs Anna voiced about children, learning and education. For example, she stated that “in the [school] teaching situation, the teacher has to have control”. This bothered Anna (being a teacher) as she felt that “children who were divergent, who had a slightly different passion” were not adequately catered for at school “because it’s necessary that...all [the children] do the same thing at the same time, so you can get through your programme”. Anna can be understood as holding both dominant and critical perspectives on schooling and as embracing quite contradictory modes of subjectivity at different moments as she positions herself as ‘mother’, ‘teacher’ and ‘home schooler’. But, interestingly, it is the socially dominant meanings about school that Jonathan has eventually assimilated and which shape his identity as a ‘school attender’. Some meanings and forms of subjectivity are more readily available to the individual than others. Discourses that construct school as the proper place for children to be educated and socialised, and the only place where a ‘school-aged’ child becomes truly ‘normal’ (in educational terms at least), are dominant in New Zealand society.

Forms of subjectivity and experience arise from discourses that are socially and culturally specific. According to the ‘student discourse’, *tōkōkyōhi* children initially understand their *tōkōkyōhi* as related to genuine physical illness. They have little or no awareness of disliking school and, in fact, still want to attend school but feel that they cannot (usually due to exhaustion). In comparison, I found no evidence in my data to indicate that the children were unaware of their negative feelings about school (prior to being home schooled) or that they understood their school resistance as stemming from genuine illness. Clare, for instance, stated that Sam would beg not to be left at school: “[He would say] ‘don’t leave me Mum, please don’t let me go to school, I love you Mum, please don’t leave me’”. Liam did appear to have quite an ambivalent relationship with school—enjoying playing with his school friends (at least in theory) but disliking other aspects of school such as the academic work and assemblies. This was explained by Vicky with reference to Liam’s poor short-term memory and high suggestibility.

Yoneyama (1999) accounts for the apparent lack of self-awareness characteristic of tōkōkyōhi students in the early days of their school non-attendance in terms of the student being so ‘alienated’ from their ‘true’ negative feelings about school that the desire to avoid school must manifest itself through physical disorder:

In the beginning, it is an almost complete state of alienation, in which conscious understanding is utterly at odds with the way one’s body registers the experience. Physical disorder is the means through which students come to be aware of what is happening to them (p.92)

This would appear to be a psychoanalytically inspired theory drawing on the idea that unconscious intrapsychic conflicts are expressed through bodily symptoms. Certainly, Yoneyama’s students report some dramatic and unusual ‘psychosomatic’ symptoms that appear to be aimed at preventing school participation such as stabbing pains during lessons, being physically unable to get out of bed, and trembling and aching when trying to reach for a pencil.

While it is possible to understand the physical symptoms that children who dislike school frequently exhibit as stress, “burnout” or “alienation” (Yoneyama, 1999, p.240), it is also possible that sometimes such symptoms are, as psychologists’ assert, not ‘genuine’. Complaints of physical illness can be understood as a form of resistance⁵⁴. Weedon (1987) states that “Where there is space between the position of subject offered by a discourse and individual interest, a resistance to that subject position is produced” (p.112-113). When children find themselves positioned as ‘school-aged’ within dominant cultural discourses about education but feel that school attendance is not in their best interests, there may be few paths of resistance open to them. Feigning illness and exaggerating physical complaints can be ways for children who find school distressing to consciously resist the cultural imperative to attend school, and need not necessarily be interpreted as the ‘manipulative’ actions of a ‘wilful’ child, the ‘psychosomatic’ symptoms of an ‘anxious’ child, or the ‘psychic’ conflicts of an ‘alienated’ child. A study that I conducted with adults who had resisted school as children (see Stroobant, 2000) would seem to support this interpretation. The adults I spoke with admitted that as children they had at times intentionally used groundless somatic complaints to avoid school, but argued that this was reasonable and legitimate behaviour

⁵⁴ Yoneyama (1999, p.211) asserts that the citizens’ discourse in Japan constitutes tōkōkyōhi as ‘resistance’ to school.

because ‘sickness’ provided a socially acceptable (and necessary) excuse for not being at school.

According to Yoneyama (1999), the *tōkōkyōhi* students understood their inability to attend school as a serious personal and social failure, at least during the initial stages of their resistance. These Japanese students seem to have deeply internalised the notion that not going to school is fundamentally wrong (perhaps making a belief in genuine physical symptoms all-important). For instance, one child who had stopped attending school recalled believing that all *tōkōkyōhi* students were “scum” and wondering whether not going to school meant that he was also scum⁵⁵. A thirteen-year-old girl stated that she used to think she “was ‘no good’ (*dame*) as a human being because everyone else was going to school”⁵⁶. Another teenager wrote that he felt “shamed and disgraced for lying” and “missing school for laziness”⁵⁷. Being labelled as doing ‘*tōkōkyōhi*’ can be understood as carrying with it connotations of a ‘spoiled identity’⁵⁸. As a result, such a social designation is likely to be strenuously resisted by individuals, for example, by denying that they dislike school and by trying to establish legitimate grounds for being absent (e.g. sickness).

While the children in my study appeared to know that they ‘should’ be at school (hence their experiences of parents and teachers pressuring them to attend), I did not get the impression that they anticipated complete social rejection or judged themselves as worthless human beings solely because they failed to attend school. This does not necessarily mean that they did not feel and think these things, just that they did not predominantly ‘story’ their school resistance in this way when with me. For both Yoneyama’s (1999) and my subjects, school resistance occurred within a specific social and cultural context. The *tōkōkyōhi* students had already deeply internalised dominant meanings of school resistance as ‘bad’, ‘selfish’ and ‘antisocial’ before they began avoiding school themselves. When they stopped going to school they were positioned by teachers, parents and peers, and positioned themselves, within the dominant behavioural discourse, as ‘scum’, ‘liars’, ‘lazy’ and ‘mean’. As discussed elsewhere, in New Zealand, school resisters are not commonly constructed in

⁵⁵ Contributor to Tokyo Shure no kodomotachi (Children of Tokyo Shure), as quoted in Yoneyama, 1999, p.232.

⁵⁶ Contributor to Ishikawa et al., as quoted in Yoneyama, 1999, p.232.

⁵⁷ Contributor to Tokyo Shure no kodomotachi (Children of Tokyo Shure), as quoted in Yoneyama, 1999, p.209.

⁵⁸ A term used by Croghan and Miell (1998) with regards to women being labelled as ‘bad mothers’.

these ways or understood as presenting a threat to wider society. Instead, school resistance is often constructed as ‘sickness’ or ‘wilfulness’ that is destructive for the individual, distressing for the family and difficult for the school. The fact that the children in my study all initially expressed clear signs of antischool sentiment (usually the *first* suggestion of school problems) may indicate that they did not see disliking and staying home from school as inherently wrong, unforgivable or deeply shameful. Nevertheless, it is unlikely that any of the children had a particularly positive self-image as a school resister. Despite Jonathan’s uncompromising attitude towards school return as a twelve-year-old, Anna states: “he felt bad about it...used to say...‘I hate myself’ and things like that” and “could see it was a problem”. In this account, Jonathan does not sound dissimilar to many of the *tōkōkyōhi* students.

Summary

The children in this study purportedly experienced a dramatic positive turnaround in mood, behaviour and attitude after their parents removed them from school. While we can understand this shift as a result of the children’s (psychological, emotional, learning) ‘needs’ being met through home schooling, it is also possible to see post-school changes, not as a product of home schooling itself, but rather as the result of the children being re-positioned socially and discursively as home schoolers. That is, the changes reported in these school resisters who were home schooled may not so much reflect a personal/psychological transformation as a radical social transformation brought about through their re-positioning within discourse as legal, healthy and functional—if somewhat unconventional—members of society. This re-positioning had profound implications for the children’s material lives and subjective experience, essentially allowing them to become different sorts of subjects, who were understood and treated (and who behaved) in new ways.

I have suggested that accounts of school resistance are constructions that can be understood as serving personal, social and political purposes and are enabled and constrained by the discourses that particular individuals have access to. These stories are not so much personal as interpersonal, and are less interpersonal than truly sociocultural. I have argued that the children’s accounts of their school experiences were to a large extent informed,

shaped and limited by the ways their mothers understood and constructed these experiences. While all the mothers understood their children as requiring protection from aversive, harmful or inept aspects of schooling, some mothers actively suppressed these marginal and potentially subversive meanings about school and instead intentionally transmitted dominant meanings to their children. In these cases, the children appeared to make sense of their school experiences using the dominant meanings that had been made available to them, and not according to the critical perspectives that their mothers communicated to me.

In the final section I discussed my finding that the children in this study, in contrast to Yoneyama's (1999) students, did not appear to have engaged in a profound internal process of reconstructing their selfhood and identity or, on the whole, radically reevaluated their attitudes towards school and society. There are many possible reasons for this, considering the very many differences between the student accounts Yoneyama bases her theory upon and the accounts that I collected from a small group of New Zealand school resisters. However, in keeping with my argument I have suggested that the changes in *tōkōkyōhi* students' subjectivity and ideological outlook may reflect their access to critical discourses that construct *tōkōkyōhi* as a survival response to the highly conformist, dehumanising and alienating Japanese education system. These discourses would appear to offer *tōkōkyōhi* students forms of subjectivity that not only serve their interests better than dominant forms of subjectivity but also allow them to actively critique school and society.

CONCLUSION

Getting ‘Better’: Home Schooling as Discourse and Experience

We live in a society in which individuals increasingly understand themselves, their relationships, and their experience of the world in medical and psychological terms. The pathologisation of school resistance can be understood as a part of this tendency within modern society to interpret many everyday events in terms of potential health effects. While psychological intervention is generally considered a humane and prudent response to situations where children find school distressing, it is possible to understand this intervention as implicated in the pathologisation of school resistance as emotional, behavioural and cognitive disorder. I have argued that the ‘disorders’ associated with school resistance are socially constructed and discursively produced phenomena, *not* evidence of individual biological or psychological malfunction. Furthermore, I have indicated my concern that when school resistance is perceived as an individual problem stemming from pathology within the child and/or its particular family, attention and responsibility are drawn away from the social context within which school resistance occurs. It has been my contention that the pathologisation of children’s resistance to school is ideologically and politically motivated. When school resistance is defined as a ‘personal’ rather than ‘social’ problem, the structure and practice of institutionalised schooling remain uncontested.

A central tenet of this thesis has been to contest the dominant assumption that representations of school resistance are uniform, and to suggest that this phenomenon can be understood in multiple and contradictory ways. In chapter one I traced the emergence and evolution of the constructs ‘school phobia’ and ‘school refusal’ within psychiatric and psychological discourses, and pointed to the contingent, unstable and manufactured nature of these classifications. I have discussed how the meanings of school resistance, and the terms that identify and classify it, have multiplied and changed considerably since this problematic child behaviour first came to the attention of psychoanalysts in the 1930s (although it has maintained its original pathological status within the dominant system of meanings). I have also suggested that many of the assumptions inherent in early conceptions of school

resistance as ‘school phobia’ still underlie contemporary approaches to explaining and treating school resistance.

I have also indicated that a number of marginal discourses about school resistance exist and that these perspectives remain unrecognised by those who hold dominant views. These are what I have called the ‘critical’ discourses. The critical discourses dispute and subvert dominant assumptions about school resistance and school resisters but have been disqualified and subjugated by mainstream perspectives which enjoy strong institutional ties. Individuals who take up these critical discourses understand children’s resistance to school as stemming from a ‘normal’ anxiety/avoidance response to an often aversive and oppressive school environment. Thus, these discourses do not recognise school resistance as a pathological response to school but instead posit that it may in fact be adaptive. From this position, the solution to children disliking and avoiding school lies not so much in ‘fixing’ the child or the family but rather in fixing the school or, more often, in removing the child from the school’s influence and control.

When school resistance is understood as school-induced anxiety, home schooling is constructed as therapeutic and restorative, and parents with children who are distressed about school are seen as concerned and devoted individuals who are being victimised by ‘the system’, a new set of possibilities for the management of school resistance presents itself. I have suggested that conventional treatment practices with school-resistant children often function to disempower these children and their families and come to shape their thinking, behaviour, self-perceptions, and relationships in ways that do not always operate in their best interests. I would argue that home schooling may constitute a positive alternative for some school-resistant children and that this alternative may potentially have better outcomes than convention psychotherapeutic responses.

While the critical discourses on one level reject the assumption that school resistance is a maladaptive response to schooling, notions of pathology still remain in the ways that school resisters are constructed as ‘highly anxious’, ‘sensitive’, ‘exceptional’ and ‘traumatised’ children. While the school resister is not seen as irrational or unreasonable, s/he may still be understood as ‘vulnerable’, ‘sick’ and ‘needy’ from the critical perspective. Thus, while the critical discourses offer alternative ways of reading children’s distress about

school, they may fail to offer school resisters radically different or empowering subject positions with which to identify.

I have discussed the critical theorists' appropriation of psychiatric/psychological vocabulary and classifications. This appropriation may have subversive potential. Within the critical discourses, the terms and classifications associated with school resistance are often given different and sometimes opposite meanings, such as, when 'school phobia' implies a 'rational' rather than 'irrational' anxiety response to school. This can be understood as a form of resistance to dominant understandings. However, the appropriation and subversion of psychiatric/psychological concepts within the critical discourses is problematic. While the use of dominant concepts and vocabularies may make an account of school resistance more acceptable and authoritative in the eyes of some readers, importing labels and concepts unproblematically and without reflexivity ignores and obscures the fact that these constructs exist within historic, social and cultural contexts that have important implications for constructing meaning. When we activate these categories uncritically we may be unintentionally reproducing dominant assumptions that serve to subjugate school resisters and deny them opportunities. In addition, the tendency to use dominant terminology interchangeably and arbitrarily, evident among the critical theorists, denies the power that these classifications have to discursively constitute children in particular ways, for particular ends.

One of my stated aims in undertaking this study was to explore the ways that practitioners understand and construct school resistance and what this means with regard to their responses to school resistance and, in particular, their attitudes towards home schooling the school-resistant child. My discussions with practitioners indicated that while they expressed somewhat vague, ambivalent and contradictory perspectives on school resistance, they clearly understood a certain proportion of school resisters as 'disordered' and requiring professional help. These children were thought to have problems that fell outside the scope of the educational practitioner's professional practice and indicated a need for mental health 'experts' (counsellors and psychologists in the main). This group of children were understood as 'at risk' of mental illness, educational failure and social maladjustment. It appeared that practitioners were drawing on the dominant discourses to constitute a sub-section of school resisters as 'sick' and in need of 'fixing'. This group of children were the

persistent school resisters who could not be persuaded to return to school by parents, teachers or principals. These results may imply that when children are determined not to accept the social ‘truth’ that school is ‘good’ and ‘necessary’ for them, their behaviour will necessarily be understood as not only problematic, but also pathological, that is, as symptomatic of some disorder that has little or nothing to do with the school itself.

The practitioners did not evince any awareness of the discursive power of the language they used to produce meaning, and thus shape subjectivity and experience. Most practitioners accepted and used the terms I nominated for referring to school resistance without comment or, in the case of GSE psychologist David Brown, as ‘more’ or ‘less’ appropriate descriptors for anxiety disorders or anxious behaviour. This is perhaps not surprising as language is generally treated as descriptive rather than constitutive and there is no particular reason why these individuals, as practitioners rather than theorists or academics, would have access to alternative ways of understanding and approaching language.

Another important finding (within the context of this project) with regard to practitioner perspectives was the way that home schooling was understood in relation to those persistent school resisters seen to be displaying a pathological response to schooling. Home schooling was understood as highly problematic in these cases and practitioners generally indicated that they would approach it only as a ‘last resort’. This is a dominant view that arises out of the psy discourses that construct home schooling as ‘contraindicated’ in cases where children resist school. This finding may imply that when children are identified as persistent school resisters by educational practitioners and are therefore understood as requiring the attention of mental health experts who generally operate within the dominant system of meanings, they will almost certainly be understood as exhibiting pathological responses to school and may receive a formal classification of ‘school refusal’. Consequently, the option of home schooling may be effectively ruled out for them as far as professionals are concerned.

An increased awareness among educational practitioners that the claim ‘school is good and necessary’ is not an indisputable, fundamental ‘truth’ (but a social construction open to reinterpretation) may allow more children to question and oppose conventional schooling through non-attendance without being seen and treated as ‘maladjusted’, ‘disturbed’ and ‘sick’ individuals. In conjunction there needs to be an increased awareness

among practitioners that there are multiple ways of understanding school resistance and that this child behaviour need not be construed as pathological just because it is problematic for those who have deeply invested in institutionalised schooling.

In chapter five I examined the therapeutic treatment of children classified as school phobics/school refusers and argued that contemporary interventions with school resisters are not primarily punitive and repressive but rather attempt to manage the socially unacceptable behaviour of these individuals by reconstituting their subjectivity. I have suggested that therapy can effect a more profound subjugation of school resisters than responses that involve external force. Therapy aimed at ‘helping’ children return to school may be more difficult to resist than attempts at forcing a child to go to school because therapeutic surveillance and control come in the guise of ‘caring’ and ‘supporting’ children who are told that they need ‘fixing’ by ‘experts’. In this chapter, I also pointed to the possibility that home schooling may function in some similar ways to therapy, shaping the subjectivity of school resisters in particular ways that may in fact lead back to school. Home schooling can be understood as ‘therapeutic’ in that it offers techniques for (self) healing and transformation (as was apparent in Jonathan’s case). Within this view, home schooling becomes a therapeutic technique capable of restoring ‘maladjusted’ children to functionality and wholeness. When home schooling ‘enables’ school return we must be careful that its ideologies and practices have not simply become another technique for promoting the interests and agendas of those in authority.

In chapter seven I focused on the ways that the mothers who participated in this study understood and responded to their children’s problematic school behaviour. The notion of the ‘good mother’ can be seen as a powerful social construct that has profound implications for maternal subjectivity and experience. I have suggested that mothers are highly motivated to constitute themselves in terms of this ideal and equally motivated to avoid being designated ‘bad mothers’, a position which is socially stigmatised and presents a threat to maternal self-esteem and identity. Furthermore, I have argued that having a child who resists school may constitute a serious threat to a mother’s self-image and social status, and therefore that the school-resistant child presents as a ‘problem’ that its mother must solve. I have suggested two ways that mothers with school-resistant children might resist being designated as ‘bad mothers’ by actively positioning themselves within the existing framework of what ‘good

mothering' means and can mean, as 'responsible' and 'nurturing' mothers. My discussions with mothers indicated that by drawing on certain ideas and values prominent in home-schooling and natural-mothering discourses the mothers in this study were able to successfully defend their maternal identity and constitute home schooling as a positive and beneficial experience for themselves as well as their children. However, in taking up certain ideals/ideas and using them to revalidate their own knowledge and alter their power relations with institutions and experts, these mothers also committed themselves to a certain path that required them to take responsibility for 'saving' their child from 'the system'. The majority of mothers indicated that they had not started home schooling 'by choice' but had felt forced to take up this option for the 'good' of the child.

The various accounts of school resistance given by the participants can be understood as 'stories', original constructions of recalled events, shaped according to various interests, needs and desires. From this perspective, none of the accounts are accurate renditions of events, but this does not in any way diminish their value or power to constitute meaning and experience. The ways in which school resistance is constructed by the individuals experiencing it determines what kind of sense they make of it and what possibilities they see for responding to it (or even whether they see a response as necessary). In addition, I argued that stories about school resistance are not individual but joint productions and that for the children in this study; mothers seemed to play a role in transmitting or constructing meaning about school and school problems with and for their children. While it was not clear from my data exactly what exposure children had to critical and anti-establishment views on school, where mothers clearly indicated that they had either exposed their children to these views or 'protected' them from anti-school ideas, the children did appear to have concordant perspectives, that is, either 'critical' or 'dominant' views of schooling.

I have suggested that the children in this study did undergo a dramatic and positive transformation through the process of home schooling. This does not necessarily mean that changes in the children were due to their perceived 'needs' being met through home schooling. The idea that the school-resistant child has 'needs' that are not met at school but can be met through home schooling, so that the child inevitably 'gets better', relies on a psychological view of the individual and a therapeutic view of home schooling. I have argued that a transformation took place at a social and discursive level, in the ways in which

these children were understood, talked about, interacted with, and positioned within society as legally absent from school. This new social position can be seen to qualitatively alter the experience of school non-attendance and imbue it with a different meaning. Hence, we should not be surprised if school resisters who are officially being home schooled start to think, feel and behave like home-schooled children rather than like 'school refusers'. While both school refusers and home schoolers are at home rather than at school, the meanings, and hence the experiences, attached to each subject position are vastly different. The majority of mental health practitioners do not draw this distinction. 'School refuser' is not understood as an arbitrary and fluid social identity that can be discarded when a child begins home schooling. School refusers are understood as having 'fixed' characteristics and problems, a 'real' disorder that can only be altered through therapeutic intervention. If the school refuser is withdrawn from school then s/he is thought to carry this problematic disposition and pathological disorder with her/him into the home schooling environment. I have argued that this is not necessarily the case, that by being re-positioned as home schoolers, school resisters can in fact become different sorts of subjects who have very different experiences of the world.

After talking with the mothers and children who participated in this study, it is my contention that home schooling needs to be redefined as a legitimate option for children who dislike and avoid school, since this study would indicate that school resisters and their families can experience home schooling as a positive and effective short- and long-term solution to the problems raised by school resistance.

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