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GHOSTS IN THE SYSTEM

The Shaping of Professional Identities within the Organizational Culture(s) of a Private Training Establishment in Auckland, New Zealand

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Abstract

The business strategy of ‘rolling intake’ (or continuous enrolment) defines the lived realities of teachers and academic managers in private language schools. Embedded deeply within institutional processes, it becomes an unquestioned systemic feature. As an operating principle, it serves as the catalyst for an organizational culture of perpetual crisis management, characterized by short-term thinking. Pedagogically suspect, ‘rolling intake’, at best, complicates the professional practices of teachers and academic managers. At worst, it is a major contributor to the job insecurities of language teachers in the private sector.

Founded on two research periods collectively spanning one year, this “at-home” ethnographic study (Alvesson, 2009) sought to investigate how five teachers and four academic managers negotiated the professional challenges they faced, individually and as a community, while working in a private training establishment (PTE) in Auckland, New Zealand. On a certain level, the research project represents an examination of the relationships between stakeholders’ professional identities, the people they teach, and the working environment. More profoundly, as arrived at through grounded theory (Charmaz, 2006), the study implicates ‘rolling intake’ and other systemic ‘innovations’ as instrumental in rendering teachers and their pedagogic concerns invisible. In this thesis, I demonstrate how, despite an inherently anti-social system subordinating pedagogic concerns to a commercial ethic, teachers keep on teaching, and learners keep on learning. They do this through individual acts of resistance which defy the cold rationality of a profit-oriented system, while also avoiding the myopic gaze of audit regimes that cannot capture the complexities of educational practices.
Dedicated to Delyse Steyn – mentor and friend.

Thank you for seeing the teacher in me before I could.
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We have to resist any attempts by those who define teaching too narrowly and work against those who advocate a 'teach to the test' syndrome of a narrow set of teaching attributes. We need to acknowledge that conceptions of good teaching are changing, and that the knowledge and research base of teaching and learning are expanding. This is all occurring at a time when there are significant changes in cultural and social conditions, which impinge on how competent teaching is defined and judged.

- Judyth Sachs, *The Activist Teaching Profession*

**Prologue**

This thesis is an expression and examination of resistance. It represents the academic result of my lengthy employ within the private language teaching industry, and my concurrent questioning of what it means to be a teaching professional in this particular educational arena.

A primary aim of this thesis is to show that even private training establishments, which can arguably be said to lie at the far end of a continuum of profit-driven educational institutions, are and have benefitted in a myriad of ways from the moral and ethical commitments of the educators who work for them. These efforts made by teachers because of their subscription to an ethics of care (Noddings, 2002) are not always recognised locally by their employers. The contributions of teachers and the communities of practice they belong to frequently go beyond mere ‘service provision’, and spring from value systems that refuse to view students or learners as ‘customers’ only.

The case therefore has to be made that a true professionalism in teaching cannot be articulated without referencing the moral, ethical and political dimensions of our intellectual labour. It is here where the varied neoliberal discourses on professionalism are found to be consistently bankrupt. The ultimate irony is that a ‘duty of care’ approach often does
indirectly benefit an institution in terms of favourable customer perceptions, which more often than not translates into financial gain as well. Yet its intangibility makes it impossible to measure in systems that prioritise quantifiable outcomes.

My personal introspection with regards to my role(s) as teacher would have become burdensome over time I suspect, if it were not for the vigorous and fruitful interactions I have had over the years with colleagues, students and academic managers. Their contributions to this project are inestimable for a number of reasons. First, the rich diversity of experiences and practices that these individuals represent served as a reality check for my own assumptions about learning and teaching. Secondly, they unearthed a treasure chest of creative ways in which teachers in their daily practices resisted top-bottom control of their work and found ways to generate deep-level learning outcomes for the learners in their charge, despite the system constraints they operated under.

My intellectual curiosity about the development of professional identities and the nature of language teachers’ work led to further questions regarding the role played by context. Having spent the bulk of my ESL teaching career in the employ of one specific private training establishment, namely Veupoint (a pseudonym), I was interested as to how an organizational culture (s) impacted on the dynamic processes of teachers’ ‘identity work’. In addition, I wanted to explore how individual and collective notions about work roles in turn impacted on the organizational culture (s). It was at this juncture that conducting an at-home ethnography (Alvesson, 2009) became a research methodology to consider.
The types of themes I focused my attention on, namely: organizational culture, professional identity, the nature of work and people’s daily lived realities – appeared suitable for in-depth examination through an anthropological perspective. Secondly, my long-term association with Veupoint as an employee meant that I had a number of understandings (subjective certainly) of certain aspects of the contextual realities there that had been developed over a long period of time – and that this personal experience could be a point of reference when collecting data from people working in the same company.

In the spirit of my opening comments, it is my intention to write this dissertation from the position of making an argument for myself and my fellow teachers (MacLure, 1993). However, just as I am allowing my own subjectivity to colour the description of my teaching reality, so I am also, to as far an extent as possible, giving my fellow teachers and academic managers the opportunity to describe their experiences and understandings of their work in their own words – to express their subjectivities. Again, at the level of writing this is an expression of resistance to the generalising discourses sometimes found in educational research – which too often ‘speak for’ teachers but don’t necessarily allow those teachers to speak for themselves. More importantly, this is also reflective of my own value-orientation of empathy with fellow teachers. In terms of the study, the stance I take is that I am a teacher who does research, not a researcher who does teaching.

So what kind of a teacher am I? It depends on who you ask, and any response would certainly also be bound by time – I am certainly not the fresh-faced TESOL graduate who started work at Veupoint in 2002. On arriving there shortly after my TESOL certification, which was preceded by a stint of teaching English in South Korea, I was eager to make my mark in a new organisation, and I very quickly became a ‘yes’ person.
This willingness to teach anything resulted in a flurry of different General English teaching assignments at various levels, and relatively quickly came to include my first experiences in teaching Cambridge exam courses, such as FCE (First Certificate of English) and CAE (Cambridge Advanced). The learning curve was steep and my hours of sleep were short, but with every passing year, I had the distinct feeling that I was developing a deeper understanding of language, teaching methodologies and the organizational culture(s) I worked in. This in turn provided me with higher levels of confidence in being able to fulfil my responsibilities. The mentoring I received from more established teachers in my first few years of teaching here, and the strong collegial spirit among staff members, were also invaluable components of my professional development at this time.

My first four to five years at Veupoint were characterised by me throwing myself into my work, drinking strong cups of coffee, and exhibiting a voracious appetite for new, innovative teaching ideas and approaches. Social engagement with students was also a significant part of my daily routine, and at that time, students and staff often interacted socially after hours, as the school had an extensive extra-curricular program.

I spent a significant proportion of my salary on purchasing language teaching books for my own personal library on a monthly basis. At times, my eagerness to share ideas I found in my reading bordered on the intrusive, and I am certain that my enthusiasm, although accepted and encouraged in general, also bemused some of those around me. I had found a vocation, and although there were certainly others who shared this orientation, I think it would be fair to also say that some teachers had a more pragmatic and instrumentalist view of their involvement in English language teaching.
In retrospect, I see Andre the young teacher spending most of this time on developing a technical competency in teaching language, in other words, becoming a language expert. That does not mean to say that the other aspects of teaching were not being reflected on or part of the process of developing my professional identity, it just means that the idea of teaching as a ‘set of skills’ to be honed and perfected dominated my efforts. My month-long, intensive TESOL certification had only been a stepping stone and I had felt the need to truly ‘master’ my craft, which I had simplistically envisioned as a form of ‘skilling up’.

By the sixth year of teaching, I felt I had reached a certain saturation point when it came to the use of ESL materials and teaching approaches. Within the specific parameters of a rolling intake system, the particular global course books that formed the backbone of the morning learning programme, and the general topics available for exploitation in afternoon lessons, I felt trapped. I still enjoyed being in the classroom and I still derived great satisfaction from teaching itself, but I had started to experience disillusionment with the system – I felt that the constraints that it imposed on what I could do in terms of teaching greatly outweighed the opportunities that it afforded me. It is during this time that I started to actively seek ways in which I could disrupt and subvert the anodyne content of the teaching materials I was expected to use on a daily basis.

My personal philosophy of teaching as at once subversive and political, which predated my own involvement as an educator (ESL teacher), had finally caught up with my pragmatic whirlwind period of technical ‘skilling up’. In other words, once I had to some extent answered the ‘what?’ and the ‘how?’ of English language teaching for myself, the ‘why?’ question had entered the picture again. And on a personal level, it forced me to then ask whether the ‘what?’ and the ‘how?’ that I had spent my time on had in fact been part of a
different ‘why?’ that I could not possibly agree with at a most fundamental level. I was questioning whether I had in fact ‘constructed’ a teaching persona that on a great many levels did not reflect what I truly believed about the nature of teaching.

My first course of action was to find intellectual stimulation; in a desperate attempt to avoid becoming one of the jaded, cynical teachers I had personally had trouble with as a learner. I enrolled in the MTESOL programme at the University of Auckland (2008-2010), and very soon I was again exploring new realms of theory, which animated my practices as a teacher. Although working full-time and doing post-graduate study was demanding – I was continually surprised at the insights that this balancing act threw up for inspection. I had one foot in the world of theory and abstraction, and the other in the messy world of real-life teaching. My strong belief in the relationship between theory and practice being bi-directional was further enhanced by this 2-year journey.

What the MTESOL did for my conceptions of teaching was to develop my awareness and sensitivity to the socio-cultural aspects of learning and teaching. In my early years of practice, I had bought into the reality of the “egg-crate architecture” (Feiman-Nemser & Floden, 1984) of a school, and this had shaped my individualist and isolationist approach to developing professionally – it had mostly been a solitary pursuit. Now my attentions were directed again towards questions of ‘community’ and the ‘co-construction of knowledge’. Many of the assignments I had to complete for my MTESOL necessitated being involved with various teaching and learning communities – strengthening my focus on learning/teaching as collective enterprise. Rather than finding answers to some of my
frustrations regarding working within the private language industry, I felt that my introspection and reflections on my teaching context as a result of my MTESOL were now bringing previously submerged issues to the fore. I had more questions.

Was I really a teacher? Could I call my job a profession? Were all the criteria that qualified a job as a profession present in my context? Who defined ‘the professionalism’ constantly referred to by managers, teachers, auditors, and government spokespersons? What were the political dimensions of the use of ‘school’ and ‘teachers’ within my place of work? Was I really part of a community of practice (Lave & Wenger, 1991)? And most importantly, were other teachers as well as academic managers asking questions like I was?

By seeking to gain a better understanding of how teaching professionals and academic managers negotiate their pluralistic notions of self within the roles and spaces they inhabit within an organizational culture (s), this thesis represents an attempt to answer, to some degree, the questions posed above.
To study the everyday is to wish to change it. To change the everyday is to bring its confusions into the light of day and into language; it is to make its latent conflicts apparent, and thus to burst them asunder. It is therefore both theory and practice, critique and action. Critique of everyday life encompasses a decision and precipitates it, the most general and the most revolutionary of them all, the decision to render ambiguities unbearable, and to metamorphose what seems to be most unchangeable in mankind because it lacks precise contours.

- Henri Lefebvre, *Critique of Everyday Life, Volume II*

Chasing Ghosts in the System

On the surface level, the flurry of activity that starts a school day at Veupoint is a familiar sight in a great many educational contexts. Students filter through the entrance doors, singly and in groups, and the air is thick with a veritable Babel of streaming languages, punctuated by spasmodic fits and starts of fascinating sound. English sentences and phrases compete for airspace, most of them emanating from those trying to organize, direct or assist. The meandering progress of the learners through the reception area on the way to their classrooms starkly contrasts with the focused strides of administrative or teaching staff hurrying from, or towards duties that have to be carried out before 9AM – when the first English lesson kicks off.
Fighting against the clock and preparing for deadlines have certainly been long-standing features of teachers’ and academic managers’ working lives. However, in the context of a private training establishment (PTE), providing ‘just-in-time’ language instruction, the notion of time is also warped, bent and misshapen in a host of additional ways – in the name of efficiency. The result is a high-octane fuel injection of instability and uncertainty into the organizational system.

As an example, let’s consider the students referred to in the opening paragraph. If I was describing a Monday morning, many of those students would be new – in other words, it would be their first day of study at Veupoint. Within this group of first-day students, periods of enrolment would vary significantly between individuals – ranging from one week of part-time study up to, and beyond, a year of full-time study. Every Monday then, new students, with a high degree of variability in their enrolment periods, join the school system. The fee-paying customer decides when, and for how long, English studies will be undertaken.

Conversely, every Friday, students coming to the end of their period of study, exit the system too. Added to this complex mix are also the large groups of students who come to the school collectively (e.g. teen groups from Tahiti during school holidays, professionals from the same accounting firm, and so on), for a short-term period. These groups serve to swell student numbers significantly on entry into the system, and also leave a black hole of empty seats to fill when they exit ‘en masse’. The most apt summing up of this continuous process of entering and leaving of students that is forever imprinted in my memory is that of an ex-student of mine (enrolled long-term), who lamented, “I’m always saying goodbye”.

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It is clear that the number of teachers employed by the PTE changes too in response to fluctuating student enrolments. Peak seasons (January, March-April, July-August) are characterised by a large contingent of temporary teachers injected into the system to help with excess demand. During the ‘trough’ periods of the annual line graph of enrolments, a small core of permanent teaching staff is all that remains. As a result, there is a significant component of ESL teachers in the private sector, who, through necessity, can be seen as ‘work nomads’ – jumping from one context to another, and from one short-term contract to another. Long-serving teaching staff members are also in the habit of saying goodbye – not only to students, but to colleagues too.

For the teacher, within the classroom, the impact of the situation described above is writ large. Every week carries with it the threat of significant changes in student configurations – for example, student numbers, proportions of nationalities represented, gender imbalances, disparities in age, differing language competencies, a myriad of learner needs and motivations to learn English. In addition, overall student enrolment changes might mean reallocation for the teacher themselves, for example, to take over a newly formed class, itself often the result of a large spike in enrolments.

For academic managers, organizing all the variables inherent in daily school operations consumes most of their working time. Students need to be placed on a weekly basis, classes are created, merged, discontinued; and teachers need to be hired, let go (‘sorry, the numbers are down’), cajoled into accepting uncomfortable arrangements predicated on necessity – the list goes on. Another aspect of the job also involves presenting the PTE as a professional
enterprise to its external stakeholders – industry bodies and governmental regulatory agencies – the key players in an ‘audit culture’ that purports to uphold standards and provide quality assurance to the paying customer.

What does it mean to be a professional in a system such as this? How are teachers and managers positioned within the system? These are important considerations that require an in-depth examination and foregrounding of context. To find answers to these questions, as incomplete as they may be, I will need to chase a few ghosts.

1.1 Rationale for research focus
My research project represents a multi-pronged effort to address a number of overlapping research gaps. On one level, it seeks to examine in-depth the professional identities of ESL teachers and academic managers in the private sector within a particular research context in New Zealand. Within L2 research, and particularly when it comes to teachers, the private language teaching industry as a whole is an under-researched context – globally (Borg, 2006; Crookes, 2009), and in New Zealand (Erlam, 2010).

Secondly, the study also focuses on organizational culture, in a bid to extend the understanding of professional identity as it relates to occupational context, and to examine in detail and to foreground contextual factors – frequently acknowledged, but rarely a primary research focus (see Beijaard, Meijer, and Verloop, 2004). This is the second research gap. Organizational culture research also helps to position my project in both the fields of organizational studies and applied linguistics.
A project of this nature requires a holistic, qualitative approach that is longitudinal, and which could go some way towards teasing out some of the localised expressions of selfhood and organizational culture(s). An ethnographic approach is well-suited to these requirements.

1.2 Research questions

The ethnographic project endeavours to develop a deeper understanding of the contextual and socio-political dimensions of teachers’ and academic managers’ professional practices within a particular private training establishment (PTE) situated in Auckland, New Zealand. More particularly, this involves examining individual and communal stances taken in terms of job roles and expectations, and to what extent the educational institution in question accommodates or rejects the enactment of different notions of professionalism.

One key focus of the study is therefore how teachers and academic managers deal with the daily challenges thrown up by a system that is predominantly market-oriented, particularly in situations where economic prerogatives conflict sharply with pedagogic objectives. At a deeper level, the relationship between localised practices and regulatory discourses as articulated by industry and government is also explored.

To this end, the research questions guiding the inquiry are:

1.) *In what ways, and to what extent, are the professional identities of teachers and academic managers shaped by the working conditions and systemic changes they experience within the particular private training establishment (PTE)?*
2.) Conversely, what influence, if any, do teachers’ and academic managers’ professional practices have on the organizational culture(s)? What does this reveal about the social positioning of teachers and academic managers within the PTE?

In order to answer these questions, I start by taking an in-depth look through temporal and spatial lenses at the particular organizational systems that either framed or still frame the working lives of stakeholders within the PTE. I then populate this description of context with the personal experiences of 9 participants – 5 teachers and 4 academic managers – to draw out points of connection and conflict. Finally, I draw out the political and social positioning of teachers as articulated in institutional discourses and processes, and use these as a platform to discuss the forms practitioner resistance can take.

1.3 Professional identity

What is characteristic of research into the notion of identity is the large variety of conceptual pathways travelled upon by scholars (Nagatomo, 2012). In the social sciences, one influential conception describes a sense of self which an individual forms over time, through interaction with their environment (Mead, 1934; Erikson, 1968). This transactional perspective has been adopted by numerous researchers, particularly in psychology. A more recent incarnation is proposed by Adams and Marshall (1996):

An individual’s personal or social identity not only is shaped, in part, by the living systems around the individual, but the individual’s identity can shape and change the nature of these living systems (p. 432).
Although still rooted to some degree in an individual, ingrained sense of self, the above-mentioned strands of thinking represent a shift away from viewing identity as a fixed, personal attribute; or what Taylor (1987) refers to as the “disengaged self” – towards a more relational conception.

Identity is ascribed a host of different meanings within the social sciences. However, Beijaard, Meijer, and Verloop (2004) observe that a commonality shared by many recent perspectives is that identity is a dynamic process – which is, from a postmodern outlook, filled with ambiguity and instability. The result is an identity dilemma symptomatic of larger-scale societal change - in which the stabilising structures and frameworks of older social worlds are disintegrating; “giving rise to new identities and fragmenting the modern individual as a unified subject” (Hall, 1992, p. 274).

With this simultaneous fragmentation of the self and the social fabric, the conception of multiple identities has become prevalent. For some scholars, a prominent example being Gergen (1991, 1992, 1994), concurrent involvement in a plurality of social communities and environments leads to a decentralized identity. Prior to a discussion of teacher identities in their various guises, I would like to propose a definition by Gee (2001) that serves to guide further inquiry:

The ‘kind of person’ one is recognized as ‘being,’ at a given time and place, can change from moment to moment in the interaction, can change from context to context, and, of course, can be ambiguous or unstable. Being recognized as a certain ‘kind of person,’ in a given context, is what I mean here by ‘identity.’ In this sense of the term, all people have multiple identities connected not to their ‘internal states’ but to their performances in society (p. 99).

There has been a sharp upturn of scholarly interest in teacher identity over the past quarter-century – as Akkerman and Meijer (2011) graphically illustrate. Although the authors
observe a marked absence in the literature of clear definitions of teacher identity, they note the persistence of three key features of it within the reviewed body of work, namely: its multiplicity, its discontinuity and its social nature.

As with the process of identity formation itself, the quest for an all-inclusive definition for teacher identity is far from complete. As Beauchamp and Thomas (2009) demonstrate, it is a demanding endeavour. One of the problems is the countless approaches through which identity has been investigated within teacher education. These have ranged from studies focusing on how personal and professional dimensions of teachers’ lived realities overlap (MacLure, 1993), through to research examining the role played by emotion in teachers’ work (see Zembylas, 2003a, 2003b).

Beijaard et al. (2004) claim that studies of teachers’ professional identity have employed a wide range of different conceptions – some have made strong connections with a teacher’s sense of self (Nias, 1989; Knowles, 1992), while others’ foregrounded teachers’ roles (Goodson & Cole, 1994; Volkman & Anderson, 1998), or developmental factors such as reflection and self-assessment (Kerby, 1991; Cooper & Olson, 1996).

Certain scholars have devoted their efforts to a description of professional identity development (Goodson & Cole, 1994; Antonek, McCormick, & Donato, 1997; Mawhinney & Xu, 1997; Sugrue, 1997; Volkmann & Anderson, 1998). On the other hand, Coldron and Smith (1999), as well as Samuel and Stephens (2000), were more interested in examining the stresses and pressures associated with the relationship between an individual and their context.
In a third of the research projects examined by Beijaard et al. (2004), no definitive meaning was provided for the idea of a professional identity. For the remainder, a common view was that professional identity is a continual process in which aspects of the personal and professional merge over time. The majority of the studies reviewed foreground the personal – often at the expense of contextual factors. One scholar who does highlight the role played by context is Reynolds (1996), who asserts that the environment around an individual, external expectations from other stakeholders, as well as the institutional forces that a teacher shapes and is shaped by, all play a significant part in the forming of their identity.

It is clear that professional identity is implicated in both personal and contextual domains. Teachers respond uniquely to what is expected of them professionally speaking – according to what they value most and least on a personal level. However, these variable reactions are also tempered by the learning environments they work in. One could think of an institution as housing a community of practice, which in turn is populated by a plurality of more idiosyncratic, individual teaching cultures (Feiman-Nemser & Floden, 1986).

The implication here is that these can overlap with each other as well as with the communal culture itself, and conversely, also be sources of conflict when they are at cross-purposes with each other, or with communally accepted practices. Giving sufficient credence to context is a strong feature of narrative studies on teachers’ professional identity - a core idea being that teachers’ stories reveal elements of an individual’s identity, while simultaneously being a product of social co-construction within a specific context (Gee, 2001). One comprehensive collection of studies in this regard is the one edited by Connelly and Clandinin (1999).
My interest in teachers’ professional identities lies partly in the desire to critique market-driven discourses weaving their way through educational institutions and government policy. These standards-led notions exert tremendous power over the occupational culture of teachers, but rarely sufficiently reflect the voices of teachers. It is with this situation in mind that I turn to the notion of teachers’ professional identity proposed by Sachs (2005) in her discussion of an activist teacher identity:

Teacher professional identity then stands at the core of the teaching profession. It provides a framework for teachers to construct their own ideas of ‘how to be’, ‘how to act’ and ‘how to understand’ their work and their place in society. Importantly, teacher identity is not something that is fixed nor is it imposed; rather it is negotiated through experience and the sense that is made of that experience (p. 15).

This then is the working definition of professional identity adopted for this study. Although four of my participants are academic managers, I think that the definition is still valid, as it can be modified for different job roles and I believe that the core conceptions are transferable to other professions. In addition, what is also important to note is that the academic managers in the study all have lengthy personal histories as teachers before making the jump into administrative roles.

Within the last fifteen years, research on language teacher identities has emerged as a distinct domain of inquiry in applied linguistics. Varghese, Morgan, Johnston, and Johnson (2005) identify two main strands of research which served as catalysts for this development. Firstly, significant increases in classroom-based research have led to more sophisticated understandings of the complexity of teachers’ roles. Secondly, a growing body of research investigating the socio-cultural and socio-political aspects of teaching have further affirmed the plurality of teachers’ roles inside and outside of the classroom.
Varghese et al. argue that this heightened level of research interest in the teacher has made one thing clear:

…that in order to understand language teaching and learning we need to understand teachers; and in order to understand teachers, we need to have a clearer sense of who they are: the professional, cultural, political, and individual identities which they claim or which are assigned to them (2005, p. 22).

The authors align themselves with current characterisations depicting identity as: multiple, dynamic, context-dependent, and socially constructed. Importantly, Varghese et al. (p. 35) suggest that this conception of identity ties in very neatly with four key themes in the literature, namely: marginalization; the position of non-native speaker teachers; the status of language teaching as a profession; and the teacher-student relationship.

The marginalization of ESL teachers has been a vigorously debated topic (Auerbach, 1991; Pennington, 1992; Johnston, 1999; Breshears, 2004). Closely linked to marginalization are issues pertaining to the status of language teaching as a profession. The status of ESL teachers has generated much discussion in the TESOL field (Johnston, 1997; Nunan, 2001; Creese, 2002; Arkoudis, 2006; Stewart, 2006). In comparison with other educational fields, job security or stability is at a minimum within commercial ESL contexts in New Zealand and abroad - primarily beholden to economic forces. In addition, officially-sanctioned perceptions of ESL teaching as less academic is prevalent, which, in combination with the view that it is more of a skill not a discipline, serves to exclude it from other more ‘respected’ educational endeavours. Auerbach (1991) sums up the situation in this way:

… we’re preparing students to do something other than learning English, and it is that other something that counts. There’s an academy with an established set of standards, and our job is to get people ready to enter it (p. 1).
As long as ESL teachers’ work is accorded an inferior status to that done by other educators (Creese, 2002), and they are positioned on the periphery of the broader teaching community, efforts towards and demands for higher levels of professionalism within ESL teaching would seem difficult to attain. The potential catch-22 is clearly outlined by Breshears (2004):

In fact, there seems to be a cycle of interaction between the three elements; poor working conditions and low pay hinder good professionalism, which in turn hinders the professionalization process, and as a result a lack of professional status prevents the procurement of good material benefits. The cycle repeats from here. Viewed in this way, it appears unreasonable to expect teachers simply to start becoming professional when outside forces determine their positions (p. 25).

The roles ascribed to ESL teachers both from within and outside of a community of practice, as well as the roles they claim for themselves, serve as a means of differentiation – it shapes how practitioners and ‘outsiders’ define who a language teacher is and isn’t and what they do or don’t do.

Language teachers have to contend with a plethora of mainstream discourses regarding teaching and learning (Miller, 2009). In addition, the institutional contexts in which they work exert considerable pressure on what is done in the classroom, and how it should be done. The personal resources a teacher possesses with which to construct their professional identity are continually “tested against conditions that challenge and conflict with their backgrounds, skills, social memberships, use of language, beliefs, values, knowledge, [and] attitudes …” (Miller, 2009, p. 175).

In terms of professional roles, the images assigned to us as well as those we adopt as ‘self-images’ both impact on the development of a professional identity. While some role expectations are explicitly articulated, many are embedded in practice and institutional procedures. Farrell (2011) defines teacher role identity as:
The configuration of interpretations that language teachers attach to themselves, as related to the different roles they enact and the different professional activities that they participate in as well as how others see these roles and activities (p. 55).

An important observation made by Farrell is that teachers’ ideas of their roles and understanding of their practices commonly operate at a tacit level, and therefore they need to be given opportunities for reflection so as to bring these to the fore. This sentiment has been echoed by other scholars (Freeman, 1996; Beijaard et al., 2004; Leung, 2009; Miller; 2009).

Farrell’s study provides a solid case for the value of teacher reflection on an individual and collective level, particularly with regards to experienced teachers. If meaningful professional identity development involves regular social interaction between practitioners, and incorporates opportunities for learning, reflection, negotiation and theorizing, then the study of it requires a robust theoretical framework rooted in practice which is also flexible enough to accommodate the ecological complexities of socially constructed identities. To flesh out this discussion of the individual in context, we now turn to culture – and in more specific terms, organizational culture.

1.4 Organizational culture
A plethora of definitions accompany the construct of culture within social science. Even delimiting its use to some extent by adding the word organizational in front of it, does not necessarily do much to reduce the diverse range of understandings attached to it, as pointed out by Alvesson (2013). Therefore, to employ it as a focus for my ethnographic inquiry entails a careful positioning of my use of it within the ‘forest’ of competing conceptions.
A good starting point on this journey would be Geertz (1973), who emphasised that culture primarily constitutes shared meaning and symbolism. Adopting this modern anthropological understanding requires a form of cultural analysis that is interpretive. This orientation, which I share, has also gained purchase within the field of organizational culture studies over time (Pondy, Frost, Morgan & Dandridge, 1983; Gagliardi, 1990; Alvesson & Berg, 1992; Schultz, 1995).

What characterised many of the traditional organization studies of culture was an instrumentalist perspective that saw culture as an organizational variable. In other words, culture was essentially a tool that could be used by managers to enhance corporate productivity and performance. This was broadly known as the functionalist approach (Burrell & Morgan, 1979). It is clear, that on many fronts, this view is in direct opposition to the predominantly subjectivist stance held by organization researchers who are influenced by the anthropological literature.

To define more specifically what I mean by organizational culture, I draw from three interrelated, but separate conceptualisations, which, in combination, I believe serve as a definitional template to work from. First, Alvesson (2002, 2013) extends the understanding of organizational culture to include values, beliefs and assumptions about social reality, while still emphasising a focus on meaning and symbolism. Organizational culture is used as an umbrella term for the shared social orientations that underpin working life:

Culture is not primarily ‘inside’ people heads, but somewhere ‘between’ the heads of a group of people where symbols and meanings are publicly expressed – in work group interactions, in board meetings, but also in material objects. It is the meaning aspect of what is being socially expressed and it is thus visible and invisible at the same time. Culture, then, is central in governing the understanding of behaviour, social events, institutions and processes. Culture is the setting in which these phenomena become comprehensible and meaningful (2013, p. 4).
Alvesson adds a caveat after these words to highlight the fact that we shouldn’t place too much of our focus on the “static elements” (p. 4) of culture – reiterating a standpoint that culture is more deeply grasped as consisting of a dynamic process of continual meaning-making within a specific context.

Not forgetting the dynamism of culture foregrounded by Alvesson, another conceptualisation that dovetails with the above-mentioned view is the one proposed by Kunda (1992). What is useful in this definition is the view of organizational culture as a resource for group members, in that it supplies “…the shared rules governing cognitive and affective aspects of membership in an organization, and the means whereby they are shaped and expressed” (p. 8).

There are linguistic limitations when it comes to trying to provide a succinct and ‘tidy’ conceptualisation of culture. There is a certain level of ambiguity inherent in the term itself that is not completely removable. However, this means it is flexible enough for use in talking about a complex, interconnected social context – such as a specific work environment, where contradictions are commonplace.

A definition that acknowledges this added level of complexity of the phenomena we are working with is that of Parker’s (2000), who defines organizational culture thus:

…a continually contested process of making claims of difference within and between groups of people who are formally constituted as members of a defined group. These claims can be made with reference to sets of ideas derived from ‘within’ or ‘without’ the times and spaces that the organisation is formally constituted (p. 233).

What I feel that this definition adds to the other two key ones is the implication that specific organizational culture(s) also contain local patterns or versions of more general cultural themes from the wider society. I think this idea serves to anchor the study, so that I am not
studying organizational culture in a vacuum – by positioning the research context in relation to other macro contexts which are also engaged in cultural reproduction. For example, this could include the private language teaching industry – local and international, Auckland as an urban community, and the Auckland-based tertiary institutions that the research context is a ‘feeder’ institution for.

The use of a tri-partite definition for organizational culture is one example of the determination on my part as researcher to adopt a multi-perspectival approach towards studying the chosen research context. Adding a political dimension to my constructivist approach represents an attempt to escape the comfortable, but ultimately misleading dualisms of structure and agency, the functional and the symbolic, as well as the harmonious and the discordant – and to allow for ‘messy’ configurations where these dichotomies are ‘exploded’ and become enmeshed.

To this end, the extensive research conducted by Martin and colleagues (Meyerson & Martin, 1987; Martin & Meyerson, 1988; Martin, 1992, 1995, 2002; Martin & Frost, 1996), is a salient reference point for the scholar wanting to adopt multiple perspectives in their research. In comprehensive meta-analysis of existing organizational culture research, Martin (2002) found that about 80% of all research to that date could be located within one of three archetypal, single-perspective paradigms, namely: perspectives of integration, differentiation or fragmentation (also see Martin, 1992; Martin & Frost, 1996).

The hallmark of studies that reflect an integrationist point of view is that culture is seen as based on organisation-wide consistencies that could be harnessed and unified, leading to the idea of “value engineering” (Martin & Frost, 1996), as critics of the approach derisively
labelled it. The studies referred to as functionalist earlier in the discussion would fall fairly neatly into this category. Metaphorically, Martin (2002) describes integrationists as viewing culture “…like a solid monolith that is seen the same way by most people, no matter from which angle they view it” (p. 94).

However marked the overtones of cultural ‘engineering’ is in integrationist literature, it is important to remember that there is a diversity of research interests represented under this categorising moniker. A rough distinction within this paradigm is made by Martin and Frost (1996) between “generalist” studies (e.g. Pettigrew, 1979; Barley, 1983; McDonald, 1991) and “specialist” research (e.g. Martin, Feldman, Hatch & Sitkin 1983; Trice & Beyer, 1984; Dandridge, 1986). Whereas generalist research tended to incorporate a vast array of cultural practices, both formal and informal, specialist projects would isolate a particular cultural feature to hone in on, such as ceremonies (Dandridge, 1986) or organizational stories (Martin et al. 1983). What ties the generalist and specialist strands together however, is a theoretical allegiance to culture as consensus, to the extent that “…deviations from integration are portrayed as regrettable shortfalls from an integrated ideal” (Martin, 2002, p. 99).

With regards to perspectives of differentiation, it is noteworthy that this category represents a very loose coalition of theorists and scholars, and that there has been, and still is, considerable dissension within its ranks (Martin & Frost, 1996). In other words, the ties that bind these scholars often originate from their marginalisation in mainstream strands of research – suggesting a high degree of iconoclastic research possible within this paradigm. What characterises the differentiation approach is its acceptance of and its focus on inconsistency within the organisation. However, as Martin (2002) notes, consistency is still
observed, albeit found in smaller units of culture within the organisation – often labelled “subcultures”: “To express the differentiation perspective in a metaphor, subcultures are like islands of clarity in a sea of ambiguity” (p. 94).

Although differentiation scholars share the affinity for a wide scope in their studies like generalist integrationists, they also insist that this has to be accompanied by sufficient depth (Martin & Frost, 1996). This means that many qualitative researchers are aligned with this approach as it accommodates a more finely-tuned and nuanced understanding of organizational cultures. By extension, ethnographies adhering to a “thick description” (Geertz, 1973) of culture that includes examinations of instances of conflict, dissension and inconsistency, are well-represented within this paradigm (see Rosen, 1985; Young, 1989; Kunda, 1992; Van Maanen; 1991).

The fragmentation perspective is in many respects an outgrowth of the attempts by some researchers to transcend the ideological battle that has been waged between advocates of integrationist and differentiationist approaches (Martin & Frost, 1996). What characterises the work of many scholars grouped under this banner is the centrality of ambiguity and contradiction within organizational culture (see Feldman, 1989, 1991; Meyerson, 1994; Weick, 1991; Koot, Sabelis & Ybema, 1996; Hatch, 1997, 1999; Risberg, 1999). In other words, within this paradigm, research becomes ‘messy’, in that it disrupts any notion of stability within the culture(s) being examined – rather, everything is in a state of perpetual change:

To express the fragmentation perspective in a metaphor, imagine that individuals in a culture are each assigned a light bulb. When an issue becomes salient (perhaps because a new policy has been introduced or the environment of the collectivity has changed), some light bulbs will turn on, signaling who is actively involved (both approving and disapproving) in this issue. At the same time other light bulbs will
remain off, signalling that these individuals are indifferent to or unaware of this particular issue. Another issue would turn on a different set of bulbs. From a distance, patterns of light would appear and disappear in a constant flux, with no pattern repeated twice (Martin, 2002, p. 94).

The purpose of this selective outlining of integration, differentiated and fragmented perspectives has been to make connections between my ethnographic project and each one of the approaches - to strengthen the case for adopting a multiple perspectives approach to studying culture. Martin (1992, 2002) has been a strong advocate of this approach for two primary reasons. One is her assertion that methodological redundancy is commonplace within each of the three paradigms – when researchers elect to adopt a single-perspective approach. As summed up by Martin & Frost (1996), “…integration, differentiation, and fragmentation researchers defined culture in a particular way and then designed studies which made it more likely they would find what they were looking for” (p. 609).

With the discussion of professional identity, the focus was on the individual (teacher or academic manager) in context, and with organizational culture, the scope of our theoretical vantage point extended to a consideration of the social world co-created (as well as experienced) by a group of individuals in a specific work environment. This thesis represents at its core an attempt to examine how the individual, the community they are a part of, and the local context relate to each other.

1.5 Structure of the thesis

The first chapter has served a dual purpose, the first of which was to selectively sketch out a research landscape for the reader of my principal interests: the intertwining strands of identity and organizational culture. At the same time, I also primed the reader for what follows - by positioning my research project within this landscape.
In the second chapter, I chart the ethnographic process and discuss the particular methodological, ethical and practical issues experienced while conducting insider research at Veupoint. This is followed by an in-depth look in Chapter 3 at the context of Veupoint – examining its historical, temporal and spatial dimensions, and outlining the organizational system as it relates to my participants.

The two chapters that follow shift the focus towards the person in context. In Chapter 4, I explore the personal histories of my participants and their experiences of working life at Veupoint. This includes looking at individual notions of professionalism and how these are either acted upon or not within the work environment. In Chapter 5, I focus on how my participants’ accounts intersect and diverge from each other, in an attempt to begin to understand better the micro-politics operating underneath the surface within the context.

Chapter 6 describes my emergent understanding of the dominant organizational culture being one of perpetual crisis management. Located within this institutional ‘way of doing things’, I discuss the personal and communal ways in which teachers and academic managers respond to this reality. Chapter 7 of the thesis revolves around the “hidden practices” (Deerness, 2014) of teachers and academic managers within the organizational culture already hinted at in the previous chapter.

In Chapter 8, I make an attempt to pull the strands of identity and organizational culture together – first by revisiting the research questions and then tying these two afore-mentioned constructs in with matters pertaining to class and social positioning. The case is then made for an activist notion of professionalism and generative politics as proposed by Sachs (2003, 2005), to resist the marginalization of teachers and the accompanying degradation of
education. This is followed by a brief discussion of neoliberalism and how it contributes to a problematic understanding of the value of pedagogy. I conclude with a call for further research into the multiple ways in which neoliberal agendas insinuate themselves into our daily lived realities – this research representing a form of academic resistance.
People are not linguistic or cultural catalogues, and most of what we see as their cultural and social behaviour is performed without reflecting on it and without an active awareness that this is actually something they do. Consequently, it is not a thing they have an opinion about, nor an issue that can be comfortably put in words when you ask about it. Ethnographic fieldwork is aimed at finding out things that are often not seen as important but belong to the implicit structures of people’s life. Asking is indeed very often the worst possible way of trying to find out.

- Jan Blommaert and Dong Jie, *Ethnographic Fieldwork*

2

**Becoming a Stranger at Home: Shadowing the Familiar**

It is a typical Monday morning at Veupoint. Penny* and June* (pseudonyms) are poring over the placement test results of newly-arrived students, engaging in fervent discussion about which classes to put them in. As the academic managers of Veupoint, they have to ensure that these learners are allocated classes by lunchtime – this is when teachers need to add the student names to the current attendance registers. From the afternoon onwards, all new students will be attending classes.

The placement process is punctuated by brief, staccato-like interruptions by administrative staff members who lean in through the door quickly, deliver a titbit of information pertaining to a student to either Penny or June, receive a terse reply, and then disappear as quickly as they had materialised.
On this particular morning, a common thorny issue has arisen. Among the new students, four of them have tested at level 5/6 (intermediate/upper-intermediate). The problem is that the current 5/6 class already contains 13 students – an additional four would push the class number beyond the maximum number of students allowed per class (15). Penny says what nobody really wants to hear on an already busy morning, “We’ll have to split the class”.

2.1 Splitting the class: throwing a rock in the institutional pool

For Penny and June, ‘splitting’ the class means finding an extra teacher on very short notice to teach the extra class that will result from the institutional ‘cleave’. This is easier said than done – especially within the short window of time they have at their disposal. They also need to decide on how the class will be split – this time around, they opt to create one class of “more 5-ish” students and the other one will be comprised of “more 6-ish” students.

My description so far of the fairly mundane, but representative placement process and regularly-occurring ‘splitting’ phenomenon is potentially misleading if I stop here. In combination with the matter-of-fact manner in which the two academic managers deal with the above-mentioned situation, it would be easy to dismiss this episode as being of very little research interest. However, this would belie the symbolic violence and social rupturing that accompanies this seemingly anodyne activity – once the consequences of putting the splitting plan into motion reverberates across the institutional landscape.

2.2 Teachers: beneficiaries or victims?

What can splitting the class mean for teachers? On one hand, if we look through the eyes of the teacher who has been teaching the existing 5/6 class, the split could be incredibly frustrating. Investing your energy into developing an effective learning dynamic within a
specific group, only to have said dynamic be drastically reconfigured from afar within a very short space of time, can easily feel like wasted effort on the teacher’s part. What happens when this recalibration of your learner group happens on a weekly basis, as it easily can within a rolling intake system?

Imagine, for example, that the teacher of the previously-mentioned level 5/6 class had been struggling to create an effective group dynamic within the existing class prior to the split taking place – and that it had been largely unsuccessful. In addition, the teacher is fairly confident that the obstructionist behaviour of two particular students is largely to blame for the dysfunctional learning environment. If we persist with the thought experiment, the split results in the two ‘problematic’ learners being allocated to the other 5/6 class. In this scenario, the teacher of the existing level 5/6 class could very well feel hugely relieved by the upcoming split – it could mean that they feel that they have a second chance at building a more positive group dynamic with the new configuration of learners.

And again, we have to be open to the understanding that between teachers’ feelings of frustration on one hand and welcome acceptance on the other hand, is a large grey area of possible mixed feelings regarding the outcome of a new class configuration.

2.3 Learners: severed bonds or new opportunities?

What could splitting the class mean for learners themselves? Generally, for Penny and June, splitting the class along lines of language level is a very logical decision that most practitioners and academic managers would accept. Yet again, for the student, this situation is not necessarily as straightforward a procedure as might be assumed. As is shown in field
notes of this particular episode of student intake, a host of other variables come into play, such as the nationality mix in each of the classes, the interpersonal relationships between students in the existing class, and the students’ relationship with the current teacher.

By way of example, it would not be hard to imagine one of the current 5/6 students being disappointed about being shifted to a new class within the space of a week. Let us say that said student had developed a strong bond with two other students in the current ‘unsplit’ class who will not be shifting to the other class with them. Added to that fact, this student has also developed a very deep respect for their current teacher and appreciates the efforts they have made in helping them learn.

It is not difficult to envision this disaffected student being a potential problem in the new classroom, regardless of the well-intentioned efforts of their new teacher – who could easily be unaware of the true reason behind their lack of motivation and willingness to learn. We could also extend this lack of knowledge to a classroom researcher, who not having observed any other institutional processes (i.e. student intake and placement) connected to the formation of this new classroom configuration, potentially mislabels, misinterprets and misattributes the reason for said learner behaviour – if data being relied upon is only sourced from classroom observation.

Just as with teachers however, it is important to be able to foresee a ‘split’ as also being potentially desirable for a certain learner in a particular classroom dynamic. And if we can entertain that notion, then again we can allow for a myriad of potentially mixed feelings on the part of the learner - found in the wide open spaces between strongly positive feelings and overwhelmingly negative feelings about an upcoming classroom split.
2.4 Organizational sleight of hand: maintaining uncomfortable fictions

There are more layers to unpack regarding this particular incident of the splitting of a class. With regards to this specific student intake process I observed in December 2012, one of the initial questions I had was, “Why is there a level 5/6 class?” As a long-serving teacher inside the Veupoint system, I thought I knew the answer. But as a researcher, I had to ask the question anyway, and be open to answers that could differ from the first one that came to mind.

My initial thoughts were that the school had received a number of learners simultaneously who placed at the high end of level 5 (intermediate) in their placement tests, but who were not yet quite ready to study at level 6 (upper-intermediate). However, the plan would be that once the current cycle (every 12/13 weeks of study) ended and the new one began (in January 2013), these learners would be placed in a level 6 class.

When I asked Penny about the 5/6 class however, I learned that the historical antecedents for the creation of this particular class originated more from a desire on the part of management to placate a group of learners who had been eager to “level up”, and who felt that this had not been happening fast enough for them. So the 5/6 class was created, where the number 6 was basically the result of managerial perception management, making a certain group of level 5 students who were not happy with still being in level 5 “feel” as if they had now climbed the next rung of language skills development.

For the purpose mentioned above, the 5/6 designation had ‘worked’ – but the splitting of the class now again posed a problem for Penny, the director of studies (DOS), and June, the assistant director of studies (ADOS). Making two new classes – one comprised of “5-ish”
students and the other of “6-ish” learners – was a logical decision managerially speaking, but also a selection rationale that had to be kept secret from the learners affected. For many of them, being in 5/6 was important, it was higher than 5. So accompanying this split is an act of organizational sleight of hand – to keep the customer happy. And for this reason, both classes continued to use the same textbook, and both had the same level designation (5/6).

The political dimensions underlying the original formation of the 5/6 class, as has been shown, are deeply embedded within the daily operations of the educational establishment. Originating from a historical need for a fast, pragmatic solution to a group of unhappy customers, the 5/6 class had now come back to ‘haunt’ its creators, complicating their decision to split the class.

2.5 The quest for a suitable research methodology

This discussion so far has centred around the phrase “we’ll have to split the class”, and what it might have meant on one particular occasion, as well as what it could mean at other times, for different organizational stakeholders (i.e. teachers, academic managers and students) in the same locality. Instead of starting with an abstract discussion about my research methodology, I have instead chosen to share a sample of my qualitative analysis to lead in to an explanation of the project – anchoring my study to the daily realities of the research context.

The principal aim of this introduction has been to sensitize the reader to the complexity inherent in the educational context of Veupoint, by showing how a small sliver of research data pertaining to class splitting can be rich in meaning and history, and at the same time, difficult to apprehend – in terms of where its impact on the organizational culture and the
professional identity of the people working within it begins and ends. It also endeavours to show that a richer understanding can come from a focus on the connections between various processes, different contexts within the institution, and the individuals involved with each.

2.5.1 ‘At-home’ ethnography

My research project does not represent an attempt to reduce the complexity of a particular situation or context (Blommaert & Jie, 2010). Instead I would like to describe it in as much detail as I can and explain to the best of my ability the perspectives of individuals and groups within the community of practice – all the while accepting that this attempt can only ever be incomplete and partial.

Before proceeding, it would be useful to restate the research questions guiding the doctoral study:

1.) *In what ways, and to what extent, are the professional identities of teachers and academic managers shaped by the working conditions and systemic changes they experience within the particular private training establishment (PTE)?*

2.) *Conversely, what influence, if any, do teachers’ and academic managers’ professional practices have on the organizational culture(s)? What does this reveal about the social positioning of teachers and academic managers within the PTE?*

In order to provide a thick description (Geertz, 1973) and an interpretive-explanatory account (Watson-Gegeo, 1988) of what people do and say within the specific context of Veupoint, and with regards to my research focus, I chose to conduct a critical organizational ethnography. The primary reason for electing to do an ethnographic study was that a
significant number of characteristic elements present in ethnographic work overlapped with what I had identified as the crucial aspects of the qualitative research work I needed to do.

My research project typified, just like ethnographic work:

- the need to obtain data that includes emic perspectives (Angrosino, 2007), meaning the views of participants within the social group being studied;
- the investigation of embedded research constructs that were not readily observable - necessitating an in-depth, long-term investigation which is holistic and comparative (Watson-Gegeo, 1988);
- the implication of various layers of context (micro and macro), requiring a deeper understanding - to uncover taken-for-granted assumptions underlying situated events, processes and actions (Blommaert & Jie, 2010);
- a compatibility with my chosen analytical framework of grounded theory (Charmaz, 2000, 2002, 2003, 2006) – one key commonality being that of an inductive approach (Charmaz & Mitchell, 2001), which entails the generation of new theory as it emerges from the process of rigorous data analysis.

Angrosino (2007) describes ethnographic research as useful in documenting dynamic social processes, and assisting in taking unpredicted results into account. The example of splitting the class, which this chapter started with, is a good example of one of the many institutional processes that, in conjunction with a rolling intake system, creates an ongoing, perpetually changing social landscape – within which the potential for unexpected eventualities is accepted as a daily probability. Among the defining features of an ethnography Angrosino mentions is that it is:

- *field-based* (i.e. in a real-life setting)
- **personalized** (researchers take part in and observe the lived realities of participants)
- **multifactorial** (makes use of multiple data collection methods)
- **a long-term commitment** (conducted over an extended period of time)
- **dialogic** (i.e. participants can provide feedback on researcher interpretations and explanations as they are being devised)

As pointed out by Hammersley & Atkinson (2007), a single, comprehensive definition of ethnography does not exist, due to its complex history and association with a wide range of theoretical frameworks. They opt instead to define it along the lines of what constitutes ethnographic work, elements of which have already been mentioned above by Angrosino (2007). Additional features mentioned by Hammersley & Atkinson are that ethnographic work is usually small-scale in nature to enable in-depth examination; and that data analysis “involves interpretation of the meanings, functions, and consequences of human actions and institutional practices, and how these are implicated in local, and perhaps also wider, contexts” (p. 3).

The context for the research study was a private language training establishment, Veupoint (pseudonym), at which the researcher himself has worked at, and so the project is an “at-home ethnography” (Alvesson, 2009). The investigation focused on the nature of the relationship between teachers’ and academic managers’ notions as well as enactments of professionalism, and the institutional environment they worked within. In addition, it also sought to understand how impactful the social imprints left by individuals and different occupational groups within Veupoint were – and what this revealed about the status and positioning of my participants within the organizational culture. It is for this reason that I needed to include individuals in management in my study, in addition to full-time teachers.
Over the course of two research periods (October 2012 - January 2013; and October 2013 - June 2014), collectively spanning a year of study, a total of nine participants took part in the project (5 teachers and 4 managerial staff members).

The primary methods of data collection were: in-depth interviews, classroom observations (for teaching participants) and observation of selected institutional processes. Data analysis was conducted according to the grounded theory process outlined by Charmaz (2006). What follows is a discussion of key methodological issues, starting with an examination of researcher positioning and reflexivity.

2.5.2 Researcher positioning and reflexivity

Doing research within my own work context and among colleagues has been the most self-conscious activity I feel I have undertaken. When was I a teacher and when was I a researcher? Could I be both at once? The perspectives of the particular people who were interested in taking part in the project, coupled with the fact that, within the community of practice being studied, it was I, Andre, who had decided to undertake the doctoral research, all combined and intertwined to create this specific ethnographic record.

At the same time, regardless of the many ways in which the institution was perceived of by participants, there was also a patchy, convoluted, mystifying system that existed and perpetuated itself outside of individual perception. Despite the continual entry and exit of various individuals, this system kept chugging along in a remarkably similar fashion day after day – or did it? A closer inspection of course would also reveal how some individuals had left clear marks and indentations on this said system, while others’ short-lived impact on the institution was almost indiscernible, or at times, completely invisible.
Conducting research within one’s own organization or culture has become more prevalent in the social sciences, and an increasing number of scholars have presented strong arguments in favour of it (Alvesson, 2009; Brannick & Coghlan, 2007; Jackson, 2008). Studies in this vein have incorporated a wide range of theoretical frameworks and employed a variety of methodological approaches, such as: feminist ethnography (Taylor, 2011), critical ethnography (Canagarajah, 1993; Melles, 2004), autoethnography (Jones, 2009), multiple methods – institutional ethnography, autoethnography, and narrative (Taber, 2010) as well as action research (Hussein, 2007). It is important to distinguish between an ethnographic method and action research – as explained by Melles (2004), action research is interventionist and aims to enact some form of change within an organization, whereas an ethnography, particularly a critical one, is more focused on generating awareness and deeper understanding of a specific context.

Although this project was not interventionist in nature, adopting a critical viewpoint signified, in my point of view, that the aim to more deeply understand my own work context was rooted in a personal desire for eventual systemic change. So even though I did not envision my project as directly being implicated in institutional change, it would be important to disclose a personal allegiance to knowledge-seeking enterprises driven by emancipatory interests.

Attention now turns to certain key dilemmas that I have faced as an insider researcher. I define myself as an intimate insider (Taylor, 2011), which means that I had pre-existing collegial and friendly relationships with my participants, prior to any research being conducted – I was a ‘native’ before I began my inquiry (DeLyser, 2001) – a distinction not always clearly made in the ongoing insider vs. outsider debate within the social sciences.
literature. Although this positioning was a great vantage point from which to gather rich data, it was also fraught with challenges.

The researcher, then, is forced to look both outward and inward, to be reflexive and self-conscious in terms of positioning, to be both self-aware and researcher-self-aware and to acknowledge the intertextuality that is a part of both the data gathering and writing processes (Taylor, 2011, p. 9).

One primary difficulty that had to be negotiated was to take care not to overstep the line between being a friend and a researcher – in other words, I had to constantly manage the balance between academic credibility and being fully accountable to my work friends and the community we were both a part of. A perpetual confrontation between providing a transparent research account and not divulging data that could have socially damaging consequences for key participants, or distort the data collected, had to be anticipated and delicately dealt with.

By way of example, I could reflect on the interactions I had with Emma* (pseudonym) – one of the teachers involved in the second phase of my research project. After having conducted my first interview with her, I had the opportunity to do my first classroom observation of her. When the afternoon class I was observing ended, I walked with her to the staffroom, where, seeing as it was the end of the work day, she invited me for a coffee. Although I was eager to return home to start typing up my field notes, I decided to join her.

It soon became very apparent that Emma’s main purpose for having a shared drink on this day was to have a personal debriefing – she wanted me to critique the lesson I had observed her teaching that afternoon; from a pedagogic perspective. As a colleague and a friend, this was in no way an outlandish request – the formal and peer observations we did every school year as part of our professional development would culminate in this very activity.
However, in terms of my research, this request was very problematic. I had taken great care to emphasise to all participants that my classroom observations’ primary goal was to seek a better understanding of the roles performed by each of them in the classroom, and how the classroom connected to other institutional spheres of activity – it was not the same kind of formal observation conducted by academic managers, where the aim was expressly to focus on an individual’s pedagogic practices.

This was a very delicate situation – Emma failed to initially understand why I could not engage in both elements of observation. She wanted critical feedback, and my research focus required investigating role performance and contextual links – could I not do both? I explained I could not – ethically and professionally, I would have overstepped the line by using my research project for purposes other than what I had explicitly stated. Furthermore, I knew that giving in to her request would have had an immediate effect on that day’s observational field notes when I typed them up on the computer – my research focus would have been muddied with other concerns. I do believe that over time, Emma understood why I had stood firm in not critiquing her lesson on that day. Both research periods threw up numerous moments such as the one outlined above – where I had to make a distinction between my activities as a researcher and my participation in the community of practice as a fellow teacher and friend.

An additional consideration I had to contend with was what impact my adopted scholarly role had on the actual responses of my participants. Furthermore, talking about topics that participants knew the researcher had intimate knowledge of could potentially lead to difficulties in eliciting detailed accounts. The potential for role conflicts also needed to be
considered, and even though tensions in this regard could realistically form a part of the research focus of the study, decisions made had always to prioritise the ethical rights of the participants.

Also of importance was the problem posed by the researcher’s familiarity with the context and the various stakeholders within it. Observing the daily processes one knew well could lead to insider blindness (DeLyser, 2001; Labaree, 2002), which would make it difficult to encounter naturally-occurring ‘breakdowns’ in understanding (Alvesson, 2009); these instances of incomprehension helping to challenge pre-conceived notions about the organization. Finding a way to personally distance myself from the context being studied on a regular basis was essential to overcoming this potential myopia.

To this end, it was very important for me as a single researcher immersed in the research context to have regular interaction with someone who was external to it – an individual who could listen to my developing ideas and also serve as a reality check – helping me to avoid idealizing my own data and interpretations. My main supervisor, understanding the involved nature of ethnographic immersion, made sure he was available for bi-monthly meetings that also served as debriefing sessions. These proved invaluable in providing me with direction and focus as the project started incrementally generating larger volumes of collected data that required analysis.

Ethnographic fieldwork in the form of observations of classes and other selected institutional processes (e.g. staff meetings, professional development sessions) also allowed for the gathering of data that was potentially etic and emic (as insider and observing participant).
This assisted in teasing out the connections between social processes that clearly influenced participants’ lived realities, but which they took for granted and did not necessarily consider mentioning in interviews.

Each mode of data collection added a different level of meaning or nuanced understanding to the overall project, and as the ethnography took shape, this cross-fertilization of perspectives was further enhanced by the opportunities participants had to respond to my transcriptions of interviews held with them, but also by the opportunities I had to use data generated by my field notes in subsequent participant interviews. It helped to establish a research habit characterised by a holistic recursive process, where all aspects of the project were open to being re-interrogated and re-examined continually – as components of a complex feedback loop.

At the same time, self-reflection on the nature of my research project only serves to emphasize the partiality of the account I have compiled – shaped by my own biased assumptions and ideologies, the particular social arenas within the context I decided to focus on, the perceptions of my participants, as well as the absent perspectives of institutional stakeholders who chose not to take part in the research. Therefore, it would perhaps be more accurate to see the ethnographic project described here as a narrative compiled from various “fictions of the real” (Gordon, 2008, p. 11). Gordon hereby implies that any description or interpretation of a particular situation, event, or social reality is inherently problematic – as it is shaped by multiple forces and sources of cultural knowledge production; rendering it inherently subjective.
As Gordon explains however, the various subjective fictions of the real that are articulated by human actors are strong enough to be accepted by them as truthful mirrors to an experienced reality. Thus, the responsibility of the qualitative researcher is to take individuals’ accounts of workplace interactions seriously, and to ensure that the research data does not in any way do harm or serve to allow other entities or individuals to use participants’ self-disclosures against them. We therefore turn next to ethical issues and safeguards implemented in the project.

2.5.3 Ethical issues and safeguards

In the broadest sense, the qualitative research project I have mapped out was focused on what people say and do. This was predicated on the assumption that the content of talk, elicited from in-depth interviews as well as observations of the classroom and selected institutional processes, provided me with an entry point into the lived experiences of my participants. The chosen research context, in conjunction with my positioning within it as an intimate insider, necessitated a careful consideration of potential ethical dilemmas.

Adopting a “hermeneutics of trust” (Sullivan, 2012) with my participants was essential to maintaining a successful and long-term research relationship with the institution I was employed by. In essence, this entailed adopting a style of interpretation which was open to and accepting of the truth-claims made by participants about their work context; as opposed to assuming a default position of suspicion towards what I was being told. More importantly, this was also reflective of my own value-orientation of empathy with fellow teachers. In terms of the study, the stance I took is that I was a teacher who does research, not a researcher who did teaching.
An ethnographic study of how teachers and academic managers’ professional identities develop within and potentially impact on the organizational culture of a specific organization, needed to take soundings from both these sources, but it needed to be done in a way which avoided dispersing information which might have been confidential to an individual staff member. Two key measures were taken to prevent such a situation from arising.

Firstly, I made it explicit to all my participants in advance which issues I had a particular interest in. This related to participant interviews as well as observations of classrooms and institutional processes. Secondly, all participants were given copies of all their interview transcripts for editing purposes, and they were invited to indicate any parts which they would prefer me to omit. Upon receipt of the edited interview transcript, I then used this hard copy to alter and ‘clean’ the digital version by removing all references and passages that the participant had indicated were ‘off the record’. This cleaned transcript was then used for coding and analytical purposes.

As the proposed research project was conducted within the researcher’s own organization, the issue of confidentiality extended to interview locations. To further ensure privacy of information, interviews were held in a quiet, comfortable setting chosen by the participant, and outside of working hours. In addition, the employer or other participants did not at any time have access to another individual’s transcriptions or research data. Finally, the field notes and any other form of research data generated from observations were only accessible to the researcher and his supervisor.

Apart from the above-mentioned matters, another key consideration with regards to ethical matters related to intrusiveness. Initially, I had intended to conduct in-depth interviews with
participants, classroom observations, and also observations of a substantial number of institutional procedures (eleven in total). It soon became apparent that the number of procedures chosen was problematic. As a result, these were eventually scaled down to four - in response to the pragmatic realities of work in the field and potential intrusiveness.

In anticipation of issues arising from the conducting of fieldwork despite my precautionary measures, I expressed my willingness to meet with staff on a two-weekly basis to discuss any concerns arising from my research activity. Coupled with this was a personal decision I had made which meant that, in the case of a clash of research and institutional priorities, my default response would be to adapt my research project around the organization’s daily operations and the exigencies that arose.

2.6 Participant sampling and research design

My intention to conduct a qualitative research project in my own organization favoured working within a purposeful sampling paradigm (Miles & Huberman, 1994). In other words, sampling choices were not and could not be random – I needed participants from the small group of employees specifically working for Veupoint. In addition, I needed volunteers from both the teaching staff and academic management. Therefore a purposeful sampling approach gave me the opportunity to include both aforementioned subgroups of staff at Veupoint in the study and describe their lived realities in detail. Simultaneously, it facilitated meaningful comparisons between teachers’ and academic managers’ experiences of institutional life during the data analysis phase.

Teaching participants initially got information about the proposed study from advertisements posted on the staff notice board at the institution. The advertisement included a set of
selection criteria for interested teachers. Teachers needed to have at least six months of teaching experience at Veupoint, and be working as full-time teachers. The primary rationale for these criteria were that a longitudinal study such as mine required participants who were to some degree committed to at least the same time period of employ as the study’s duration. Equally important was the need to explore the perspectives of individuals who had had the opportunity to become a part of the Veupoint organisational system, and therefore could comment on the various institutional processes they had become acclimatised to as well as regularly participated in. Individuals interested in the study were invited to contact the researcher directly for further information. This procedure was followed twice – for each phase of the ethnographic project.

In terms of management participants, The Director of Studies (DOS) and Assistant Director of Studies (ADOS) had already expressed a keen interest in being involved. For management team members, I was completely reliant on a voluntary sampling approach (Perry, 2011). Due to their positions and the fact that they had to be apprised of my project in order to provide input into an institutional letter of support drafted by the Principal, I depended on them approaching me and expressing an interest in participating. For the second phase of the research project, I asked the DOS if she could mention my upcoming research project (October 2013) at a management meeting, and ask any interested parties to approach me directly with their inquiries. As a result of this, the principal and the head of teacher development expressed an interest to take part in the second phase of the study.

2.7 The initial study

The primary reason for conducting my ethnographic project in two phases was to be able to experience the research process as a full cycle of concurrent field work, data collection and
analysis and then take stock – before committing more time and resources to the field. In other words, the initial study period provided me with a “procedural scaffold” (Nunes, Martins, Zhou, Alajamy, & Al-Mamari, 2010), as it could be seen as a form of in situ methodological training. Ethnographic work is demanding and energy-sapping – I wanted to make sure that my project had realistic goals and that they were achievable. As the in-field changes and modifications mentioned later shows, what is envisioned and what is possible are not necessarily aligned.

Four stakeholders took part in the initial study, which was conducted from October 2012 – January 2013. Table 1 below provides a brief description of the participants. Due to ethical considerations, all names are pseudonyms.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>G</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Job Position at Veupoint</th>
<th>Years at Veupoint</th>
<th>Qualifications / Future Study Plans</th>
<th>Teaching / Admin. Experience</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Lisa</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>63</td>
<td>Teacher</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>BSc (Chemistry) CELTA BA (Linguistics)</td>
<td>17 Years (L2 Teaching)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>June*</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>47</td>
<td>Assistant Director of Studies (ADOS)</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>B.Ed (Maths / Physical Ed.) CELTA, DELTA</td>
<td>20 Years (L2 Teaching) 13 Years (Admin., as ADOS)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Penny*</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>37</td>
<td>Director of Studies (DOS)</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>BA (French / Linguistics) CELTA, DELTA MBA (Business Admin.), started Feb. 2013</td>
<td>10 Years (L2 Teaching) 7 Years (Admin., 4 years as DOS)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sam</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>Teacher</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>BA (History / Geography) TESOL (Grad. Dip. – 1 Year)</td>
<td>8 Years (L2 Teaching)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 1. Research participants for the initial study (October 2012-January 2013)

(*=managerial research participant)

The primary data collected were audio-recordings of in-depth interviews with individual participants, as well as field notes of observations in the educational setting. Observations were made up of classroom observations of teaching participants, and observations of selected institutional procedures (all stakeholders).
2.7.1 In-depth interviews

A total of four interviews with each teaching participant were held. Although initially scheduled to be one and a half hours in length, the decision was made to scale these down to one hour in respect of teachers’ time constraints. Both the DOS and ADOS were interviewed three times – each interview being one hour in length.

2.7.2 Classroom observations

Each teaching participant was scheduled to be observed four times – once every two weeks, starting in the second week. Due to a very demanding institutional schedule from the fifth to the seventh week of the research project, the decision was made to limit classroom observations to three for each teacher. Each classroom observation session lasted for two and a half hours.

2.7.3 Observations of institutional processes

As mentioned previously, the decision was made to cut down on the key organizational processes which would be observed outside of the classroom. Table 2 on the next page lists the particular institutional processes scheduled for observation during the initial phase:
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Institutional process</th>
<th>Frequency of Observation</th>
<th>Average duration</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Staff Meetings</td>
<td>Once a week</td>
<td>Variable</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teacher Development Sessions</td>
<td>Once a month</td>
<td>1 hour – 1 hour 30 min.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Progress Test Liaisons</td>
<td>Once a month</td>
<td>Variable</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Moderation of Marks</td>
<td>Once a term (13 weeks)</td>
<td>Variable</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Collab. Lesson Planning</td>
<td>Once a week</td>
<td>Variable</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Student Intake Discourse (DOS + ADOS only)</td>
<td>Once a week, on Mondays</td>
<td>Variable</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Farewell meetings</td>
<td>Once a week, on Fridays</td>
<td>20-30 minutes</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 2. Institutional processes scheduled for observation during initial study (October 2012 – January 2013)

Once in the field, observing some of these institutional processes became problematic, primarily for logistical reasons. Progress test liaisons, moderation of marks and collaborative lesson planning were difficult to document. Teachers tended to do them ad-hoc – wherever they could find little pockets of time around the daily schedule to liaise. The decision was made fairly early on in the study (the third week) to discontinue formal observation of these three processes. With routine institutional procedures much fewer difficulties were experienced.

Upon completion of the initial period of study, I reached the conclusion that, of the four institutional processes, the two most promising in terms of eliciting data for the main study...
would be staff meetings and teacher development sessions. Although farewell meetings and student intake discourse had helped shape my understanding of elements of a ‘rolling intake’ system, I felt that I had reached a level of data saturation in terms of emerging concepts that pertained to professional identity or organizational culture.

2.8 The main study

Prior to the commencement of the main study, I wrote to the UAHPEC Committee asking for approval to reduce the key institutional processes to be observed from 7 to 2 (namely, to staff meetings and teacher professional development sessions), in light of my in-field experiences and findings connected to the initial study. Permission for these changes was granted on the 23rd of August 2013 (Reference No: 8419).

Five stakeholders (three teachers and two members of management) took part in the main study, which was conducted from October 2013 – June 2014. Table 3 on the next page provides a brief description of the participants. Due to ethical considerations, all names are pseudonyms.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>G</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Job Position at Veupoint</th>
<th>Years at Veupoint</th>
<th>Qualifications / Future Study Plans</th>
<th>Teaching / Admin. Experience</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Emma</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>Teacher</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>Entrepreneur; CELTA</td>
<td>4 years (L2 Teaching)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gabriela</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>Teacher</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>BA (English); Honours (Eng. Lit.); CELTA (Spanish + Eng.) Postraduate Studies (in progress)</td>
<td>10 years (L2 Teaching)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Daniel*</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>63</td>
<td>Principal/ General Man.</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>C-TEFLA / D-TEFLA; MA in Applied Linguistics</td>
<td>34 years (L2 Teaching / Training / Managing)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chris</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>41</td>
<td>Teacher / TECSOL Trainer</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>BA (Education); Dip. In Primary Teaching; CELTA</td>
<td>11 years (L2 Teaching / some Managing – as ADOS)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ava*</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>46</td>
<td>Head of Teacher Dev.[HOTD] ; Ass. Director of Studies (ADOS); Teacher Trainer</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>BSc. (Chemistry); Dip. of Teaching; C-TEFLA D-TEFLA</td>
<td>24 years (L2 Teaching / Training / Managing)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 3. Research participants for the main study (October 2013 – June 2014)

(* = managerial research participant)

As with the initial study, primary data collected were audio-recordings of in-depth interviews with individual participants, as well as field notes of observations in the educational setting.
Observations were made up of classroom observations of teaching participants, and observations of selected institutional procedures – this time limited to staff meetings and teacher development sessions. Although Ava (see above) was primarily involved in the project in her position as a member of the management team, she also did teach – as per her contractual commitments as ADOS. Therefore classroom observations of her teaching were also included in the data, as she was willing to be observed in this capacity.

Each participant was interviewed three times – prior to each interview, a meeting time was scheduled, and the individual was also informed as to the particular focus of the upcoming interview. Due to the time constraints that already began impacting the study at the beginning, most interviews ran for approximately one hour. However, there were a few exceptions where they lasted around one and a half hours – this would only be the result of the interviewee wanting to continue, as they had expressed the need to finish off what they were telling me about, and that they had the time to do so.

Apart from these fifteen in-depth interviews, one additional interview was also conducted within the timeframe of the main study. One of the participants in the initial study, namely Penny (the DOS), resigned in mid-December 2013, and I thought that conducting an exit interview with her prior to leaving could potentially provide rich data pertaining to my research interests. This extra interview lasted approximately forty-five minutes.

In terms of classroom observations, each of the participants was observed three times (with the exception of the Principal, who did not teach), as in the initial study. As before, each observation session lasted for two and a half hours. With regards to institutional processes, the focus of the main study was on staff meetings and teacher development sessions alone.
Over the period of study (October 2013 – June 2014), thirty four staff meetings were documented, and a total of seven teacher development sessions were observed.

2.9 Charting the Ethnographic Journey

The use of three main strands of research data (i.e. interviews, classroom observations and observations of institutional processes), was an essential component of my research design. I felt that an over-reliance on any specific data-set could potentially ‘seal off’ potentially rich avenues of inquiry and result in a very narrow representation of the role played by contextual dimensions in the working lives of teachers and academic managers. Furthermore, the different types of data I collected physically and mentally ‘moved’ me to different spheres of activity in the organisation. What follows is a more detailed description of how these three main areas of research were operationalised. Also given are rationales for my methodological choices.

2.9.1 In-depth interviews

Seidman’s (2006) model of phenomenological interviewing was chosen to provide the overall structure of the interview series with participants. As grounded theory and phenomenology share a focus on exploring the world of lived experience and a trust in participants’ abilities to makes sense of it – I felt that Seidman’s protocols were compatible with my research design. In addition, it had been effectively used in previous language teacher studies – including ones with a similar research focus as mine (see Young, 1990; Cook, 2004; Nagatomo, 2012).

As advocated by Seidman (2006), a series of three interviews was held with each participant. The first interview focused on participants’ life histories, prior to arriving in the current research context of Veupoint. The second interview examined “…the concrete details of the
participants’ present lived experience in the topic area of the study” (p. 18). The final interview was reflective in nature – it gave participants the opportunity to contemplate the experiences shared in the previous two sessions.

One of the key reasons for choosing to use in-depth interviews was that the primary constructs in my research questions could not be effectively researched by relying on direct observation alone (Kagan, 1992), and therefore required personal accounts of participants’ ‘lived realities’. Using in-depth interviews in conjunction with participant observation enabled me to collect data for comparative analysis, which fed back into a recursive process of re-checking data and re-interrogating emerging themes and concepts from multiple perspectives.

Interviewing in a qualitative study needs to be viewed as a complex form of social interaction in which interview data is co-constructed by the interviewer and interviewee. As a researcher it was important for me to be cognizant of this and to “…recognize that dialogue is discovery and only partial knowledge will ever be attained” (Heyl, 2001, p. 370). I would categorise my interviews as semi-structured and unstructured. Although the plan was to gradually move towards a more unstructured form of interviewing as the study progressed, the reality was that from the first interview onwards, my participants appeared at their most comfortable to share their perceptions in an unstructured and loosely associative manner – for me as an insider researcher, it was again a strong reminder of how my relationship with my participants dictated to a large degree what type of interaction they would be comfortable with.

To help me think in a systematic fashion however, I did arrange interview questions for the first and second interview within three categories – initial, intermediate and ending. Rather than these constricting what could be discussed, they were more a part of my own mental
preparations for an interview as a researcher – serving as a reminder that this was not just a chat over coffee with colleagues. Charmaz’s (2006) sample of grounded theory interview questions about a life change (p. 30-31) provided the above-mentioned categories and was used as source material for some of my questions, although I adapted them to fit my topic area. In addition, the interview protocols used by Vasquez (2009) in her unpublished study of individuals leaving corporate cultures to become teachers (cited in Janesick, 2011, p. 103-107), also provided ideas that informed my choice of questions (Appendix 1).

The principal objective of the last interview was to give participants’ the opportunity to express their thoughts on some of the themes emerging from the previous interviews as well as the observational data I was collecting. This is an example of allowing an initial, broad examination of previously gathered data to begin shaping and informing subsequent instances of data collection. As could be expected, these interviews were largely unstructured – in most cases, participants had a wealth of thoughts to share and they initiated much of the discussion.

I chose to adopt a recursive model of interviewing (Minichiello, Aroni, Timewell & Alexander, 1995) for the last interview. With this model, the interview mimics to a large degree a natural conversation, allowing the interviewee to steer the discussion in a way they see fit. Simultaneously, the researcher uses small transitions as a technique to gently move the conversation back to issues germane to the research topic, if participants have managed to veer far away from the research focus. Also key with the recursive model is the intentional strategy of feeding in elements of previous interviews or observation data which the researcher might feel needs further commentary, and to give the participant an opportunity to reflect on the research project so far and more specifically, their involvement with it.
Adopting the recursive approach made it possible for me to allow conversation to ‘flow’, and to approach the interview from the perspective that each participant and the way they experienced a situation was unique. More importantly, this allowed me to modify my emerging understandings of the organizational culture in response to data that had been ‘fed back’ through the research process itself.

2.9.2 Field work: observations

As already mentioned, the primary objective of my observations was to provide a detailed or ‘thick’ description (Geertz, 1973) of participant interactions and behaviour connected to specific institutional processes and the classroom. Through my written field notes, I attempted to develop a multi-sensory awareness of how work was organized in my institution. My observations were not guided by a specific set of observational protocols or coding sheets, as this would have become a case of ‘forcing’ data into pre-existing categories, which was in opposition to the constructivist grounded theory approach I had adopted. However, having general guidelines to focus my attention on was beneficial. I selected Mitchell’s (as cited in Charmaz & Mitchell, 2001) proposed questions to consider every time I engaged in observational fieldwork, whether that was of an institutional process or focused on the classroom (Appendix 2).

As a researcher embarking on my first ethnographic project, I knew that in order for me not to be ‘swallowed up’ whole by the process, a functional system of field note writing was going to be essential – if only to serve as an anchor for when the data threatened to overwhelm me. Hammersley & Atkinson (2007) emphasise that selectivity is unavoidable when it comes to writing field notes. It simply is not possible to record everything occurring
in the setting. Therefore it was important to develop a workable strategy as well as a method of organization for my field notes.

Firstly, I adopted one of the two note-taking strategies outlined by Emerson, Fretz, and Shaw (1995) in their discussion of field work, namely comprehensive note-taking. This entailed recording as much as possible in an orderly and detailed manner; and during a particular time period or event (like for example, a specific classroom lesson). The main organizing principle of my field notes was temporal – e.g. I would chart the progress of a lesson from the beginning to end. The most noticeable feature of this approach would be my use of time stamps - for example, I broke down my observations into smaller chunks of time – the majority of my classroom observation field notes are marked in 5-minute blocks (i.e. 10:35 am.; 10:40 am.; 10:45 am.)

The comprehensive approach was the main strategy employed in note-taking. As listed by Wolfinger (2002), one distinct advantage of this strategy is that, in the process of reconstructing events in the order that they actually happened, memories of details that otherwise would have slipped the mind are often triggered. It is an effective means of letting our ‘head notes’ (O’Reilly, 2009) emerge. Personally I also found that this strategy encouraged me to include more descriptive details, as I could often rely on my sensory construction of events to later re-trigger more theoretical or abstract notions connected to what was observed.

In his ethnographic research on aesthetic discourse in gymnastics, Palmer (2010) employed a means of organization for his field notes derived from the suggestions made by Schatzman &
Strauss (1973), who strongly advocated recording observational data in “distinct packages”, namely: Observational Notes (ON), Theoretical Notes (TN), and Methodological Notes (MN). The adoption of Schatzman & Strauss’ model as an organizing principle for my field notes was borne out of the need for a practical, yet flexible means of organizing note-taking prior to writing up and expansion. Even though initial recording of events and processes were heavily biased towards detailed description, the fact that each page of my notebook was divided into spaces for observational, theoretical and methodological notes meant that any serendipitous realization of a potential theme or emergent category could immediately be scribbled down before disappearing into the ether.

2.9.3 Grounded theory as method and analysis

In ethnographic research, the boundaries between data collection and data analysis are not necessarily clearly delineated. As I was operating within a constructivist paradigm which foregrounded the socially-constructed nature of knowledge, one of my main concerns was to allow for salient themes to emerge from the data I collected, and so care had to be taken not to create artificial theoretical categories into which I then tried to ‘force’ my data. Due to the nature of my research questions and my focus on trying to find out how my participants perceived their professional roles as well as made sense of institutional processes and interactions, my methodological approach had to accommodate a plurality of perspectives.

At the same time, my role as a participant observer and a field-based researcher necessitated me switching backwards and forwards between emic and etic perspectives myself, in a cycle of constant validity checking (Angrosino, 2007). In other words, this process was a means to continually gauge whether the research data collected and my interpretations thereof had traction with those whose social world it involved (i.e. the participants), as well as whether it
achieved verisimilitude when shared with a fellow academic positioned outside of the research context (i.e. my supervisor). Key examples of my efforts to check the validity of my research would include: member checking of all participant interviews and providing opportunities for the discussion and re-articulation of perspectives; as well as the regular debriefing sessions held with my supervisor – where an attempt was made to create some analytical distance from the research context in order to make sense of emergent themes that could become part of eventual theorybuilding.

The fact that I was researching my own organization also meant that my interactions were inextricably intertwined with what I was observing and taking part in. This made validity checking crucial, and although this might have seemed like an intuitive activity to engage in, the challenge lay in managing to do this continual switching in a systematic fashion. Therefore I needed a methodology that allowed me to ‘play’ with the data as I was collecting it, yet at the same time provided a framework for academically rigorous analysis.

To this end, the decision was made to adopt a grounded theory methodology; according to the process outlined by Charmaz (2000, 2002, 2003, 2006), which is informed by a symbolic interactionist theoretical perspective (Blumer, 1969), and reflective of a dynamic approach to researching social life. This way of doing things relies on the idea that our grounded theories are constructed “through our past and present involvements and interactions with people, perspectives, and research practices” (Charmaz, 2006, p. 10).

It is important to note that my aim was to conduct data analysis through a grounded theory approach on all the data collected from observations and interviews. As highlighted by
Watson-Gegeo (1988), the importance of comprehensive data treatment (Mehan, 1979), was paramount in preserving the integrity of an ethnographic project.

When illustrative examples are presented in an ethnographic report, they should be the result of a systematic selection of *representative* examples, in which both variation and central tendency or typicality in the data are reflected. Anything less caricatures rather than characterizes what the ethnographer has observed and recorded (Watson-Gegeo, 1988, p. 585).

What follows is a brief description of the steps taken in the data analysis process – starting with transcription protocols for interviews, moving on to the refining of field notes of observations, and continuing with coding procedures as well as memo-writing – these procedures resulting in grouping emergent concepts and integrating conceptual relationships uncovered, and finally culminating in the writing of the ethnographic journey itself.

In terms of interviews, all audio recordings of these for the initial and main study were transcribed by me. Prior to coding, the first draft of transcribed text would be given back to the participant for the purposes of highlighting for me which parts of the interview they wanted to designate as ‘off the record’. Upon this transcription’s return, my first step was to modify my digital copy of the interview to reflect the omissions the participant had requested. This edited version was then ready for initial coding.

As my research focus was more concerned with *what* teachers say about themselves and their teaching context than *how* they articulated it (Nagatomo, 2012), the transcription process involved a ‘sanitizing’ step, after which the transcript resembled a written text more than a spoken one (Elliot, 2005).
Due to the fact that video recording of classroom observations and institutional processes was not possible during the proposed study, typing up and expanding on written field notes was a crucial initial step. Immediately after the conclusion of an observation, the field notes were typed up on computer and notes suitably expanded. Different types of information were clearly marked and categorised according to the method described in the earlier field notes section. The typed up observation was then re-read and checked in preparation for initial coding.

Prior to doing any coding, interviews were again listened to and read simultaneously (audio recording as well as first tapescript) from start to finish a number of times – to initiate a period of familiarization with the data. Observation field notes were also read through carefully a number of times.

The coding process itself did not happen in a completely linear fashion, but the following steps are an approximation of the process undertaken:

- **Initial coding** – for interviews, line-by-line coding, and for field notes, incident-by-incident coding. The main aims were speed, precision, short codes, preserving actions, and comparing data with data.
- **Focused coding** – this second step involved categorising data by identifying significant and frequent codes that appeared to explain larger chunks of text.
- **Identifying potentially useful emerging categories and concepts.**
• Interrogating emerging themes against various theoretical frameworks or ideas found to be useful sensitizing devices – these were sourced from the literature on professional identity and organizational culture.

• Revisiting sections of data to test the interpretations and explanations formed in the third and fourth steps.

It is important to note that the above-mentioned process could be repeated a number of times for a specific section of data or particular emergent concept – it was all dependent on the extent to which connections between it and other appearing themes could be made.

Making annotations and memo-writing were concurrent activities that were initiated as soon as coding began. During initial coding, any quick thoughts or speculations were briefly annotated to the relevant portions of text – those which triggered extensive thought were written up in a rudimentary memo. During focused coding, the function of memo-writing changed in that it became an analytical tool to help chart the emergence of initial themes and categories. Once various theoretical frameworks were being applied to the data set as well as emerging categories, then more advanced memo-writing facilitated making more sophisticated comparisons between: data sources, participants, and conceptual categories.

With the research process and its attendant strategies mapped out, it is important to consider issues of trustworthiness, and whether the project satisfies qualitative research criteria for validity.
2.10 Trustworthiness

An ethnographic approach rooted in a constructivist grounded theory has been presented as a valid and good fit with my research objectives in terms of: chosen constructs, the specific organizational context selected, as well as the nature of my relationship with the participants. Key assumptions of the grounded theory approach were that:

- reality is socially constructed and dynamic in nature
- identity is formed within social processes and interaction
- the key phenomena of human experience is situated within our social ‘lifeworlds’
- and the author is seen to be in partnership with the participants – co-constructing meaning + understanding

(Grbich, 2013)

In addition, my choice of ethnography provided me with research tools that could aid in providing a composite view of organizational life and individuals in its orbit – and moved my findings beyond mere “uncomplicated subjectivity” (Sullivan, 2012). Combining a grounded theory approach with an ethnographic method was certainly different than, for example, utilising it in a questionnaire-based project, or perhaps a case study which primarily used interviews and self-report journals as data sources.

The different data sources I employed, namely interviews, observations of classrooms and institutional procedures served to triangulate the data analysed – and meant that emic as well as etic perspectives were captured. In addition, the specific nature of the types of data I collected necessitated moving to different physical and social spaces within the institutional landscape, which in turn served to sensitize me as a researcher to the very different spheres
of activity that made up the lived realities of my participants. This was again conducive to rupturing and challenging any potential researcher biases towards an “uncomplicated subjectivity”.

In addition, the various forms of member checking of data implemented helped to legitimize a plurality of authorial voices that spoke from the position of personal experience within the research context. When a participant was given an interview transcript and given a retrospective chance to change or clarify what they had said previously, or if, on receipt of my research summary on conclusion of the study, a participant made a point of contradicting a point I had made – the authenticity of a particular representation of an organizational culture or the professional identity of an individual participant was preserved. In other words, member checking was a practical manifestation of the epistemological and ontological positioning of identity, culture and knowledge as being socially-constructed phenomena.

Having explored the primary constructs of the study in chapter one, as well as outlined the research method and process in chapter two, we now turn to the research context itself – in order to develop a backdrop to the individual and communal perceptions shared further down the line.
This is the new “now.” Our society has reoriented itself to the present moment. Everything is live, real time, and always-on. It’s not a mere speeding up, however much our lifestyles and technologies have accelerated the rate at which we attempt to do things. It’s more of a diminishment of anything that isn’t happening right now - and the onslaught of everything that supposedly is.

- Douglas Rushkoff, *Present Shock: When Everything Happens Now*

### 3

**Veupoint in Context: Spatial, Temporal and Historical Dimensions**

At Veupoint, the final wipe of the whiteboard at the end of the working day usually removes the last trace of the teacher’s presence in the classroom they taught in. Apart from the occasional board pen, forgotten CD player or misplaced textbook, little else would specifically indicate that a teacher had been there before 3:30 pm (at which point the last lesson finishes). As to finding out which particular teacher was teaching in which classroom, that would be an even more difficult task for the after-hours observer. The uniform desks and chairs reveal no secrets and they tell no stories – they are furniture items with no memory (Morrison, 1970; 2007).

The only way to ascertain which teacher had taught in which classroom would involve either going to the staffroom and accessing the student attendance records, or perusing one of the three bulletin boards around the school which display the class lists. And again, this would
only be an exercise in gathering basic factual information – these lists or records only present a label or a name attached to a person, they say very little else about them. In any meaningful way, the teacher is absent from these official records, as they are from the classroom.

It is ironic that teachers do not truly ‘inhabit’ their classrooms at Veupoint – after all, it is the space they spend most of their work hours in (25 contact hours per week as a full-time employee to be exact). And yet, in a ‘rolling intake’ system of enrolment, teachers are, spatially and temporally, at the mercy of forever-expanding or shrinking classes, as these dictate which spaces they will be teaching in, and when. Rolling intake means that students enrol at Veupoint on a weekly basis, while others also leave within the same timeframe. This process is very uneven, as can be imagined – the numbers of entering and exiting students almost never match each other. As a result, after every school week, some classes will swell with added numbers, while others’ student populations will shrink. In addition, it is very common for two small classes to be merged, or during periods of high intake, for new classes to be added to the roster on a weekly basis.

However, there are related reasons that also contribute to this sense of impermanence embedded in the physical appearance of the classrooms. With a rolling intake system it is also true that, apart from a small core of permanent salaried teachers employed year-round, a significant proportion of the teaching staff are on temporary contracts. These teachers are usually not in the context for very long beyond the peak period of full-capacity enrolments – and so they too have a marked effect on the constant re-allocation of teaching spaces. All this necessitates a constant recalibration of classroom usage – bigger groups of students need to be put into the bigger classrooms, whereas smaller groups are re-allocated to the more compact rooms. Where the classes go, the teachers have to follow. And when the number of
learners shrinks school-wide, teachers also have to leave – having no students to teach. This uprootedness and lack of fixedness in terms of place lends practitioners’ classroom movements a certain nomadic quality, and simultaneously, the classrooms themselves, an anonymous, sterilised appearance – nobody hangs around for long enough to invest in modifying a room’s aesthetic properties.

The constant shifting of classes and teachers outlined above is just one concrete example of how an institutional system can operate in a manner which, to some degree, renders the teachers working within it invisible. By not affording a teacher the opportunity or time to modify their immediate surroundings, the system performs a kind of structural violence on their employees by imposing a regime of forced mobility that at the same time erases, partially but never fully, various physical articulations of the self. And, in combination, if there is a tacit acceptance of the system as being the only way to run things, teachers themselves activate their own environmental invisibility through non-resistance. The circle is complete, and the past, as well as potential futures, for the most part, are excised from individual and collective memory, in the name of bureaucratic efficiency.

In many respects, teachers (and to a lesser degree, academic managers) are ghosts in the system. And by this I do mean to suggest that they ‘haunt’ the institutional context – but not in the supernatural way commonly depicted in fable and fantasy. My reference to the ghostly nature of teachers working within the context of a private training establishment is connected to using the idea of spectrality as a conceptual metaphor and a sociological way of talking about phenomena (and people) that reside in the interstices between official policies and daily practices – elements (and participants) within the system that are taken-for-granted and exist “on the margins of perception” (Collins, 2015, p. 108).
As is widely acknowledged in the social sciences, the use of ghosts and haunting for the purposes of academic theorizing was to a large degree kick-started by Jacques Derrida’s publication of *Specters of Marx* (1994). Particularly within literary and cultural theory circles, Derrida’s idea of ‘haunting’ as the inevitable result of time being “out of joint” (in reference to Shakespeare’s *Hamlet*) gained significant purchase, leading to what some have dubbed the “spectral turn” (see Luckhurst, 2002; del Pilar Blanco & Peeren, 2013). Although an exhaustive literature review of spectrality and haunting falls outside the scope of this project, I will briefly discuss the multiple meanings that this conceptual vehicle carries in my use of it and prior to that, a brief outline of the situation that led to my choosing it as a conceptual metaphor.

During my primary data analysis phase, I experienced a persistent and nagging feeling that I could sense a large emergent theme swimming underneath the surface of my coding – it was like catching a glimpse of something out of the corner of your eye, and as soon as you fix your gaze upon it, it disappears – only to re-emerge as a shape in your peripheral vision as soon as you shift focus. Only after a very long gestation period of re-interrogating the data, I came to the realization that one of the key features of my data was that the elements most salient to professional identity and organizational culture seemed to be ‘absent’ or if you will, ‘ghostly’. However, this ‘absence’ had a faint tangibility to it, and therefore to some degree, was marginally perceptible. In other words, the absence was slightly ‘conspicuous’ for not being there. Furthermore, it was specifically “the barely there” (Maddern & Adey, 2008) quality they exhibited that seemed to add weight to my emerging understanding of the local institutional system as a largely unconscious, unpiloted ‘machine’ that marginalized and
externalised whatever ‘parts’ of its employees which could not be ‘put to work’, and concurrently suppressed class identifications and other undesirable personal and collective inscriptions as a threat to ‘the way things are done here’.

How could I articulate clearly the notion that professional identity and organizational culture within this particular localized context was characteristically ‘fuzzy’ and ‘indeterminable’? How far could I go in delimiting and defining my understanding of my research constructs, when they appeared, at their core, to defy and elude precision of description?

Avery Gordon’s notion of ghosts and haunting (2008) came right at the time that I felt I had reached an impasse in terms of being able to articulate an understanding I clearly felt almost viscerally. Gordon describes her understanding of *haunting* thus:

…it is an animated state in which a repressed or unresolved social violence is making itself known, sometimes very directly, sometimes more obliquely. I used the term *haunting* to describe those singular yet repetitive instances when home becomes unfamiliar, when your bearings on the world lose direction, when the over-and-done-with comes alive, when what’s been in your blind spot comes into view. Haunting raises specters, and it alters the experience of being in time, the way we separate the past, the present and the future (2008, p. xvi).

In a complex lattice-work of situations and contexts in which teachers are responded to in a variety of ways, ranging from partial acknowledgement to being blatantly ignored, it should not surprise us that most practitioners have taken to haunting the ‘breathing spaces’ between the public and the personal, the subjective and the objective, the individual and the collective. And although the organisational system and macro-discourses originating within government or the industry are effective at ‘disappearing’ teachers to some extent, they never fully succeed. Within each interstitial space occupied by a practitioner, there always remains room for manoeuvre, no matter how limited. And the movement of the individual in this space,
sometimes exercised collectively too, stubbornly demands to be acknowledged. In some ways therefore, haunting is actually the very real lived experience of the push and pull between structure and agency.

The upcoming examination of context in this chapter then represents my attempt to avoid the pitfalls of falling on either side of the agency-structure debate – either by idealizing the potential for individuals to exercise their agency and shape their futures, or by overstating the ability of the system to shape the thoughts and behaviour of those working within it (see Block, 2009). Taking up a position in the contested area between the two seems to suggest adopting a stance that accepts conflicting accounts, ambiguity and complexity. It also necessitates an attempt to make visible that which has been suppressed, and to ‘colour in’ the faint traces of important outlines of individuals and the collective who have been rendered ‘ghost-like’ within the confining structures of the institution – either intentionally, or inevitably - as the result of the history-erasing activities of the system. This requires, in the words of Holloway and Kneale (2008), a concerted effort in “materializing the spectral” (p. 297). It is important here to emphasize that I see description of the quotidian aspects of institutional life as the foundational work that allows for the ‘ghosts’ I want to examine later to emerge, as my foregrounding of context helps them take on a more discernible ‘shape’ and ‘form’.

To this end, this chapter’s first section is devoted to extending the description of the spatial-temporal dimensions of organizational life at Veupoint already introduced. This is followed by an examination of the notion of ‘rolling intake’ and how it structures a daily working week. I then extend the discussion to the historical, first by painting a few broad brushstrokes as I briefly outline the emergence of the private language teaching industry in New Zealand, and
then hone in on Veupoint’s own position within this meta-narrative – with specific attention paid to institutional changes implemented before and during the conducting of the research project (from 2010-2013). The chapter then concludes with a discussion of how the various snapshots of the aforementioned contextual elements combine with each other to demonstrate how the teacher, an integral participant within the system, has been gradually and systematically reduced to becoming “the nagging presence of an absence” (Maddern & Adey, 2008, p. 292).

3.1 Veupoint: the geography of a private language school

3.1.1 Classrooms

Veupoint is located in the centre of Auckland Central’s hub of business activity, in a city centre office block housing a number of other private training establishments (PTEs) – on the main road running through the centre of the city. The school itself occupies two of the building’s floors, with the reception area, administrative offices and teachers’ rooms found on the first of these – along with a number of classrooms (11). The remaining classrooms (14 to be exact) are located one floor up. With only four lifts servicing the entire building, a typical school day is filled with the hustle and bustle of students pouring in and out of these on the way to their classrooms, or exiting the building after a day’s lessons.

When Veupoint first took over the lease for the current premises in 2006, work was undertaken to convert the large rooms utilised by an international college (the previous occupant), into smaller classrooms. The main objective was to be able to run more classes simultaneously and to exploit space more efficiently in terms of the average number of students per class (the maximum number at this time being 14). This subdivision of larger rooms have not been unproblematic, as it has affected the existing airflow patterns in terms of
air-conditioning – the end result being that some classes are inordinately cold and others stiflingly hot – depending on the season. This is a recurring source of complaint for teachers and students alike.

In terms of decoration, it would be fair to say that, in comparison with other educational contexts (e.g. primary schools), classrooms are sparsely adorned. Desks and chairs are typically and functionally arranged in U-shapes facing a whiteboard. Most of the classrooms are now also equipped with a smart TV, which is used for the audio-visual components of a lesson. Every classroom also has a bulletin board on which various important notices and rules are displayed – including a detailed diagram that informs students of the complaints process at the school. Other features include a map of the world and a more detailed one of New Zealand. Prominently displayed above the whiteboard is a clock. With small degrees of variance, this basic description could apply to most of the classrooms used. They are ready, at a moment’s notice, to serve as another group’s instructional space – nothing which would suggest a particular group saw this room as ‘theirs’ is easily identifiable.

3.1.2 Staffrooms and Offices

In contrast, the teachers’ rooms give the first-time visitor a more ‘lived in’ sense, as teachers’ personal spaces here are crammed with personal objects and various paraphernalia – photos of departed students, family members and other loved ones; letters; reminders; books; phones; as well as ‘tools of the trade’ (e.g. tape players, stationery, textbooks, photocopied material etc.). Both rooms are open-plan, and at their centres, is a large oblong communal desk around which the majority of teachers are seated. In the bigger of the two rooms, there are also seating spaces running along two of the room’s walls.
The smaller room is positioned in a central space that joins the corridor leading into the various administrative offices with the larger teachers’ room. This means that there is a constant flow of personnel moving between the administrative offices and the larger teacher’s room. Due to this positioning, teachers who have desk space in the smaller room are constantly subjected to interruptions, staff movement, and students not reading the sign on the door bursting into the room trying to find a member of staff they need to speak to. This has led to the development of a ‘pecking order’ of seating to a certain degree – with temporary or relief teachers often finding themselves in the ‘social cauldron’ of the smaller teacher room, and with more permanent staff members and those aspiring to be, ‘graduating’ to the bigger room, which is mostly perceived as more desirable and conducive to getting work done.

However, in the bigger room itself, there is also a discernible hierarchy of status – which is not necessarily talked about, but visible to the interested observer. In the far left corner of this room is an L-shaped desk where the Assistant Director of Studies (ADOS) sits. Directly opposite her is another L-shaped desk which is occupied by the researcher himself. Another two L-shaped desks can be found in this room – both occupied by teachers who have been with the school for a long time. Logistically, the L-shaped desks have more space for books and other items, and on a purely realistic level, the three teachers who have been employed by Veupoint for more than a decade do possess more files and books than the others. It is also true however, that, even though mostly in jest, the relative ‘status’ of various seating arrangements are commented on and talked about by other staff members – permanent or temporary.
The bigger teachers’ room also houses one of the photocopiers as well as all the teaching resources (textbooks, supplementary materials, CDs etc.) – these are all found on shelves lining one of the passageways leading out of this room. In the far right corner of the room is a small kitchen area – comprising a sink and table top for lunch preparation, as well as a variety of domestic appliances (e.g. toaster, microwave). This is a very cramped area, and therefore the two eating tables here cannot seat all the teachers at once – especially during peak enrolment periods. Many teachers therefore eat lunch at their desks. At any one time, about eight teachers could eat lunch together in the kitchen area.

On the walls of the bigger teachers’ room are a variety of noticeboards containing pertinent information to daily operations. There is a small whiteboard on which teachers can book specific rooms / spaces for various classroom activities (e.g. watching something on TV, using computers etc.). One noticeboard displays the curricular cycle for morning classes and the different assigned textbooks for specific language levels. On it one can also find the class lists of enrolled students for the week, as well as a separate list denoting the new student arrivals and their specific class placements (teachers have to add these names to their attendance registers every Monday).

On the other side of the smaller teacher’s room is a corridor that leads to four separate offices. The first office is occupied by the business manager of the school, while the second houses the principal. The third is that of the Director of Studies (DOS), the only academic member of staff with their own separate working space. The fourth room is shared by the three members of the marketing team, as well as the registrar. Students who need to see a member
of the administrative team report at reception (located near the front door entrance of the school), and are then collected by the staff member concerned, who takes them through to their office for consultation.

3.1.3 Other facilities

On each of the two floors occupied by Veupoint is a common area or lounge, where students can relax between classes or after school. The first floor lounge is the larger of the two and a number of sofas and bean bags are arranged around the room to provide seating. The second floor lounge is a carbon copy of the first except that it is smaller and more confined – adorning the walls here is a massive collage of photos of previous students engaging in school and extra-curricular activities.

The second floor also has a student kitchen with a number of circular tables (eight) where students can eat their lunch. Due to lack of space, there are two to three classrooms that are also allocated as eating rooms during lunch hour. On the first floor there is also a computer lab for students which they can use for personal browsing, email and so forth, as well as learning activities during class-time. The computers spill over into the hallways, where they are lined up against one of the walls. With the preponderance of smartphones however, most online activity has now migrated to students’ own hand-held devices, on which they connect with the school’s Wi-Fi system.

3.1.4 Implications of the physical

This brief physical description of the research context serves to prime the reader for the premise that even the most material arrangements within a workspace can have significant
psychological, cultural and political implications. As has been hinted at, seating itself can be imbibed with all manner of power relations, as a teacher’s physical location and deskspace could serve as a marker of position within the system.

Likewise, seemingly innocuous decisions such as that of sub-dividing existing classrooms, can have a great impact on whether a physical environment is conducive to learning or not. This is a good example of when a base economic decision can have a lasting effect on the daily operations of an educational institution.

Most importantly however, I have tried to demonstrate the transience and the temporary nature of the relationship teachers have with their teaching spaces in the research context. Clearly, investing personal effort into the appearance of one’s classroom is a futile activity, when one has no idea for how long you will occupy the space. Therefore, there is this psychological sense of uprootedness displayed by teachers – whereby they become nomads or ‘travellers’ in their own institution – regardless of the length of their employ.

In tandem with the above-mentioned assertion, is the belief that to understand who teachers are, we also need to understand the physical nature of the context they inhabit – because embedded in their physical surroundings are tangible clues to deep-seated cultural artefacts that reveal ideologies of practice.

In brief, the open-plan communal staff rooms and the constantly changing teaching spaces do suggest a deep-seated ‘production-line’ mentality that has systemic roots – students hop on for a while and hop off, and accordingly, student numbers also dictate that teachers for the most part hop on, and also hop off. In market-oriented education this has already been taken
for granted and is, for the most part unquestioned. But why is this? Part of the answer lies in
the sense that the idea of a ‘rolling intake’ system is almost perceived as natural, it is the way
things have always been. This sentiment serves to move it beyond the critical focus of those
who live within its shadow. And yet, we shall try to reverse this trend – it is time to look at
the idea of rolling intake.

3.2 Cycles within cycles: how rolling intake works…”

The main distinguishing feature of the operations of a private language school in comparison
with other educational settings is that of rolling intake. Rolling intake refers to the continual
process by which students are enrolled. Instead of having fixed terms of study with pre-
determined start and finish dates, students are able to enrol whenever they want to. The
periods for which students can enrol is also flexible – ranging from one week to a full year of
study – in a number of rare cases, some students have studied for periods extending beyond
52 weeks.

On average however, students typically enrol for periods between 3-12 weeks.
This system applies to General English courses, which is the type of study most of the
institution’s learners are involved in. The general exceptions to continuous intake policy are
Cambridge courses such as IELTS, FCE or CAE, as well as teacher training courses (such as
TESOL) – these have fixed start and end dates. However, even these courses are increasingly
being subjected to the variability of the system by the school more frequently accepting
students on an exam course who might only attend a few weeks of a course instead of the full
period.
Rolling intake is the primary organizing principle around which administrative and teaching duties revolve. Planning for both staff and management is therefore generally arranged in weekly blocks. It structures the work week in a very specific way and also is responsible for the majority of daily exigencies that need to be dealt with speedily.

A typical Monday morning would involve a process of orientation for newly arrived students which involves placement testing and interviewing, presentations by various key administrative staff members highlighting key aspects of students’ stay in New Zealand (e.g. homestay information, transport information, school or study information etc.), as well as a brief school tour. Based on placement test results and a short verbal interview, students are then placed in a suitable class for their level. Placement needs to be completed by the lunch hour, because the Director of Studies (DOS) needs to compile a list of new students for the staffroom noticeboard so that teachers can add the new students to their existing class registers. By Monday afternoon, all new students start their first English lessons.

As evidenced by my field notes detailing the time spent ‘shadowing’ the DOS and ADOS (Assistant Director of Studies) performing intake duties, there are a variety of factors influencing the placement of students that go far beyond their English level and test performances. These include: number of spaces available at different class levels, period of enrolment, the personality and expressed needs of the learner, the personality and teaching ‘style’ of the teachers at various General English levels and so forth. Placement in a rolling intake system is necessarily pragmatically-oriented.

By Tuesday, there are normally a number of placement adjustments that need to be made due to glaring class or level mismatches – either brought to the attention of the academic
managers by teachers or learners themselves. If a student can be re-allocated this is done, but in many situations, a certain amount of ‘damage control’ happens at this stage – either to rationalise the reason for the placement or to explain to a teacher why a move for the student is not possible.

On Wednesday, a component of the staff meetings will often be the mention of any particularly important aspects of that week’s intake that affect teachers in general or a look forward at a future intake – for example, to warn teachers that the coming week will have a large new student intake which will result in a significant ‘reshuffling’ of classes. During the beginning of Thursday’s lunch hour, new students have a brief meeting with the DOS and ADOS about their first week at Veupoint – this includes their feelings about morning and afternoon classes as well as their homestay experience. Students fill out a ‘My First Week at Veupoint’ evaluation form, but those with particular issues also have a chance to talk face to face with the academic managers about it.

Every Friday morning culminates in a short farewell ceremony at the end of morning classes for students who are leaving the school that week. School leavers are given a final evaluation form to complete and hand in to reception before they leave. In addition they also receive their study certificates outlining the courses studies and overall English levels attained.

Although most private language teachers, including the majority of my research participants, accept a rolling intake system as the only feasible way to run a private training establishment – I am of the firm belief that this is the product of not working in any other system within the private sector. Continuous intake is such a wide-ranging and ubiquitous aspect of private language teaching, that the ability to imagine an alternative is what is challenging.
And yet at the heart of it, is the fact that the reason for adopting a rolling intake system is economic, not pedagogic. So the question then is, how does a rolling intake system affect practitioners’ teaching experiences? This will be discussed at further length in the fourth and fifth chapters, in which teachers articulate their perceptions of the system they work in.

Casting our eyes further afield, we can look at Veupoint as one localised space in constant flux, operating within a multi-billion dollar export education industry. What are the historical contours of this profitable industry itself, and how is Veupoint situated within its narrative? This is the focus of the next section.

3.3 Positioning Veupoint: a narrative of private language teaching in New Zealand

The internationalisation of education and the accompanying growth in the export thereof has had a very marked impact on the geographical as well as socio-cultural landscape of New Zealand; in particular, on its largest city, Auckland (Collins, 2010). It is at its most visible in the urban surroundings of the Auckland CBD, where many international students pursue their studies. As Collins notes, this urban bias in international student mobility is to be expected - it mirrors global trends studied in the USA, Canada and Australia.

Auckland’s international student population is one component of a great many others that contribute to it being a melting pot of cultures. For example, within the group of 1.4 million people which call this city home, 190 different ethnic groups are represented – add to this the fact that 65% of New Zealand’s non-English speaking citizens live here too (Comet, 2011).

For the calendar years 2007-2012, the percentage of international fee-paying students (IFPs) in New Zealand studying in the Auckland catchment area grew from 54.9% to 63.2% (Ministry of Education, 2012). However, this increase in student population density does not
reflect an overall downward trend in the number of IFP students in New Zealand: from a high of 124,312 in 2003 to a significantly lower number of 91,732 in 2012 – figures have fluctuated to some degree in the years between, and for a variety of reasons (Ministry of Education).

Veupoint, the institute at which I conducted my research, is a private training establishment (PTE), and more specifically, a non-SDR (Single Data Return) PTE. This is a PTE which does not receive any government funding (Ministry of Education, 2012). To position the research site within the narrative of private language education in New Zealand, I will start by giving a brief historical outlook of the industry over the past few decades.

Although already a small presence in the market since the mid-80s, private language schools exploded onto the educational stage in the business-friendly climate that characterised the 1990s, becoming “major players in the selling of New Zealand education” (Lewis, 2004, p. 27). This was largely due to the fact that New Zealand offered an attractive blend of relatively inexpensive language tuition, a safe learning environment, and popular tourist activities and attractions. The numbers of foreign fee-paying students (FFPs) increased dramatically in this decade. The cash injection for the economy was most visible in Auckland, where revenue, coupled with positive long-term outlooks, generated a flurry of apartment building projects as well as frenetic economic activity in service provision and retail (Collins, 2006).

Government regulation of export education during this era was minimal at best as far as private institutions were concerned. Although the NZ government introduced a Code of Practice in 1996 for education providers, it was toothless, as it was voluntary (Lewis, 2005).
However, many providers did become signatories – it was one way in which they could market their professionalism. In addition, for English language schools, membership of industry organisations such as FIELSNZ (Federation of Independent English Language Schools of New Zealand) and IALC (International Association of Language Centres) were often means by which schools could attach an additional mark of quality to their name – as well as differentiate themselves from ‘rogue operators’.

3.3.1 The boom and the bust

Following the 1997 Asian financial crisis and the subsequent dip in student numbers in certain key markets, a combination of government policies from both China and New Zealand saw a great influx of Chinese students into the education system – primarily as undergraduates and students at English language schools (Tarling, 2004). The largely unchecked growth of the industry for the better part of a decade, although more gradual, had already given rise to myriad interconnected problems, and these now rose to the surface and into the public eye with greater regularity.

It is not too difficult to imagine the strain put on the education system if one considers that between 1999 and 2002, the total number of international students tripled – from roughly 6250 to over 22000 (Lewis, 2005, p. 21). The potential for a good financial return saw a number of private education providers enter the market, often “speculative” and “under-capitalised” - with disastrous consequences. Events such as the failure of Planet English and the Modern Age Institute of Learning in 2003 (Tarling, 2004) did much to damage the reputation of New Zealand education in general, and private language schools in particular. The spectacular “boom” in export education provision became a “bust” and international
student numbers fell – for example, Chinese enrolments at English language schools (ELS) decreased by 80% between 2003 and 2006 (Lewis, 2011).

However, bad business practices certainly did not provide the full picture – prior to 2003, there was a noticeable increase in language student dissatisfaction with what was perceived as low educational standards and a lack of qualified teaching personnel in certain private English language schools (Mao, 2002; Li, 2003). To compound matters, racialization and distortions of export education issues were common in the media (Li, 2007).

3.3.2 Government intervention: policy-making and the development of regulatory frameworks

The developing crisis in export education initiated a period of heightened government scrutiny from 2000 onwards. The report, Export education in New Zealand: a strategic approach to developing the sector (Ministry of Education, 2001), articulated a vision of “providing sustainable, high quality international education and support services, thereby producing a range of economic, educational and cultural benefits for New Zealand” (p. 13). With particular focus on institutions in the private sector, the International Education Appeal Authority (IEAA) released a report in the same year, outlining primary issues regarding pastoral care – with an emphasis on tuition refunds, residential care of students, and dispute procedures amongst others (MoE, 2001). It highlighted the need for a more stringent code of practice that did more to safeguard the reputation of New Zealand education than the existing voluntary code could.

All this government activity culminated in the Code of Practice for the pastoral care of international students (Ministry of Education, 2002, 2010 – revised version), which lies at the
heart of the regulatory framework which emerged. It is compulsory, and therefore any educational entity who wants to provide services to international students has to be a signatory to the code.

What the Code of Practice did, particularly in terms of private language schools, was to bring them out into the open, making them more visible, accountable and subject to regulation. A further development that operates closely with the Code was introduced by the Government in 2003 – a compulsory industry levy known as *The Export Education Levy* or EEL (see Ministry of Education, 2012), which is payable by all signatories to the Code, including PTEs who do not receive state funding. The EEL is utilised in various ways, namely:

- to invest in a wide array of initiatives aimed at developing the industry
- to fund marketing for export education in New Zealand
- to pay for professional development of employees within the education sector
- for research and data collection
- to provide funding for the running of the Code of Practice office responsible for the pastoral care of international students
- *to support students impacted by the financial failure of private providers*  
  (Ministry of Education, 2013a, *emphasis added*)

### 3.3.3 Quality assurance: government and industry initiatives

Alongside the above-mentioned government initiatives to regulate the education export industry, the issue of quality assurance and maintenance was, and is prominent. The Act under which the EEL was authorised, namely Section 238 of the Education Act, 1989 (Ministry of Education, 2012), put forward a more expansive definition of an international
student - which now included individuals enrolled in short-term courses and who were not in New Zealand on study permits (Lewis, 2011).

Consequently, these short-term courses (with a few exemptions) had to be approved by the New Zealand Qualifications Authority (NZQA). This was highly significant for private English language schools, which nearly exclusively enrolled international students. Being a signatory to the Code of Practice and having its courses NZQA-approved and accredited are the two requirements needed to be able to enrol international students (New Zealand Qualifications Authority, 2009a).

The NZQA introduced a new assessment framework, The Quality Assurance Framework, on 1 September 2009 – the central focus of which was an outcomes-based approach. The three main elements of it are: registration, accreditation and course approval; self-assessment procedures; and external evaluation of an organisation’s practices by a non-affiliated standards body (New Zealand Qualifications Authority, 2009b, p. 1). Being an NZQA-registered education provider has become a mark of quality, and the NZQA itself markets accreditation as providing an entity with this benefit (NZQA, 2009a).

Initiatives by professional associations within the English language teaching industry to assure quality of education in the private sector should also be mentioned. One key body of quality assurance is English New Zealand or ENZ (established in 1986 and incorporating FIELSNZ), which represents private as well as public English language schools.
3.3.4 International students: 2003 to the present day

The numbers of international students in New Zealand education providers have not again reached the lofty heights of the 2003 period. A decline of 27.7% in enrolments, from 126,503 in 2003 to 91,388 in 2008, was followed by a growth period in which enrolments increased by 8.8% to 99,466 in 2010. A significant drop in numbers (5.7%) was again experienced in 2012, and this has been ascribed in part to the Christchurch earthquake in 2011. For non-SDR private training establishments, especially English language schools, a stronger NZ dollar also had a significant impact over this time period (Ministry of Education, 2013b). Despite this overall downturn, international students have and will remain a very significant source of export revenue.

In the calendar year of 2011, the export education industry as a whole contributed an estimated $2.3 billion to GDP. By education sector, the top contributors were universities (25.6%), PTEs (23.2%), and English Language schools (16.7%). The PTE figures in this data set excluded those who focus on English language provision, as they were accounted for separately (Infometrics, 2012). Compared with figures from 2007/2008, the overall contribution to GDP in 2011 had increased – up from $2.1 billion. However, significant changes are apparent when one looks at the top contributors – in 2008, universities (32.1%) and English Language schools (23.5%) contributed much more and PTEs (10.4%) much less than in 2011 (Education New Zealand & Ministry of Education, 2008).

With increasing levels of international student mobility, the New Zealand government’s economic forecasting (for the year 2025) seems to show an overall increase in enrolments in the future. The number of international students in English language schools in New Zealand is projected to grow the fastest – at a rate of 5% per annum. However, in terms of economic
value added, universities are estimated to contribute the most, while English language providers are a close second (Ministry of Education, 2011).

It is important to acknowledge international students’ contributions to New Zealand in more than just economic terms. The overall value of students from other countries studying in New Zealand is acknowledged in the government document, *The International Education Agenda: A Strategy for 2007-2012*, released in August 2007 (Ministry of Education). International students are seen to:

- help strengthen the academic and research performances of educational institutions;
- provide meaningful cultural and social exchange that enriches New Zealand’s citizens and institutions;
- contribute as members of the workforce if they choose to remain after gaining qualifications;
- serve as ambassadors for New Zealand and as a link to other countries upon their return home.

To achieve the goal of providing international learners with a high-quality educational and living experience, the Agenda recognises that it must ensure that “good quality ESOL teaching and resources are available for international students from all education providers” (MoE, 2007, p. 18). This is again reiterated in the *Leadership Statement for International Education* along with a call for overall improvement in the services provided by English language schools and PTEs (New Zealand Government, 2011).
3.3.5 Who and where are the teachers?

There is no question that the situation within private language education in the 1990s was untenable and robust regulatory frameworks were required. However, the manner in which policies were implemented and industry standards enforced needs to be approached critically. Who or what has been marginalized?

It is clear that the discourse(s) of new managerialism and marketization have been predominant in discussions on export education – populated with notions of accountability, minimum standards, benchmarking, branding, professional development, consumer protections, competition and external audit. With the auditory regimes in place, the lived realities of managers, teachers and students have become populated with paperwork and the ‘tyranny of numbers’. Working towards a pre-determined set of externally-mandated outcomes has important implications for how the various stakeholders within an institution interpret their roles as well as the social relations that form between them.

Audit brings external scrutiny to self-regulation. It examines contracts rather than performance, form rather than substance. Audit examines documents and procedures and comments on their compliance with a predefined set of rules for their form. It is these rules that are supposed to guarantee performance (Lewis, 2005, p. 13).

In all education sectors, including English language teaching, there has been a renewed focus on teacher qualifications and on-going professional development. Professional associations such as English New Zealand take a strong interest in these matters in their auditing standards. Quality assurance within private language education as to teacher certification is problematic for a variety of reasons. Firstly, entry-level certification for ESL teaching in New Zealand is relatively easy and quick to acquire – both the CELTA and Trinity TESOL certificates are commonly awarded after a 4-week intensive course (Li, 2003). A 4-week course is not, as Li quite rightly argues, sufficient in developing the levels of teacher preparation that a high
quality education system requires. Even the CELTA regulatory body has admitted that the certificate should be viewed as an “initial step” in a prolonged journey of professional development (Ferguson & Donno, 2003).

Just as with language learning, developing teacher competence is most certainly a non-linear process, and there is much that audit regimes focusing exclusively on qualifications and observations of teachers will not be able to assess reliably (Barduhn & Johnson, 2009). Another significant issue is that of a career track and the low status of teachers in the private ESL field. It is common for language teachers to have to compete regularly for employment opportunities, and in the case of a full-time job, it will rarely be tenure-tracked. As experience is accumulated, it infrequently translates into significantly better wages or employment benefits (Krauss, 2002).

The export education industry in New Zealand has been re-centred, and private language schools are on the periphery of policy considerations and research. Concurrently there has been an ideological shift which has placed the student as a customer firmly in the middle of any discussion. The implications for private ESL teachers are significant – the voices of other stakeholders (government, academic researchers, managers, parents and students) seem to be so much louder than theirs. Here too, as in the physical spaces of their classrooms, teachers have become invisible and ghost-like. If policy and audit regimes are concerned with the ‘whole’ international student – their academic, social and psychological well-being while here in New Zealand – surely the ‘whole person’ of the teacher also deserves attention and care as the other important half of the student-teacher relationship.
3.3.6 Research on ESOL teaching and teachers in New Zealand

Language teaching and learning research in New Zealand in the last decade has covered a broad spectrum of languages (community, English and foreign), educational contexts, as well as a diverse range of themes and issues. Ker, Adams, and Skyrme (2013) identify four thick strands of research that are prevalent, namely: second language acquisition (SLA), curriculum, language teaching methodology, as well as teacher education and cognition (p. 232). The above-mentioned review covers research on indigenous and community languages, New Zealand Sign Language, foreign languages and ESOL.

With an increased focus on professionalization in both the domains of ESOL and foreign languages, two distinctive avenues of inquiry within research on or by teachers have emerged – that of postgraduate research and action research, or other forms of practitioner research (see Burns & Burton, 2008a). Compared with Australia, teacher-initiated inquiry is viewed as having been more “fragmentary” (Roach, as cited in Burns & Burton, 2008b) in New Zealand. Two important issues pertaining to ESOL research in New Zealand has been: the manner in which funding is allocated for study projects, and in terms of government policy, the ‘pushing’ of ESOL concerns to the periphery of consideration at times (Burns & Burton, 2008b). What this translates into for ESOL teachers wanting to engage in inquiry-based teaching is serious time constraints and lack of support (e.g. Denny, 2005). For private ESL instructors, the problems can be more acute – management or staff members often do not perceive research as useful. In addition, securing release time for research is difficult.

Of the two main strands of research mentioned previously, postgraduate research clearly enjoys a higher level of prestige and visibility. There are a variety of reasons for this as pointed out by Ker et al. (2013) – one being that a significant number of New Zealand
researchers in applied linguistics are prominent in the scholarly community. Apart from that, there are a plethora of conferences at which papers can be regularly presented. With increased commercialisation of tertiary education and the importance of researcher as well as university rankings (Ker et al.), Performance-Based Research Funding has also become prevalent – often marginalising smaller-scale, non-tertiary projects.

Practitioner research on the other hand is usually confined to local journals, such as Many Voices: Journal of New Settlers and Multicultural Issues (Burns & Burton, 2008b), but overall, regular publishing opportunities are limited (Jeurissen & Kitchen, 2007). Another very common avenue for the dissemination of teacher research is conferences – particularly the biannual Community Languages and ESOL Conference, otherwise known as CLESOL (Burns & Burton, 2008b; Ker et al., 2013).

A very powerful illustration of the gaps which exist in academic peer-reviewed research in New Zealand is provided by Erlam (2010) in her examination of 120 journal articles published over a 5-year period (2005 to 2009) in local journals. Her investigation involved sourcing articles from TESOLANZ, New Zealand Studies in Applied Linguistics, The New Zealand Language Teacher and SET, and then classifying them in five key ways. This classification serves to illuminate key neglected areas in language learning and teaching research in the New Zealand context.

Erlam found that studies employing classroom observation were dwarfed in number by both experimental and survey-based research. When studies were categorised according to who the researchers were, it was found that those working in a tertiary context were the authors of approximately ninety percent of all studies. The most heavily researched context was tertiary
too, followed by secondary and primary or intermediate school contexts. The most under-researched contexts were private language schools and migrant settings.

With regards to the research participants, a clear majority of the articles focused on ESOL students, followed by foreign language (FL) students, and then teachers. Very rarely featuring as participants were those claiming Maori or Pasifika heritage, and principals. As an extra fine-tuning exercise, Erlam also classified studies specifically according to ESOL context. Again, as has been shown earlier, tertiary contexts were heavily favoured.

Admittedly, the review of Ker et al. (2013) and the study by Erlam (2010) focused on applied linguistics research conducted and published in New Zealand. However, extending the examination to New Zealand-based research published further afield, as well as commissioned by the NZ government (e.g. the Ministry of Education), the pattern recurs. Narrowing the focus to ESOL studies on or involving teachers, the pickings are very slim in terms of private ESL instructors and private language teaching contexts. A number of studies have focused on primary and secondary school teachers (language and content), either in relation to TESSOL or with relevance for it and English language learners (e.g. Kitchen & Jeurissen, 2006; Feryok & Barkhuizen, 2008; Gray, 2011, 2012).

When examining practitioner research published internationally, the same tertiary bias emerges. The edited TESOL volume by Burns & Burton (2008a), *Language Teacher Research in Australia and New Zealand*, is a case in point – all of the New Zealand-based action research projects mentioned were conducted by academic, tertiary researchers in a tertiary context (Coxhead, Hunter, Pierard, & Cook, 2008; Denny, 2008; Griffiths, 2008; Roach, 2008).
Examining the proceedings and papers from previous CLESOL conferences, it is also clear that studies focusing on teachers and teacher education are present, but certainly outnumbered by those focusing on ESOL learners. In addition, and yet again with research on teachers, the tertiary sector is well-represented (e.g. Edwards, 2008), while the private sector has a smaller footprint (e.g. Thaine, 2004).

Clearly there are a number of research gaps in the study of language teaching and learning in New Zealand. As the data collected by Erlam (2010) clearly shows, there is a need for more research that:

- is situated in authentic learning contexts (i.e. the classroom);
- explores ESOL teaching and learning “in contexts other than tertiary” (p. 38);
- done by teachers for teachers dealing with teacher concerns;
- focuses on research participants that are underrepresented in studies (e.g. Maori/Pasifika, principals and other stakeholders, and teachers);
- is longitudinal in nature.

3.4 Caught between two worlds: the case of private ESL instructors

The argument could be made that various research projects conducted in other educational sectors do have value and applicability for the private language teaching sector as well. That is certainly not to be disputed – as an example we can look at Gray’s (2012) investigation of the benefits of collegial observation as being useful for a great many ESOL educators in a
variety of contexts. However, there are major structural, contextual and employee role
differences between private language schools and other NZ educational contexts that need to
be highlighted.

One notable exception to the overall dearth of studies focusing on the private language
2011b). Although this research is primarily informed by a management and business
perspective, Walker has done much to capture and describe the nature of a market-oriented
language teaching enterprise and what this means as well as implies for students (clients),
teachers (service providers), administrative staff and management.

According to Walker (2007), private language schools or ELTCs (English Language
Teaching Centres) as he calls them, are markedly different from public sector educational
entities in almost every way. One very significant difference is the nature and duration of the
learner’s connection with an ELTC. Predominantly, learners are often only engaged in short-
term studies – and from a business perspective as well as client-oriented response, ELTCs
most commonly have a ‘rolling intake’ system. Other key features of an ELTC that
differentiates it from other educational contexts are:

- an intense focus on profit margins, (i.e. a market orientation)
- institutional size (in NZ in general, smaller than entities in the public sector)
- means of assessing learner performance and teaching approaches
- range of subjects offered (more one-dimensional, with a focus on English learning)
- teachers’ backgrounds and qualifications
- range of students’ ages that can be represented
• average number of learners in a classroom

• student backgrounds and cultures (although some overlaps)

• intrinsic features (e.g. ‘service climate’)

(Walker, 2007, p. 317)

A moral dilemma arises when considering how a public good such as education can be delivered within a market-oriented environment. As Walker puts it, “…in organisations like ELCs [English Language Centres], where teaching staff must reconcile a professional ethic with commercial priorities, there is potential for a discrepancy between what is commercially and what is professionally desirable” (2007, p. 319).

Walker’s research emphasises that private English language schools are service organisations with a commercial prerogative – in terms of daily operations and from an organisation theory perspective (2002, 2007, 2010). The implication is that, in this type of organisational climate, we could find management expectations of teachers to perform certain roles not commonly required in other educational contexts.

We are also interested in apparitions. How do the aforementioned commercial priorities of private training establishments serve to ‘silence’ and obscure the reality of teachers as multi-dimensional social figures needing to find an empathetic ear as well as institutional support for their valid pedagogic concerns? A comprehensive attempt at an answer to this question is still some way off. First we need to provide the backdrop for the upcoming in-depth look at the experiences of individuals and the collective within the research context (to be found in the fourth and fifth chapters); by offering a brief historical primer of key systemic changes at Veupoint, focusing on the years 2010-2013, a period which incorporates the two key research
periods of the study. To preface this, what follows is a brief description of the institution as it operates currently – which serves as an anchor and time marker for the historical developments that follow.

3.5 A specific educational environment: the research site in focus

Veupoint is registered as a Private Training Establishment (non-SDR) by the New Zealand Qualifications Authority (NZQA) and is owned by an international company which also operates other language schools abroad. The school is a member of IALC (International Association of Language Centres) as well as English New Zealand (ENZ), and is also a signatory to the Code of Practice for the Pastoral Care of International Students (Ministry of Education, 2002, 2010 – Revised version). In addition, it serves as an educational agent for various Auckland-based tertiary institutions and is registered as an official TOEIC Test centre. Courses offered by the school include:

- General English Courses (beginner – advanced),
- Cambridge FCE, CAE & CPE,
- Cambridge IELTS,
- English for Academic Purposes (EAP 1,2,3),
- TESOL & Cambridge TKT (teacher training/teaching knowledge),
- TECSOL (Teaching English to Child Speakers of Other Languages),
- CLIL (Content and Language Integrated Learning) courses for teacher groups from non-English speaking countries (e.g. Vietnam, Thailand),
- Business English,
- and Teenage Courses (English instruction + Activities).
In addition to the English instruction offered, the school also has an in-house activities coordinator who organizes weekend trips and social activities during the week. The majority of learners at the school are placed in homestays, and for teenagers unaccompanied by their parents, this is understandably a requirement.

The number of students enrolled at the school fluctuates over the calendar year. Students are encouraged to map a pathway to learning, especially if they are planning to study long-term, and therefore General English courses are often viewed as preparatory classes for exam courses – which in turn are often linked to study pathways that lead to enrolling in other tertiary courses at various education providers offering New Zealand qualifications.

The number of short-term students has increased over the years, and this is indicative of various economic forces that have shaped the market. This has been accommodated for a long time through the school’s policy of continuous intake or “rolling entry” (New Zealand Qualifications Authority, 2012), meaning that new learners are accepted on an on-going basis and not at pre-determined times, while other students also exit the school at the same rate. The staff members at the school represent a diverse mix of cultural backgrounds. A certain proportion of teachers are employed permanently, while others are on fixed-term contracts. Full-time teachers generally teach for 25 hours per week – this means ‘contact-time’ in class and does not factor in lesson planning and preparation. There are also part-timers who assist during busy seasons. Roughly half of the staff members have administrative roles, although there are instances of overlap. Due to the number of nationalities represented among administrative staff, some individuals also assume mentoring roles for learners.
If one looks at the teaching staff, it is quickly apparent that a very flat organizational structure applies to them in terms of position and decision-making power. Although experience and long-term service to the institution does carry with it a certain amount of symbolic capital – in terms of respect and credibility – there are very few significant material advantages that go along with belonging to this ‘club’. However, hourly rates of pay do increase marginally for every additional two years of teaching experience accrued.

When one looks at management, a clear hierarchy is easily discernible. Both the Director of Studies (DOS) and the Assistant Director of Studies (ADOS) are responsible for academic management issues, which roughly translate into learning and instructional concerns relating to students, as well as co-ordinating and supporting all teacher-related activity – which would include daily operational matters as well as extra-curricular professional development. The Head of Teacher Development (HOTD), although a separate title with a particular brief relating to professional development, is a little more ‘fuzzy’. This is due to the fact that, during the research period, the individual with this job description assumed the role of ADOS as well, due to institutional changes. Currently, therefore, HOTD is not a separate position as before, but an added responsibility for the existing ADOS.

However, in terms of decision-making power, regardless of which person wields it (and how much of it), the triumvirate of DOS, ADOS and HOTD are the job positions that determine what happens in the school academically. To some extent they also represent the concerns of teaching staff in management-only meetings. In addition, these individuals are responsible for compiling various reports for other members of the management team that detail facts and figures relating to student feedback, forecasting in terms of staffing numbers and student enrolments in the upcoming months, as well as curricular changes and adjustments.

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Overseeing the academic team is the Principal, who is responsible for reporting on learning and teaching matters to the owner of the enterprise. In addition, the principal is also largely responsible for the overall efforts of the marketing team, as well as liaising on a daily basis with other administrative staff members to ensure smooth service provision in all institutional procedures. To this end, the principal works closely with the registrar (responsible for bookings, course changes and other administrative controls of student enrolment), the homestay co-ordinator (in charge of accommodation provision for students) and the accounting manager, who takes care of all the financial and budgetary concerns of the school. Although the power structures associated with various job roles in the company emerges from the accounts of individual participants, it is important to mention at this stage that, in most respects, the financial prerogatives of the institution have precedence over all other operational concerns. For this reason, the true decision-making power in the company firmly rests with the accounts manager and to a lesser extent, the principal.

To gain more insight into how Veupoint itself has developed in terms of institutional procedures, it is necessary to provide a selective catalogue of key systemic changes experienced over time (before and during the research period(s), and this is what we turn to next.

3.6 A Catalogue of Key Systemic Changes at Veupoint (2010-2013)

In 2006, Veupoint changed ownership, becoming a member school of a larger enterprise which included institutions based in Australia. The change in ownership heralded a new era in the school’s history, and also signified the beginnings of an organizational and cultural paradigm shift, partly brought on by a more intense prioritization of financial returns, as well
as a move towards providing a more diversified portfolio of instructional services for the customer-student (e.g. a larger variety of high-stakes exam courses on offer).

3.6.1 The year of 2010

Although these changes slowly insinuated themselves into the institutional framework in the first four years under new management, it was in 2010 when the push to ‘professionalize’ the school gained momentum and burst out into the open. Having been appointed as Director of Studies in 2008, Penny, in her first appointment in this position, had worked diligently on proving her capabilities to both managerial and teaching staff over the previous two years - and she felt personally ready to start reshaping the school system in a way that would reflect her conception of a professional enterprise.

The most impactful systemic change of 2010 was a shift from teacher-generated progress tests to standardised tests designed by the DOS and ADOS. Previously, teachers had been personally responsible for creating or compiling regular progress tests for their students – based on the material they had covered over a month of instruction. Starting in January, the first standardised tests were trialled with a number of leaving students, with the first official teacher-administered standardised testing taking place on February the 1st of that year. Essentially, standardised testing meant a more fixed and regulated body of grammar and vocabulary content that would be assessed periodically.

Initially, the idea of standardized testing was sold to teachers as a means of simplifying their lives and saving time. As an example of how this was communicated to staff, here is an excerpt from meeting minutes of that year:
You will not need to create your own grammar and vocabulary tests anymore. The first round of tests will be ready by tomorrow for you to look at. Please make sure you cover in class what is in the test. We have selected big chunks of grammar and vocab which should be covered anyway, but please keep an eye on test content and plan lessons accordingly.

We feel creating set tests are useful as it cuts back on your time. Instead you can use this time to plan your lessons, read up on teaching methods and develop yourselves further so you improve your classroom teaching. We are trying to lift the academic level at Veupoint as much as we can in order to become an even more professional school.

(Staff Meeting Minutes, January 14, 2010)

In general, the response from teaching staff was overwhelmingly positive, as many teachers, particularly newly-arrived ones, found compiling their own tests quite daunting. A minority, primarily composed of more experienced teachers (and including me), felt that our ability to adapt and change material to our specific learner needs within a particular class could be negatively impacted by the push towards standardization. Over time and with increased normalization of the standardised testing regime, our initial misgivings came to be shared by a larger number of teachers. Although this systemic change will be returned to later on, it is important to note how this ‘innovation’ gradually led to a discernible loss of autonomy for the individual teacher. Teachers now had to factor in what was covered in the set tests in their own lesson planning, to ensure that they managed to cover the grammar points and vocabulary items assessed in time – ‘remote control’ of the curriculum had been achieved, and a significant portion of curricular decision-making power had been wrested from the hands of teachers.

As is the case with major changes, a few small ‘tweaks’ of the assessment system accompanied the move to standardized testing. One of these was the ‘stretching out’ of the assessment period to include other accountability measures – the main rationale being one of
increased professionalism. Students were now given “How do I feel about my English?”
feedback forms the week before testing, ostensibly to gauge what areas they were happy with, and what areas they were concerned about. In reality, it soon became apparent that the feedback form was also a subtle way of gaining early awareness of which students felt they
needed to ‘level up’ and who was still satisfied with their current levels – useful information for academic managers to then get from teachers to assist them with future planning of class allocations and changes.

Additionally, on the Friday of a test week, teachers were now required to run ‘tutorials’ with their students. This involved setting aside the first morning slot of lessons for having one-on-one meetings with students, in which the teacher would discuss their test results and classroom performance, as well as give them their progress reports. While the teacher was thus occupied, it was also expected that they had designed a lesson/activity for the other students awaiting their one-on-one meeting to be busy with.

3.6.2 The year of 2011

Time management was the watchword of the first two months of 2011. Traditionally, a
leaving ceremony for exiting students had been held every Friday during the mid-morning break (10:30-11:00). This had transformed into quite an ad-hoc event over the years, with students being given the opportunity to make speeches and thank their classmates and teachers. It was also here where students were presented with their leaving certificates.

Quite frequently, these farewell ceremonies spilled over into the lesson time of the last morning slot (11:00-12:00). As a response to a few cases of disgruntled student feedback, the decision was made to shorten these meetings. Classes were now asked to arrive in the lounge
for the farewell promptly at 10:35, and individual speeches and certificate presentations were
done away with (to be done in the students’ own class), and the only focus of the farewell
was now announcements, followed by a quick roll call of leavers, followed by a collective
“goodbye and good luck”. This soon became a sarcastic chant with a long half-life outside of
the procedure that spawned it – a teacher and student reaction to the reduction of a joyous,
unstructured ceremony into a robotic, repetitive mundanity.

All other organizational events of 2011 were however dwarfed by the Christchurch
earthquake and its aftermath. Aside from its general impact on the social consciousness, it
also more specifically loomed large over Veupoint’s own prospects from February 2011
onwards. Essentially, Veupoint lost its Christchurch school which meant that the remaining
school in Auckland had from that moment on, to try its best to make up for the financial
shortfall created by this natural disaster. The earthquake basically put a halt on Veupoint’s
steady climb towards profitability since ownership changed hands in 2006. This singular
event had an indirect ripple effect on many aspects of institutional life and the daily lived
realities of my participants.

Symptomatic of a renewed push to diversify the forms of instructional services provided,
April 2011 saw new Friday afternoon class options introduced, namely: Skills for Life and
Real Life Listening. These were in response to student feedback that requested more
opportunities for learning useful and pragmatic language for use in the real world outside of
the classroom. In terms of Skills for Life, these lesson materials were given to teachers to use
– they did not have to create these themselves. For Real Life Listening however, teachers
had a brief to design a lesson around an authentic non-textbook text, such as a news broadcast
or a clip from a TV interview etc.
In addition, a new course for the school was developed by Ava and Penny – a teacher-training TESOL course. This was introduced to staff members in the month of May. Over time, this course added another form of potential scrutiny of teachers’ practices, in the form of teachers being asked if they minded hosting TESOL trainees for various assignments in their course - which involved observing an experienced teacher teach, or observing a learner in class for the purposes of learner needs analysis.

2011 also saw a concerted effort by the academic management team to more actively encourage and incorporate technology into the existing practices of teachers. A number of widescreen TVs with multi-functional capabilities were installed in a number of classrooms for use by teachers. This led to teacher development sessions focused on technology and also led to the implementation of an added mini-component to staff meetings – where Ava (HOTD) would present a 5-minute show on a few novel ways of incorporating technology in the classroom.

3.6.3 The year of 2012

A recurring problem at Veupoint had been that students who were enrolled for 3 to 4 weeks would often be in the position of just missing out on an upcoming progress test. From March of 2012 a new policy of providing these students with an exit test was introduced – so as to be able to give them some kind of formal assessment before they left the school. Although it was accepted favourably by both teachers and students, it did place a significant extra burden on the teacher. Outside of normal scheduling and marking times, the teacher would have to administer and mark these tests in a timely manner to give them the results on the same day that they took it.
Another continual issue for the school had been enforcing (albeit gently most times) an English-only policy in terms of students speaking in the school environment. In March of 2012, the plan of having English speaking ‘monitors’ was trialled, and the general response was that it was working. Ostensibly, it meant that teachers appointed English language monitors in their classes – these students were then tasked to actively encourage others to speak English when they came across students speaking their home language during break times, class time and so on.

In terms of long-lasting impact, the most significant organizational change of 2012 was that of the timetable overhaul, which came into effect on the 2nd of April. In general it translated into shorter break times and an earlier finishing time. Although garnering a majority of support from staff and students at the time, the effects of this tightening of the schedule has been deeply implicated in growing stress levels in the staffroom, and a feeling of being ‘rushed’ all of the time, as communicated by a number of my participants. In addition, for some it has meant less time to provide students with individual attention. This timetable change will be returned to, as it forms an important part of the discussion around the notion of ‘time poverty’ and how it has affected the teaching participants in my study.

The unveiling of a new afternoon class topic-based syllabus happened in June of 2012. Designed over 2 years by Penny as a “personal project”, it was seen as addressing the perceived need of teachers for updated resources that were more current and at the same time engaging for learners. Although the changed syllabus was met initially with excitement and appreciation, feelings about it cooled after it was tested out in term 3 of that year. Feedback from teachers responsible for lower levels (i.e. elementary and pre-intermediate) was that the materials were difficult for learners. Others felt that specific units (e.g. the Independent
Study Skill unit) did not seem to engage learners. Some teachers also criticised it for being a bit sparse in terms of resources for certain topic areas – where basically, the materials contained little beyond a teaching idea to be developed by the individual teacher.

In smaller private teacher conversations, a frequently recurring comment related to the fact that this syllabus had been created by one person, with very little to no input from the teachers who were now supposed to teach the materials. As with standardised testing, it seemed to be a replication of a pattern of appropriating previous areas of the curriculum/syllabus under teacher control and relocating decision-making and shaping power to academic managers. Again, the other side here is that for certain teachers, this was welcomed as a means of cutting preparation time and alleviating heavy workloads.

### 3.6.4 The year of 2013

In December of 2012, it was announced that a change in term lengths would come into effect in the first term of 2013. The move was from 12/13 week terms to 10 week terms. The main catalyst for the change had come from customer demand – more specifically, several Saudi students who had felt that they needed to progress through levels and course books faster and had put pressure on the school as well as their agents to request the change. After debate and consideration, the academic managers also felt that in some respects a 10-week term was also easier to manage. Again, this change was ‘sold’ to teachers as making their lives ‘less complex’ – it meant less testing per term as well as report writing, and it also required cutting out ‘annoying’ parts of the global course books (e.g. Chapter 1 revisions, that often met with lukewarm responses by students who had just ‘leveled up’).
The month of February 2013 was dominated by the spectre of the NZQA school-wide audit, known as an EER (External Education Review). In combination with the implementation of a new term system, tighter timetable schedules and members of management under great pressure, the general atmosphere was that of living inside a pressure cooker. Tempers frayed and small conflicts erupted with increased frequency. After receiving a favourable report overall, there was a dramatic turnaround in staff morale as the school had secured Category 1 status, a very important distinction which meant that students who studied with Veupoint were able to legally work for up to 20 hours per week while studying.

The month of July saw the first step taken by management (in particular an initiative attributable to Penny) to revamp the marketing department – a new Marketing Manager was appointed. The next few months saw a steady increase in marketing-oriented activities with a promotional bent. A further appointment was also made in the marketing department with the arrival of another marketing executive (23 September), to further assist in the marketing ‘revamp’ and to provide material support and expertise to the other team members.

The new marketing initiatives, although well-supported and promoted by teachers, did have a gradual ‘wearing-down’ effect on practitioners. Promotion of the various marketing events had to be done in class time, and some of these activities needed to be participated in during the already shrunken pockets of free time around contact teaching hours. Only being paid for contact hours in the classroom, many teachers already were feeling that they were contributing significant unpaid time to the school in the form of individual student help during breaks, extended planning periods, new teacher assistance and so forth.
Despite the above-mentioned efforts to build the brand of Veupoint, August and onwards saw student numbers starting to drop at an alarming rate. Matters came to a head in the month of October, when it became clear that the school was dangerously close to having to start redundancy proceedings in terms of teaching staff. After a few emergency meetings, a plan was devised to create a rotating schedule of enforced leave-taking as well as unpaid leave in a desperate bid to save most teachers jobs. Fortunately, this seemed to work reasonably well, and a lengthy, drawn out redundancy process was narrowly avoided. Further shocks were in store however – the Principal took ill suddenly, and at the same time the DOS tendered in her resignation. It was announced towards the end of November that the then ADOS (June) would be taking over the role of DOS from Penny – starting 14 December 2013.

This redundancy period forms an important part of the research project, as it coincides with the second period of research conducted at Veupoint. Additionally, the shock to the organizational system of potential redundancies served to shake out many interesting aspects of organizational culture and individuals’ notions of their part in the company narrative. For many teaching participants it also served as an object lesson of how little they were involved in company planning and decision-making, until there was no alternative but to notify everybody of the existence of a crisis.

Although by no means exhaustive, these selected systemic changes over the period 2010-2013 serve to give the reader some contextual details which will serve as anchoring points in the upcoming chapters in which individuals will reference these events and policies in their personal narratives. In terms of policy changes, such as the shift towards standardised testing, I have a dual purpose – in addition, I am providing a few core examples of how teachers have
‘disappeared’ from decision-making about curriculum and syllabus design. Becoming a ghost in the system happens gradually perhaps, but on a number of fronts.

3.7 Conclusion: invisible teachers

As has been described, a rolling intake system possesses the power to shape teachers’ relationships to the physical classroom spaces they temporarily inhabit. More interestingly it also, to a large degree curtails the potential of teachers to appropriate physical space, to make a mark and to create a presence for themselves in the places they spend most of their working lives in.

I have attempted to extend this idea of the “spectral indeterminacy” (Edensor, 2008) of teachers to other areas pertaining to their lived realities. In terms of governmental and industry bodies’ audit regimes and systems of quality control (e.g. the NZQA), the foregrounding of high-quality service provision to the customer (i.e. the student), albeit necessary to some degree, also with its almost myopic gaze that focuses on protection of the consumer of export education, serves to cast the teacher in the shadows. Along with a fixation on accreditation and qualifications, teachers are reduced to a faint one-dimensional presence in policy documents and legislation.

In another way, particularly with reference to practitioners within the private language teaching industry, academic research also appears to have a blind spot. Globally and in New Zealand, teachers are not very frequently the focus of research compared to other participant categories. When we then also consider teachers within the context of private language tuition, they become an even smaller dot on the research landscape.
More specifically, in reference to Veupoint itself, a small number of key systemic changes between the years 2010 and 2013 also serve to illustrate how within a localised context, particular policies and institutional changes have also, through the ‘slow creep’ of gradual tinkering with the curriculum, conspired to give teachers a smaller pedagogic footprint through measures such as standardized tests.

The situation sketched out above requires a response, or in Avery Gordon’s words, “a something-to-be-done” (2008). Once we accept the metaphor of a ghost to describe the outcome of this process of institutional erasure of a teacher’s presence, we can then begin to explore narratives of resistance, in which we explore the subtle and myriad ways in which individual practitioners and the collective counteract the efforts to render them invisible. The first step to take is to tell their life stories and to commit to memory their work histories – thus giving the ghosts of the system a discernible shape and form.
But there is no body except in and through movement. That is why there is no subject but a wandering one. The wandering subject moves from one place to another... There can be predetermined stages for the journey. But the path does not always lead to the desired destination. What is important is where one ends up, the road travelled to get there, the series of experiences in which one is actor and witness, and above all, the role played by the unexpected and the unforeseen.

- Achilles Mbembe, Life, Sovereignty, and Terror in the Fiction of Amos Tutuola

4

‘My Job isn’t what I do, it’s what I am’: Life Stories and Personal Perceptions of Work

In 2003, after a little over a year of continuous employment, I was unexpectedly made redundant at Veupoint. Although there were certainly a complex set of reasons behind the decision to shrink the employee base at the school, the primary factor was the financial climate within the private language industry at the time – which in turn, was a symptom of drastically falling student enrolments. This was the result of a number of high-profile education providers suddenly going bankrupt and being unable to reimburse international students for the fees they had paid in advance (see Tarling, 2004).

Knowing that work opportunities within the industry as a whole were difficult to come by, I made the decision to work as a cleaner in the building which housed Veupoint and a number of schools. The bottom line was that I needed to work, as I had no cash reserves to tide me
over for any length of time. As I had accepted the redundancy package offered to me, I was also given first options, along with a number of other teachers, for any teaching work that came along in the upcoming months. On a pragmatic level, cleaning near where I had potential teaching work made sense.

For the next eight months, I worked in and around a sporadic instructional schedule, cleaning the same building I was teaching in, including Veupoint’s premises. This soon started creating uncomfortable situations, particularly for the company itself. Newly-enrolled students would see me clean the carpets or toilets in the afternoon after classes, and then, perhaps because of a sick permanent member of staff, they would see me the next morning in class, as a relief teacher. The haunting question then for students were, “Is he a cleaner who also teaches? Or is he a teacher who also cleans?”

The questions above instigated a number of instances of negative feedback. Students in general did not want to accept a teacher who also cleaned, regardless of what came first – there were too many social norms and entrenched ideas about the position and status of teachers that interfered with their perceptions of the reality they were now confronted with.

I admit to a certain perverse enjoyment of the situation – the tension created dovetailed with what I felt was a philosophy of education that centred on notions of social justice and equality. Here was a ‘real’ situation with which to confront the privileged students of the world with – the teacher you depend on for English instruction, which you need to achieve your future goals, relies on cleaning to make ends meet. It was a self-indulgent fantasy and very powerful – I could be a victim of circumstance and take the moral high ground at the same time.
However, much more powerful was an intense feeling of gratitude towards the institution for providing me with a short-term solution to my unemployment. They had gone above and beyond in terms of accommodating what was not really an advantageous arrangement for them – it was a decision that had its roots in a sense of social responsibility rather than strategic business interests. It is this event that I feel explains the strong emotional bond I subsequently formed with this institution, which in turn also secured my personal commitment as an employee – to a degree that certainly went beyond any rational or instrumental prerogatives.

As the months passed, it was very clear that my employment as a cleaner had become untenable – Veupoint was finding it increasingly difficult to manage client perceptions regarding my double role. Fortunately for me, at the point of reaching this impasse, work opportunities began to increase steadily, and I was able to be employed by the school as a full-time teacher again – a situation which continued up to 2012, when I began my doctoral studies.

This episode in my learning “trajectory” (Wenger, 1998) as a teacher has loomed large in terms of influence and impact. Behind the bare facts of the redundancy and the pragmatic considerations which motivated my decision to do cleaning work, is a complex and dynamic sense-making process that I was engaged in at a personal as well as a communal level. Out of it came an assembled narrative about the past that persistently bleeds into my present and contains the potential to shape an unknown future.
4.1 Dissolving boundaries between life history and the now

What are the multiple strands of individual and collective experience that meld together in the telling of a life history episode such as the brief personal one above? It is a challenging question to ask, as every time it is asked, a different or modified answer might be proffered.

The ‘cleaning at Veupoint’ episode, when I recall it, often implants childhood echoes of my father’s oft-repeated mantra that there is “dignity in all work” in my head. As kids growing up within a conservative religious family dynamic, the idea of a life of service to an ideal bigger than yourself was drilled into us. It was also the rationale that saw my brothers and I being roped into all kinds of manual work in and around the church schools my father taught at as we grew up. We painted, we cleaned, we fixed, we mowed, we weeded, we built – and all the while, our father would be there, demanding a level of work that we persistently fell short of. However, the main lesson was learned – ‘be proud of any work you do’, and, ‘no job is beneath you’.

In one respect, cleaning at Veupoint was a return to a mode of living that involved menial tasks and manual labour – the primary ways in which I had earned pocket money during my teenage years and also how I had made ends meet during my formative tertiary education years. On a certain level, I had returned to my working class roots, and it felt honest to me. There was also a self-sustaining life force within my return to manual labour – a hard-edged defiance that came from knowing I had been here before, and that I had used my hands in the past to get to a point in the future where I could again feed my mind with what I had wrought (or ‘cleaned’) with my hands before.
This effort in memory reconstruction of my past of ‘not shirking’ hard work, and connecting it to a personal experience of a redundancy and its aftermath, represents to me a personal attempt in my ongoing efforts at constructing a “coherent professional self in the present” (Paquette, 2013, p. 147) – positioning an episode of my teaching career within a longer life story narrative, including childhood memories. In other words, digging that far into the past always entails a selective and changed ‘remembering’ of the life narrative that serves as a conceptual bridge that ties an earlier chronology in with a particular impactful event or experience – in this case, a period of teaching unemployment and general work precarity.

An added consideration is how the year of 2003 and its associated employment turmoil influenced my teaching life afterwards. I could certainly credit my period of teaching unemployment as being partly responsible for sowing the seeds of a renewed and stronger commitment to including in my teaching practices instructional content that provoked learners to engage with social issues and controversial topics – while concurrently providing opportunities for my learners to develop critical thinking skills. This coincided with increasing levels of frustration with published teaching materials, particularly ‘global’ coursebooks, which appeared to me to present a very sanitised curriculum of language content that was ‘safe’, frequently not very stimulating, and overly celebratory of commodity culture. My own personal experience of the volatility of the private language teaching industry certainly also helped fuel my negative sentiments.

Again, the impetus for this refreshed mode of resistance I believe came from particular personal experiences that I can associate with my ‘cleaning’ period. As an example, I can recall on a number of occasions, where students, who were new and not aware that I was also a teacher, would approach me, as a cleaner, and demand a speedy response to some
‘emergency’ in the bathroom or other area that needed to be addressed by me promptly. It was mainly the tone in which the message was delivered that was interesting – compared with the markedly different manner in which learners, who primarily (or at least initially) had had a student-teacher relationship with me, would talk to me. Out of a plethora of situations such as this, confronting me (in combination with each other) over a specific time period, grew a renewal of personal feelings of solidarity with the working class, as well as an idealistic desire to engage in a critical pedagogy that could somehow challenge the stereotypical notions of social status that appeared to be held by a significant proportion of the enrolled students at the private language school – who predominantly came from upper-middle class or wealthier backgrounds.

In addition to its significance as a catalyst for engaging in more subversive teaching activity, the narrative of being a cleaner at Veupoint has itself been repeatedly retold by me with different audiences – colleagues in academia, this thesis, colleagues at Veupoint, as well as students I have taught. Why? Again, this is very difficult to answer in a specific way. Over the many necessary periods of intellectual gestation that accompanied this ethnographic project, and which involved frequent interrogation of the themes emerging from the data, the reason that appears to have a powerful explanatory power across contexts and audiences, is the desire on the part of me, the storyteller, to remember who I am and what has made and shaped me.

This act of remembering is not however a passive act, it is a stance of resistance to official ‘versions’ and narratives of Veupoint’s collective past that frequently has erased incidents, memories, and perceptions that are uncomfortable, challenging and potentially thought of as
‘damaging’ to a brand image that needs to be maintained at all costs – but which are at the same time, incredibly important to a group or an individual as a vital component of their professional identity and understanding of their career development.

And just as my recalling of the ‘cleaning’ period at Veupoint is selectively presented to my audience, so too are the individual and collective accounts of organizational life edited, honed, and shaped by their tellers. And it is these recollections, memories and understandings that are not captured by the record-keeping process. They therefore remain intensely subjective – and they are certainly powerful enough for each one of us to define our working realities according to the shapes and the forms of them that we find acceptable, and which are compatible with our own efforts to create a coherent sense of self.

The remainder of this chapter attempts to outline the personal ‘lifeworlds’ of my participants; as they chose to represent them. This journey begins with an exploration of the personal trajectories followed by individuals prior to their employment at Veupoint. These historical ‘flashbacks’ are followed by a more focused look at participants’ accounts of working life at Veupoint and their experiences of the organizational culture. This is initiated by a description of key role expectations identified in practitioner and academic manager accounts. The relational aspects of participant’s working realities are then looked at; first through the lens of teacher-student relationships, and then through collegial relationships.

4.2 What Came Before: Individual Trajectories Leading to Veupoint

Asking participants about their learning and teaching histories was frequently a revelatory experience for both parties. The intentional ‘digging’ we were collectively engaged in regularly succeeded in unearthing historical aspects of our pasts that had been hitherto not
shared with colleagues – regardless of the length of shared employment. This was at times akin to an electric jolt, as we were mutually confronted by the fact that there were a great number of elements of our personal lives that had surprisingly not surfaced in our daily work-related dialogue, or in our extra-curricular social interaction. As commented on by Lisa, with whom I had been working for over 10 years, “I can’t believe we’ve never talked about this… I was so sure you knew that about me!” This sentiment was expressed by other participants on a number of occasions.

As a researcher, this was a powerful reminder of how interviews, regardless of the fact that I was conducting them with long-standing colleagues, were a different type of interaction than the ones I normally engaged with them in. It therefore had the power to disrupt our taken-for-granted notions of each other’s realities, and also necessitated a mutual effort on our part to recalibrate our understandings of the context we worked in. The reflexivity this led to on the part of me as researcher as well as my participants was at times energizing, but also uncomfortable. The interviews were prompting a personal and collective in-depth look at who we thought we were and who we thought we were working for. What follows are brief life histories of my nine participants – sketching out the trajectories that eventually led them to Veupoint.

4.2.1 Lisa (teacher)

Lisa did not ever see herself as a teacher - it was a second career that she chose as the result of a complex interweaving of professional as well as personal circumstances, and a chance encounter which turned into a long friendship. Her first month of teaching after getting her CELTA certification was not a positive experience, and she questioned her initial decision: “I thought, ‘I’m not sure whether I’m cut out for this’”. Upon joining Veupoint as a relief
teacher, matters took a turn for the better – she got a lot of “good karma” from working here. For her, the tightly-knit community there was like a ‘surrogate’ family and she felt comfortable.

At Veupoint, Lisa found institutional support and an atmosphere of enjoyment and fun. Even as a relief teacher she felt welcomed as a valued member of the teaching team and she reciprocated by showing a willingness to do whatever is needed. Lisa took on various temporary teaching assignments elsewhere when fluctuating student numbers necessitated it, but the school has remained her primary employer for 17 years. In the early 2000s, she also went back to university and obtained a BA in linguistics to satisfy her personal desire to further develop her knowledge of language systems.

4.2.2 June (academic manager)

Teaching was a vocational choice for June – she followed her interests in maths and physical education into her tertiary studies. Upon graduating with a B.Ed., she started doing some relief teaching in secondary schools on a part-time basis. The transition to language teaching was made by taking advantage of an opportunity in Japan – where she was able to earn money and travel at the same time.

Initially, June came to New Zealand with the intention of starting a business organizing adventure tours for language learners. After encountering a number of obstacles due to not having CELTA certification, she decided to attend a course. After gaining CELTA certification, the business plan faded in importance, and June 'bounced' between various part-time teaching assignments and schools in Auckland in the late 1990s. This was followed by longer-term employment with a former language school for teenagers, and Veupoint itself.
Over time, June became a little disinterested in only teaching and “needed a kick up the bum just to get me going again.” At the same time, the principal of the school for teenagers favoured her for a leadership position – he offered to pay for a DELTA course in exchange for June agreeing to continue to work at the school. After a number of years working as ADOS, the school closed permanently, and June took up teaching full-time again. Due to her experience, she was put in charge of the teenage program at another Auckland-based school. Although she greatly enjoyed the teaching itself, she was not entirely satisfied with the overall learning climate for teenagers.

I ended up being down in the basement usually or sent down in the lower levels somewhere, while the main school’s up here... you never really felt like you were, like the teens were a part of the school, they were just like this extra. I guess I thought that because I cared about them I could look after them and I did, you know... I mean I still have some students contacting me now.

In the meantime, significant changes were underfoot at Veupoint. The ADOS there was on her way out, and June was invited to apply for the position. After a number of weeks of “learning the system” with the incumbent, she took on the position full-time. She worked in this capacity until December 2013, which is when Penny, the DOS at the time, resigned – leading to her replacing Penny as DOS.

4.2.3 Penny (academic manager)

Penny pursued her life-long interest in languages by focusing on them at the tertiary level - graduating with a BA in French and Linguistics. While pondering her future career, she attended a CELTA course and obtained her certification – after which she went to Australia, where she found a job as a sales representative. She started contemplating using her qualifications and made attempts to secure teaching work in Perth – finding only “bits and
pieces” of “that awful relief teaching”. After a few months, Penny moved to Brisbane - where she went back to work as a sales rep, before managing to secure a full-time teaching position in a school for a year.

Falling in love prompted a move to Switzerland, where Penny started teaching Cambridge exam courses. When her visa ran out, she returned to New Zealand. Applying unsuccessfully for a “higher” position at a school in Christchurch, she was given work as a teacher there. She worked in this context for about a year, and further "honored" her exam course skills - until she decided to move on.

So I left there and magically found another job the following Monday at [name of another language institute in Christchurch]... where I spent a good two or three years just doing every single course I could get my hands on. That’s when I started getting into EAP, and IELTS, and all those kinds of academic programs. Eventually work petered out, because it was around that time where the whole industry went into a collapse...

She made a decision to get "into the admin side of school" and successfully applied for work as an administration and marketing assistant at another school in Christchurch.

So I started working there, and that’s when I got involved in admin, homestay, marketing, all those other ‘paperworky’ areas. That lasted for about eight months, and then my partner got a promotion to Auckland and so we moved up north...

In Auckland, a language school was advertising for the position of homestay manager. Penny successfully applied for the job, and initially, she was also doing some teaching. As time passed, her homestay role became all-consuming. The emotional strain imposed by this position started to get Penny “really down”:

I didn’t know if I wanted to stay in teaching or if I wanted to try something new. I did a bit of research and talked to a few people, and decided I should probably do my DELTA if I want to stay in the industry and move up. So, I did my DELTA while I was working full-time down there...
The DELTA took nine months part-time, and as soon as I got it, I just knew I had to get out of teaching, and do something at a higher level. It was just a matter of opportunity - I basically hung around for six months, just waiting for something to come up. Then this job came up here [at Veupoint] as director of studies...

Penny applied for the position of director of studies at Veupoint and was accepted. She enjoyed the new challenges and responsibilities that came with being in charge of an institution’s academic programme. For the better part of four years, she worked on “putting efficient systems in place” at Veupoint. During her last year at the school, Penny started feeling the familiar desire of wanting to further develop her career. Having enrolled in a MBA that she was doing part-time, and sensing that there were no substantial career furthering opportunities at Veupoint, she resigned as DOS in December 2013.

4.2.4 Sam (teacher)

Sam's entry into the language teaching field did not come from a long-term personal ambition to teach. On the recommendation of students he tutored at university, he decided to go to South Korea to teach English. Sam spent about 3 years teaching in Korean hagweons (for-profit private institutes). He enjoyed the “quality of life” and “making a decent salary.” After his last contract finished, he returned to Canada for a few months.

Around this time, Sam decided to obtain a teaching qualification, while also satisfying his desire to travel. He enrolled in a year-long TESOL graduate diploma in Melbourne, Australia. He is quite critical of the course.

I really wasn't all that impressed with the course. It was very theory-based, which is fine in and of itself, but with the lacking of the practical component, it was just not really all that helpful. There was nothing about actually planning a lesson, nothing about planning a curriculum - it was just like assuming that the curriculum had already been made - how would you teach this, which method of teaching would you use… It wasn't exactly what I was looking for. Some of the courses, like leadership and classroom management were just deathly dull and awful.
While taking the TESOL course, Sam also taught IELTS preparation classes at a university. Although he enjoyed it, he felt that there was an overemphasis on “test-taking strategies” that led to a level of disconnection from “the real world” – for him and his students.

Upon graduation, Sam travelled to Russia and found work in a private language institute in the south of Moscow. What he really enjoyed here was the “relaxed atmosphere” of the school, as opposed to “a more controlling work environment” in Korean hagweons. After finishing his work assignment in Russia, Sam returned to Canada, where he made plans to visit New Zealand. Once all aspects of the trip were finalised, he made his way to New Zealand. Veupoint was the first to offer him substantial work opportunities other than patchy relief work. He worked there for a year in total.

4.2.5 Ava (academic manager)

On completion of her university degree in education, Ava’s long-term boyfriend had started making plans to go to Japan, to pursue a Master’s degree in electronic engineering. Wanting to accompany him, Ava started looking at English language teaching as a possible option. On arrival in Japan, she first found work at a “very alternative” conversation school for a year. At the end of the year, management approached her and told her about their plans to set up a children’s school. She helped them to set up this school and worked for them for 2 years more.

With a few years of practical experience of English language teaching under her belt, Ava decided she wanted to continue working in the field. “I thought I had been doing two years of this kind of teaching, but I really didn’t know what I was doing – so I thought I’d better do
a C-TEFLA”. So to give herself a theoretical base for her language instruction, she signed up to do a C-TEFLA course in Auckland. Upon completion of her certification, she returned to Japan where she worked for an additional 2 years.

After returning to New Zealand, Ava applied for work with [an institute] in London, but due to the waiting period between jobs, she ended up teaching English in Poland instead, which she did for 2 years. This is also where she did her D-TEFLA qualification and subsequently worked as a director of studies at a language institute. It was at this stage too that Ava realised that her career path was now firmly moving away from her initial teaching qualifications. “There was no way I could go back [to becoming a state school teacher], because my time in Poland had taken me off into a different direction”.

Ava was “thrown in to teacher training” in a rather bizarre way. Travelling back to New Zealand to do one of the first Young Learner Extension courses to the CELTA on offer, she instead ended up being “trained up” to teach it, as the institute providing the course was in dire need of an extra trainer. It was here too that Ava began her working relationship with an experienced teacher trainer whom she shadowed on the aforementioned course, whose influence on her looms large in any discussions regarding her teacher training career.

I mean it was [name of experienced trainer] who was my mentor in many respects... It’s her saying, "Don’t worry, you can do it! You can do it." Not realising that some people panic about doing things. And because of her, this teacher training thing has taken me as far as it has... It’s basically her not having any fear, and me having the fear – but then letting go of the fear and just doing it. It’s the belief in yourself, and if you know you can’t do it, then you can’t do it. But if somebody else believes that you can do it enough, then maybe you can do it. And that’s what she does, she believes that I can do it enough, and then I do it. She just says “Ah, shut up Ava, just do it!” and then I do it.
Ava started working at a specialist teenage school for English language learners founded by Daniel, the current principal of Veupoint. This is also where Ava and June first worked together as academic managers – Ava as DOS, and June as ADOS. She worked for this institute for 10 years, until it closed its doors. This was followed by a year-long period of shorter work assignments at various schools, until she was approached by Daniel, who had since been appointed the principal of Veupoint, to join the academic management team there towards the end of 2006.

4.2.6 Gabriela (teacher)

Upon graduation from high school, Gabriela decided to apply for teacher’s training college to become a teacher of English – this entailed doing an entrance exam.

So, I studied really hard during the summer. I bought a grammar book, Murphy's [Grammar in Use], and I went through it on my own... and then I could get in. But sometimes the problem isn't about getting in, it is surviving when you study. The first semester was hard, but then things got better. So that's basically how I got into teaching... it wasn't something planned, it was more or less like a plan B, but then my plan B became my plan A. And I think it's... I'm really happy that I've chosen this profession. I don't think I could do, I don't see myself doing anything else. Which doesn't mean that I'm not ambitious or anything, but it's just that, by chance, I've found my profession.

After four years of study, Gabriela graduated from teacher’s training college, with qualifications that enabled her to teach English at a primary or secondary school level nationally. As a new teacher, she was very enthusiastic and embraced all the teaching opportunities that came her way, keen to “experience everything”.

So I taught all different levels, private schools, state run schools, rural schools...and I did as much as I could, but then I started to get bored, thinking I want something else. And at that moment I started to feel like I had worked so hard to get my degree, to be just teaching in the classroom, simple present or colours, or one to ten. And I was thinking, I can do more than this... so that's when I moved from high school and primary school teaching to private language schools in [name of South American country]...
Within private language schools, Gabriela taught students who were on the whole more motivated to learn, having made sizeable personal investments to be there - compared with school students, for who English was often just one of a number of subjects that had to be taken. After a number of years, Gabriela started “getting bored again”, and this time she decided to go abroad. Prior to her travels, she completed a Spanish CELTA certification in her home country, with the idea being that she could possibly “pay her way” by teaching Spanish to foreigners.

Well I wanted to go to another country and get some, personal experience as well, not so much professional experience - because I saw that [professional experience] as so, so far away… yeah out of reach really. I mean I never thought about coming to New Zealand to teach English...I never thought it was going to be possible.

Upon her arrival in New Zealand, Gabriela started looking for work – offering Spanish tutorials to any interested parties. Opportunities were limited, and so she tentatively put out feelers regarding teaching English. She was surprised to be offered part-time work by Veupoint very shortly after. The school had just experienced an influx of teenage students, and needed teachers urgently. In addition, Gabriela’s CV, including her Spanish CELTA, in some respects represented a level of language teaching certification and experience that was impressive compared with other recently-graduated CELTA teachers within the country.

Working as an English teacher in an English-speaking country felt a little surreal for her in the first few weeks, and it took some getting used to.

I remember when I walked into the school for the first time. I saw this massive library of books, and all the resources...and they had a copy machine...and we had our own desks - like we don't have that back home [in South America]. Back home I had to make, I had to get the copies for the students, I had to take my own stereo to the school. It's just different, the standards are really different. So here I remember, during my first appraisal I just said, “There's no way for a teacher to fail here. How can a teacher be a bad teacher here, if you have everything you want?” Much better books, much better material, computers, computer room - like, come on…
As she became accustomed to her new working environment, Gabriela came to appreciate the multilingual classroom dynamics she had in lessons, compared to the monolingual situations she taught in back home. Coupled with this was the fact that she was able to alternate between teaching teenagers and teaching adults – a mix she enjoyed.

In her six years at Veupoint, Gabriela has invested a lot of her personal time into her professional development. Shortly after being offered more long-term work by Veupoint, she went back to South America and obtained her English CELTA certificate. This was followed some time later by the completion of a Masters in TESOL.

4.2.7 Daniel (principal)

Daniel came to language teaching after spending 7 years working in Australia in construction and landscape gardening. On the advice of friends, he decided to try out English language teaching, and returned to his home country of England, where he completed his CTEFLA in London. For the first few years of his language teaching career, Daniel moved around Europe, teaching for [a chain of language schools]. The longest stints of full-time work during this period were in Spain, in San Sebastien.

After several years of European country-hopping, Daniel returned to Australia, where he took up work with a well-established college of English. While here, he enrolled in the DTEFLA program, and within a year was trained up as a CELTA teacher instructor. Following his certification, the college appointed him Assistant Director of Studies. In addition to his administrative duties, Daniel was still working as a teacher trainer at the college too. Despite his frenetic schedule, he agreed to help set up a second campus of the college in Manly, which turned out to be a highly profitable undertaking. A year later, he was earmarked for
the role of marketing director of schools – which he accepted when offered. It was at this time that Daniel’s teacher training responsibilities decreased significantly, as the administrative workload was significant.

In 1992, Daniel came to New Zealand where he started working as International Director for a language institute in Hamilton. This position was short-lived however, as he moved laterally within the company to take up the role of Director of Studies. Feeling very comfortable with his job role, he soon underwent a period of what he terms “intellectual stagnation”. As a way of getting out of this rut, he decided to enrol in the Master’s programme at the local university, from which he graduated in 1994.

The next year (1995) was a turning point for Daniel. He had been offered tenure by the local university, but simultaneously was made aware of a business opportunity in Auckland. More specifically, he was given the opportunity to found an educational institution which would specialise in teaching junior English students of school-going age. In the end, Daniel opted to take up the business offer and made his way to Auckland.

What followed was a 10-year period of running this school, which ended up being very successful, having captured a niche part of the language instruction market. This is the school where June (ADOS/DOS) and Ava (ADOS) worked together as academic managers.

Unfortunately for Daniel, the bottom fell out of the business venture when New Zealand high schools started “grabbing students directly”, meaning that the junior school’s preparatory function as a ‘feeder system’ for the aforementioned high schools became redundant. After a short period of aimlessness, Daniel was approached by the existing academic management at
Veupoint, and asked if he would be interested in the role of General Manager / Principal at the school, which he was. His appointment to this position in 2006 coincided with a change of ownership for Veupoint – with the original owner retiring and selling the institution to an overseas business entity.

Since his appointment, Daniel has worked as principal for Veupoint, although the title of general manager has not really been applicable since the closure of Veupoint’s school in Christchurch due to the earthquake there (in 2011). What this means is that he is ostensibly in charge of daily operations for only the Auckland school.

4.2.8 Emma (teacher)

Having relocated to New Zealand from England with her partner and her children, Emma decided to take up teaching English as a second career. At this time she was working in a blind factory, and doing work she was very bored and unhappy with. Learning about teaching English as a second language from a friend, she decided to join a CELTA course, which she completed part-time after work.

Upon graduating, Emma started looking for teaching work. The first place that had expressed their interest could unfortunately not give her work at the time when she would have become available, once she had worked out her remaining time at the blind factory. However, the DOS at this school gave her Veupoint’s contact details, knowing that Penny (DOS) had recently communicated with her about needing a teacher.
Veupoint was Emma’s first employer when it comes to teaching. Although she has enjoyed teaching, she always saw doing it as a pragmatic choice for her future goals, and not as a vocation. At the same time, she also feels that financially, teaching has not been rewarding enough.

What does it [teaching] mean to me? It doesn’t mean everything to me. I enjoy teaching, but I think for me, it's a path to somewhere else I want to be - so it's a stepping stone. It's not the be-all and end-all, and I haven't had an urge to always teach. I've had more of an urge to write. I think this [teaching] is a process for me to be able to know my grammar more than anything… Also, I don't earn enough money from teaching. It's not that I want loads of money, but it's not cost-efficient really.

Partly the result of disaffection with her previous job and serendipity, Emma’s decision to start teaching English can be described as “planned happenstance” (Brimrose & Barnes, 2007, p. 24). In other words, a general undefined ambition to be a writer spurred her on to make the decision, but she did not have any plans mapped out from there. Emma worked at Veupoint for four years, at which point she decided to resign, in order to pursue a bachelor’s degree in English – which for her was the logical next step in her personal aspirations to becoming a fiction writer.

4.2.9 Chris (teacher / teacher trainer)

After graduating with a primary school teaching degree, Chris’s “incessant restlessness” led him to Japan where he ended up teaching English in the JET program to secondary school students for two years.

The high schools I taught at were fantastic – they were really ‘pro’ foreign language teacher. So because I had a background in teaching, they said to me, ‘The previous teacher also had a background in teaching as well, and she wanted to do all the planning’. And I said, ‘Well, that makes it easy for me, I’ll just do the planning too then’. Whereas a lot of my friends who were over there, had the planning given to them. They were told which parts and which roles they had to perform – when they had to speak, when to step back and let the other teacher speak in Japanese.
He enjoyed this time immensely and when he returned to Auckland, a friend helped him find work with a private language school in Auckland, where he worked for a year. Having in the meantime become romantically involved with a British citizen, Chris followed his love interest back to her home in the UK, where he briefly worked as a teaching assistant. In the long term however, this became problematic, as he was not an English citizen. This situation necessitated a temporary move to Egypt, where he taught English in a primary school for about half a year.

With his personal and professional situation becoming increasingly untenable in the UK, Chris decided to return to New Zealand, where he resumed working for the same private language institute which had hired him prior to his leaving for the UK. In total, he worked for this organization for four years, making the transition from general teacher to senior tutor. This was followed by a stint as assistant director of studies towards the end of his tenure, although he found this to be stressful and not really to his liking.

Not enjoying the fact that he was now more “outside of the classroom”, he changed jobs, and worked at a New Zealand tertiary provider for a year, where he was in charge of an ‘English for Hospitality’ language course. Although he enjoyed the interaction with learners here, he felt that the working environment itself was too politically charged, and so he made plans to move on when he could. When it was financially feasible, Chris resigned from his post and applied for a position at yet another private language institution in Auckland, and he was promptly hired. He worked here for a roughly a year and a half, when a sharp downturn in student enrolments led to a wave of staff redundancies, and he lost his job.
Having made social connections with Ava through industry-wide gatherings such as teacher training days, he immediately came under her radar when she started setting up a TECSOL teacher training course at Veupoint. With his primary school credentials and teaching experience, he was suitably qualified to join the team as a teacher trainer and teacher. When approached by the school, Chris gladly accepted their offer, and joined the teaching team. He has worked at Veupoint for four years.

4.3 Making an argument for yourself

The historical backgrounds of my participants demonstrate the idiosyncratic personal journeys made by each individual in becoming teachers, as well as ending up at Veupoint. Broadly speaking, there is a rough division between those taking the vocational route (Gabriela, Ava, June, Chris) and those who to some degree ‘fell into’ teaching and/or stuck with it for more pragmatic reasons (Daniel, Sam, Lisa, Penny, Emma). What we now concern ourselves with is what perceptions of role expectations and occupational relationships emerge from conversations with the cohort of research participants, who make up a more than significant proportion of the total number of Veupoint employees – and who collectively occupy job positions on both sides of the practitioner / manager divide.

What follows is a discussion of the most salient and frequently recurring notions of professional practice and institutional realities from the research data. The aim is to present a composite view that is reflective of, at times, contradictory individually-held beliefs and values, as well as shared perceptions that find a wider overall purchase in the community, and hence the organizational culture. For the sake of organization, the discussion has been divided into three key areas of participants’ working realities, namely: role expectations,
teacher-student relationships and collegial relationships. It is important to note that these core dimensions overlap with each other in numerous ways, and therefore the boundaries between them are relatively porous.

4.3.1 Role expectations: practitioner and manager perspectives

Upon inspection, the institutional documentation outlining the job responsibilities of teachers at Veupoint (Appendix 3) is to some degree self-evident. It reflects a list of duties that would arguably form the core of any similar document in the majority of private language schools. However, it belies the reality of what is expected from employees, and to what extent an institutional culture develops around the interplay between various interpretations of what constitutes professional practice. In addition, it also does not reveal the extent to which role expectations are unevenly applied to employees, and the number of factors that influence how these are articulated within the community. Importantly, it is the unspoken and taken-for-granted nature of these norms of professionalism that lend them their culture-shaping power.

My ‘reality check’ in terms of unearthing what I could of these embedded values was Sam’s perceptions of what he thought the school expected from him as teacher. Having a fixed period of employment with the school with no intention of renewal, Sam’s personal investment in the institutional culture was of a temporary nature. This allowed for a level of candour in interviews that often served to sensitize me to pertinent concerns bubbling underneath the surface. In Sam’s words:

It seems like there's not really a whole lot of expectation... although I’m sure there is, but it's not made explicit... It’s come to staff meetings, show up on time, do the once-a-year Saturday teacher training day which we don't get paid for... And avoid complaints - if you can avoid complaints it seems like everybody is happy to ‘go along, get along’. So as long as you're not costing the school customers by having a really abrasive personality or being a shit teacher... If you've got a base level of competence where students are learning something and it shows that they're learning something through
their progress reports... which can be doctored ... (laughs)... but they [the students] are progressing and they are getting better, and nobody's unhappy, then I feel that I've done my job and I feel like I've done what they've expected of me - which is to make the students enjoy their time and develop an enjoyment of learning English…

Although the teachers with longer tenure constructed more elaborate pedagogically ‘justifiable’ narratives about role expectations, their own accounts do contain traces of Sam’s blunt assessment of the service-oriented nature of private language schools. However, their articulations of this reality are often more indirect and brief – frequently mentioned under the breath, as an aside, or in the form of a joke.

Lisa regularly refers to a “bums on seats” attitude, and although she recognises the profit-orientation of the school, she also distances herself from this commercial prerogative. As the longest-serving teacher in the study, she anchors her sense of role expectations to the idea of “going above and beyond what is necessary.” This is a mentality she strongly associates with the first managerial and teaching staff team we both started our Veupoint careers with, and which she feels has faded with a more concerted institutional push towards a modus operandi which to her is founded on “misguided notions of professionalism”.

For Emma, the business orientation of the school is a given. Her own career history as a businesswoman and entrepreneur is frequently referenced in the way she talks about students as “paying customers” and “providing a quality service to your client”. Quality service provision becomes to some degree synonymous with her idea of professional practice – the teacher is a language knowledge expert who utilises their understanding to provide a ‘tailored’ product to the customer - meeting their instrumental needs. This is the notion that she also expresses when asked what she thinks management expects from her.
I think I know how to get the best out of people, and that just comes from my business background...every day, going into people's houses, and it could be as many as 10 different people...and you might meet a couple, you might meet one person...and having to, having to make friends with them in a matter of minutes. Because you know, if they don't like you straightaway, they won't buy anything from you... it's making sure they know they can trust you...and it's the trust thing... we wouldn't sell anything we wouldn't buy ourselves. It's the same approach in the classroom.

As observational data around student intake, classroom lessons and other institutional processes show though; the daily, efficient running of the system dominates the thoughts and actions of employees – in other words, if something is not broken, it does not generally warrant attention, and does not need to be fixed. The corollary of this prevailing attitude is that individual teachers only generally appear on the managerial radar via negative student feedback. In the situation where an academic manager gives credence to a learner complaint along the lines of pedagogic practices, we find unspoken role expectations becoming visible. What ensues is an elaborate dance involving managing customer expectations, outlining what is expected from employees, and finding a speedy and satisfactory solution for all parties concerned.

There is a prevailing mistrust of student feedback processes. Teachers and academic managers have developed a complex, intuitive approach to establishing the veracity and validity of student feedback. This is necessitated by the fact that short-term enrolments make up such a significant proportion of the overall student numbers. If a student is only going to attend school for two weeks for example, any problems that crop up regarding them need to first be prioritized in terms of importance, as well as dealt with efficiently. In addition, practitioners and managers have come to understand that the paying customer is often motivated to maximise a service they have paid substantial sums of money for by attempting
to secure what, to their mind, is the most enjoyable, useful and efficient type of English instruction – regardless to what degree this is based on criteria directly linked to learning outcomes.

Avoiding complaints and keeping people happy. For practitioners who see teaching as a vocation (Chris, Gabriela, June, Ava) this is a grossly insufficient rationale. Even though they might accept with an air of resignation that this simplistic orientation is the underlying reality of private language instruction, it is also true that they construct narratives and role expectations for themselves, their colleagues and their institution that reflect a more demanding and pedagogically-driven sense of what is expected of them. The practitioners who see teaching as a vocation generally experience a great deal more self-imposed pressure regarding their roles, and they also perceive as well as experience a higher degree of institutional expectation regarding their instructional practices. Gabriela articulates a point of view that in many respects is in juxtaposition with those of Sam’s mentioned earlier.

I have to be much more organized, much more serious about my teaching here [at Veupoint]... to prepare much more I feel. I also feel that they expect a lot from me, more than in a high school. Like when I was in high school back home [in South America], once I shut the door of the classroom, that was it... I could just go there, sit down and read a book and give my students a reading or I could just go and teach a proper lesson, no-one would know. No-one would ask the students, "Are you alright? Are you happy? Are you feeling you're learning? Do you like your teacher?" Whereas here, students are constantly being asked how they feel, how they're doing or we get observed, or...people are constantly checking what you're up to. So maybe there's a different type of pressure.

Although there is no mistaking the more serious tone in which Gabriela articulates institutional expectations of her, it is interesting to what degree her comments highlight the underlying basis of role expectations mentioned by other teachers – giving primacy to the learner as a customer that provides evaluative feedback on a constant basis. In contrast with Sam, Gabriela experiences this as a significant source of stress. To some degree, the fact that
teaching is for her a vocation means that student feedback elicits a fear of not “living up to institutional expectations”. Compounding her and other vocational teachers’ stress levels are cases of student feedback that seem to be random and based on non-pedagogic criteria. For those who take their job very seriously, being evaluated in such a fickle and haphazard way is potentially unsettling.

From the perspective of the academic managers, the key emerging idea is that they expect a “base level of competence” on the part of the teacher – as expressed earlier by Sam. However, when pressed to define what “competence” looks like, answers and definitions are consistently vague, see-sawing between notions related to pedagogic practice and those more closely aligned with being an efficient employee overall, in other words, not specific to the job of teaching – for example, consistently and efficiently performing administrative duties and paperwork.

With out-of-class administrative duties being more frequently surveilled than actual teaching practices (for example, formal observations are bi-annual events), it becomes quite easy for role expectations of teachers to be skewed towards their performances of the mundane and the routinized procedures outside of the classroom. As June, self-admittedly “a perfectionist”, puts it:

I've been in the industry long enough, and I've done this job long enough to know that not everybody's brains work the same as mine. And they’re not as thorough as me and they never will be, basically... It’s just little admin duties that teachers have to perform that I expect them to be able to do without me reminding them and telling them all the time... But I always do try to push teachers to do their job properly, mostly so that it saves me time. So I don’t have to follow up on things, because I do a lot of following up.
As demonstrated in the interview excerpt above, an added consideration for why the bureaucratic aspects of the teaching job becomes so prominent in the managerial perspective is also the fact that it directly impacts on management’s role performances on a daily basis. This is not generally the case with teachers’ pedagogic practices, when we bear in mind that these tend to remain in the ‘black box’ of the classroom – unless they become visible through the student feedback process when negative comments draw attention to them.

And it is at this intersection between classroom instructional practices, intimately intertwined with student feedback, and the performance of administrative duties that role expectations of teachers become very unevenly applied. For instructors who are new to Veupoint, daily life becomes a pressure cooker, especially during peak enrolment times or the weeks when tests and reports need to be completed. For the neophyte, there is a constant trade-off in terms of time allocated to keeping on top of their admin or adequately preparing for their lessons.

To alleviate the stress levels of new teachers, there is a ‘buddy system’ – where new teachers are paired with a long-serving teacher who can assist them with any queries and provide support in terms of paperwork, lesson planning, and so forth. For experienced teachers, although they have already passed beyond the steep learning curve of understanding ‘the system’, their added responsibilities as mentors means that they also have less time to fulfil their own duties. In other words, the stress levels of veterans of the system are not necessarily lower, as they are expected to not only help the ‘newbies’, but also perform their duties with greater precision and efficiency than others, seeing as they are the ones with experience and knowledge of the system.
A more submerged element relating to the role expectations managers have of teachers is that of their own deep-seated beliefs about the nature of good teaching and effective practice. Here, their own learning and teaching histories were strongly connected to how they saw teachers, and how they positioned themselves in relation to teachers now that they had taken on their managerial roles. How these perceptions were articulated also served to reveal less obvious aspects of the manager-teacher dynamic within the organisation. As a case in point, Penny has this to say about what she thinks makes a good teacher:

It is an awareness of different learning styles in the classroom - it’s an awareness of how to deal with different students’ needs that are all in one group, and looking at them more sort of individually instead of just as a whole group. And it’s an awareness of how to adjust your teaching and your personality to suit each individual learner. Some people have got it and they know it, and some people don’t... I mean you don’t get it if you haven’t got it... that’s when you get complaints... (laughs)

People ring me up and say “I want to become a teacher what do I do?” Where do I start? … Or they come in to the school and they’re standing at reception… and it’s really difficult because I’m quite good at judging a person very quickly, and I know you’ll be a good teacher and you’ll be rubbish... I know it straight off the bat...

For Penny, effective pedagogy and knowing what to do in the classroom appears to be primarily an innate quality – in other words, some teachers possess it and others do not. This can have far-reaching consequences if the person who holds this view also has considerable decision-making power when it comes to the employment of teachers. Coupled with the confidence she displays in her own ability to speedily assess a person’s instructional capabilities, the implication is that role expectations of teachers are also, to a significant extent, individualised by Penny. This means that based on her evaluation of the practitioner, she will tailor what she expects of them. This expectation however, is arrived at through non-evidentiary measures first, not observed practices or experiences with/of the person concerned in the work context.
One way in which the stance outlined above by Penny impacts on the school system is through the intake process. As described at the beginning of the second chapter, the process of allocating a class to newly arrived students on Mondays is a complex process that involves the consideration of a number of variables. As observed, one consideration that frequently cropped up was Penny and June’s assessments of individual teachers and what they were capable of – these would result in which classes the teachers got to teach. In addition, this also was a determining factor in which students they decided to place in which teacher’s class.

To conclude, role expectations of teachers derive from multiple sources at Veupoint and are multi-faceted. For teachers who see the job as a means to an end it is less problematic to align themselves with the “keep customers happy and avoid complaints” mantra. For other practitioners, especially those who see teaching as a vocation, there is a need to develop more pedagogically-oriented rationales for doing their job, even though they might also acknowledge the underlying profit-making orientation of the organisation. In terms of manager expectations, the general pattern appears to be a skewing towards the outside-of-class duties of teachers, as these are impactful on a daily basis – whereas pedagogic concerns tend to arise out of negative student feedback more sporadically.

Role expectations are also differentiated along the continuum between inexperienced and experienced teachers. This uneven application of role expectations are then complicated further by the way academic managers individualise their assessment of teachers’ roles – and what specific people are capable of, as judged by them. With academic managers possessing significant decision-making power when it comes to teachers, the question is asked to what extent pre-existing evaluations are ‘set in stone’ or amenable to change.
4.3.2 Teacher-student relationships: inside and outside of the classroom

In many respects, the teacher-student relationship lies at the centre of the constellation of interconnected aspects of professional identity mentioned in this chapter. On a quantitative level, it was the most frequently discussed aspect of teaching within teaching participant interviews. Less superficially, practitioners tended to define and articulate a sense of professional achievement and effective practice largely in term of its impact on the teacher-student relationship.

By way of introduction, Lisa identifies her primary role as a teacher as assisting students in “stretching their thinking” and developing an intrinsic enjoyment of learning English. Just as importantly, she feels responsibility for facilitating the “breaking down of barriers” that potentially impede effective communication. Part and parcel of this belief is being “accessible” to her learners and developing a strong level of rapport with them – although she feels that establishing this social connection can be a challenge within a ‘rolling intake’ system where student turnover is high and frequent. In addition, Lisa perceives her age to be a factor that influences her relationship with students.

The younger ones who come from the school system... probably because I’m an older teacher... they perceive me as being, when they first meet me... that I might be like the teachers they had at school. I used to get quite a lot of feedback like, “When we first met you, we thought you were strict, and then we realised you were crazy” (laughs)

Both Lisa and Emma, as second career teachers, frequently reference experiences where their age creates a student-initiated gulf. This appears to be a pervasive issue for older teachers, and does seem to stem from latent ageist and sexist notions (see George & Maguire, 1998). What is inordinately frustrating for both of them is the fact that they strongly identify with a notion of self that is far removed from how they are sometimes judged by learners.
Lisa is very sensitive to individual learner differences and believes that one of her roles in the classroom is to actively accommodate and support the various means through which different learners develop their language abilities. In her view, the logistical demands placed on class composition in general English classes by a ‘rolling intake’ system leads to having a wider range of “mixed levels”, which are difficult to cater for.

Of all the management participants, June is the one who references the teacher-student relationship the most. Even though she generally interacts with students in a different capacity now (as ADOS first, and more recently, DOS), she still talks about her contact with learners in ways similar to those of teaching practitioners. The impression generated over time and across interviews is that interfacing with learners allows her the chance to legitimately “escape from all the administrative crap”. June has placed great importance on developing rapport with her learners, and has embraced “a motherly role” in addition to classroom roles. This non-teaching role was necessitated by her feelings of responsibility for teenagers studying far away from the support networks in their home countries. As ADOS, June has managed to maintain her personal connections with students by playing a “counselling” role through her involvement with learner feedback processes, as well as teaching when required.

In terms of the teacher-student relationship, Penny adopts an analytical and outcomes-based approach to language learning. She frames the primary role of the teacher as a language expert and a professional communicator who, in the context of the classroom, provides learners with meaningful tasks and a range of activities that facilitate second language acquisition and communication. Penny believes it is important to have a “personal touch” with students, but does not really see the need for a teacher to adopt a social role beyond the
classroom. For her, teaching language is an intellectual endeavour that can be mastered, but that requires building a good social dynamic within the classroom.

For Penny, a healthy teacher-student relationship is based on mutual respect and appreciation. To some degree the teacher performs a role as a learning ‘maximiser’. She views fostering learner autonomy as a key role for educators – this process mainly viewed as training learners in “learning how to learn”. Penny often describes teaching practices in terms of “efficiency” and “effectiveness”.

I thought ah, I’ve got quite a good grasp on all this - and then I did the DELTA and went back to the classroom and I realised, “Oh my god”, I didn’t know that... It was only through doing that kind of qualification that all these things sort of came together and I thought “Oh my god... I’ve been doing it the wrong way, there’s a more effective way of doing it”.

As she gained more experience and obtained her DELTA, Penny gave more prominence to the teacher’s role as diagnostician. This entailed viewing the classroom as a group made up of unique individuals instead of just teaching a “whole group.” However, Penny generally views the teacher-student relationship from an administrative perspective now. This is in part due to her desire not to teach full-time again – she feels that she has ‘graduated’ from teaching; she is “at the next level” now.

I know that every class is different, every learner is different, every course book is different, whatever you use is different – but I don’t know how many times I can teach the present perfect... that side of things I find quite monotonous... It’s rewarding when students get things and understand things and you can see progress... I find that quite rewarding... I just don’t know if I can really deal with all those students’ needs anymore.

For Sam, establishing social connections with students in and beyond the classroom is of paramount importance - in his view this takes precedence over any learning objectives. He believes that this emphasis on a personal relationship earns him his students' respect and trust.
One of my biggest things about teaching is trying to get outside of the classroom with students. I think that there are too many teachers that are friendly with you during this next forty minutes while in class... As soon as class is done, I don't want to talk to you, I don't want to see you, I'm not interested in what you have to say... It kind of comes across as this falseness... And students can tell, they can tell the teachers that don’t really want to socialize; that are not genuinely interested in them... They're just putting on this professional front of interest.

Sam believes that this focus on building rapport precludes many classroom management issues. He describes it as being on another “level of communication” with learners. Apart from avoiding behavioural issues, he also feels that his approach helps to establish a co-operative spirit in the classroom – instead of having to demand compliance. Finally, he sees it as also helping him to avoid managerial scrutiny – reflecting a pragmatic understanding of the importance of the students as customers; keeping them happy keeps management happy.

Within the context of Veupoint, Sam believes that a primary component of his role as a teacher is that of being “a support system.” He feels strongly that a student’s overall well-being in a country not their own is a main concern of his.

They're [students] thousands of miles away from home, in a new culture eating strange food, living in a homestay or a hostel with people from other cultures – they need a comfort zone. And, I think, a big part of being a teacher in a situation like this is being that comfort zone, being the person they can come and talk to if they have a problem that is not related to English.

In a language teaching context such as Veupoint’s, Sam is a fellow traveller with his students. Coupled with a small gap in age with most of the young adults he teaches, he is able to develop rapport quickly with them. Unencumbered by the familial and other external obligations characteristic of resident teachers, he has the time and inclination to socially interact with his students out of class. As opposed to other teaching contexts he has worked in, he also identifies with being a “support system” for his students – as they are far away
from the social networks they would normally rely on. Sam’s teacher role identity here very much aligns with two significant sub-identities (Mishler, 1999), namely that of a social worker and socializer (Farrell, 2011).

A number of very rough and jagged lines could be drawn at this stage, with each representing a continuum of participant perceptions regarding one of the facets of the educator-learner relationship. Of the more prominent of these would be the “care/support as a moral duty” ↔ “the personal ‘touch’ as an instrumental tool to enhance learning outcomes” continuum. Within accounts of the research participants, most are heavily slanted towards an ethics of care. Morality is certainly a significant dimension of most participants’ professional notions of self, even within such a profit-oriented environment. This appears to support, first of all, a call for paying close attention to moral dimensions of teachers’ working lives (Johnston, 2003), as well as corroborate identity studies with similar findings (e.g. Phan Le Ha, 2008).

However, matters are far from straightforward. Even though each participant might be generally placed on the moral duty – pragmatic purpose continuum in a specific place, it is also apparent that a practitioner might inhabit a number of different positions on this line – reflecting both moral and pragmatic reasons for a specific action taken with regards to their relationship with students. Concurrently, it would also be possible for two participants to share a similar stance, but for different reasons.

As an example we can look at Gabriela’s experiences. To a certain extent, her view on the teacher-student relationship is mirrored in Sam’s views – she gives primacy to her interaction with learners, describing it as her “fuel”. Having embarked on her master’s studies, she has been spending less time in the classroom:
But I miss my students. I miss that personal contact I have with my students, and I feel that if I move to more of a management position or something like that, I would miss the contact of being with the students, and seeing them learning. Seeing students learning is what keeps me going - that's the fuel I need to keep going.

So far the discussion has focused more on what teachers provide students with in their mutual relationship. However, unlike Sam, Gabriela emphasises the nurturing ‘life-force’ the teacher-learner connection provides to teachers themselves – it sustains them. In Gabriela’s case, this sustaining power is doubly important. Over more recent years she has experienced a “cooling effect” with regards to collegial relations – partly the result of good friends she worked with leaving Veupoint. What she has found is that she has increasingly spent time with students, and less with colleagues.

When [name of ex-Veupoint teacher] was here, and when [name of ex-Veupoint teacher] was here, they were my mates and I had the pleasure to work with them as well. Whereas now I don't feel I've got mates at school - I have people I get on really well with and many people I have a good relationship with, but I don't feel I have friends. But it's alright, we get on well… with some people I talk more and with other people I talk less. There's a little bit of banter here and there - and that's okay. When it comes to colleagues, for example, I don't hang out with them as much as before, outside of the school. Now I'd just rather hang out with students for some reason, which I didn’t before. It’s like my focus has changed, maybe because my interests are different right now.

On another level, Gabriela has a strong connection with learners that stems from her background as a non-native speaker teacher (NNST). She has gone through similar processes as a child, in terms of L2 acquisition, as the learners she now teaches. This has resulted in her having a very finely-tuned empathetic orientation towards her students, in terms of the educational as well as psychological issues they might be experiencing while studying. Gabriela can recall several times where a learner credited her as a source of inspiration for them in terms of “what is possible to achieve as an L2 learner of English”. Like Miki, a participant in Duff & Uchida’s (1997) ethnographic study on socio-cultural identities, Gabriela identifies with pride as a “bilingual role model” (p. 468).
Gabriela appears not to have persistent feelings of inadequacy or anxiety about her language or teaching ability (Tang, 1997; Rajagopalan, 2005), which can be a recurring feature for some NNSTs. In part this is attributable to the self-affirming fact that she has been employed long-term in an English-speaking country by English-speaking managers – something she had not thought would be possible previously (see p. 119 of the thesis).

For Emma, the teacher-student relationship has been very important from the beginning of her employment period – for her, her students were the first people with whom she started to feel comfortable and with whom she could ‘be herself’:

I’m no different now I suppose than I was. I’m no different now in the classroom than I am in the staffroom, but before when I started… I was like shy in the staffroom, but you could be the person you really are in the classroom if you get me. So no, I’m not a different person… but I suppose it’s like when you teach with another teacher, like in Friday options, you’re looking at them and they are also looking at the way you teach etc., you feel a bit like you’re on show. So maybe you’re less likely to be the person you are when you're teaching with somebody else.

Emma also subscribes strongly to an ethics of care (Noddings, 2002) for her learners when thinking about her role as a teacher. She extends this notion further by expressing the thought that she feels this responsibility even more strongly when it comes to students who “do not quite seem to fit in” with the rest of the group:

I’m just thinking about the ones that are the ‘dorky’ ones… In a way, I'm more likely to want to befriend them than some of the others because you want them to feel comfortable too.

The students that have a little trouble for whatever reason, and you know what the traits are that the other students don't like - you want to help them. You don’t necessarily particularly like them yourself... but it’s about trying to help them, you know? It's almost like trying to educate the people who are not caring to be caring...

What has emerged from the study data is an appreciation, first and foremost, for the primacy of the teacher-student relationship in the professional identity work of the practitioner. Just
as striking is the prominence of the moral dimensions of the teacher-student relationship, with the majority of my participants subscribing to a self-imposed ethics of care. Both managers and practitioners exhibited an empathetic stance towards the challenges faced by their learners, but those with similar language learning experiences displayed higher levels of solidarity. From my fieldwork data, this position of empathy and duty of care on the part of practitioners often found its expression in the observed instances where teachers and academic managers gave of their non-contracted time and energy to assisting learners. This support was given with regards to numerous issues — ranging from learning problems right through to personal problems.

4.3.3 Collegial relationships: together alone?

When it comes to relationships between colleagues, it is important to factor in the high rate of employee turnover among both teaching and administrative staff. As a case in point, at the time at which I stopped collecting data for this project (2014), I was only one of three individuals still working at the school who had been employed from 2002 or earlier. From 2002, the three of us, apart from being witnesses to the numerous teachers and other members of staff who had entered the system and exited, had also worked under three different management teams. In other words, in terms of workplace relations, change has certainly been a constant.

The length of employ of a practitioner and the perceived likelihood of the future retention of their services has a powerful influence on the degree of investment they exhibit in the work environment. At the same time, it is observable that long-term staff members also tend to invest less of their energy forming bonds with workers who are assumed to only be around for a short while. For temporary teachers in general, it appears to be easier to adopt a pragmatic
stance that allows them to maintain an affective distance from the community they are briefly a part of. Of the research participants, only Sam (with a 1-year commitment) falls in the temporary worker category. His perceptions of the community of practice must therefore be considered in light of the above-mentioned comments – there is a likelihood that longer-serving practitioners might believe that there is a more socially active element to the job than outlined by Sam.

Just as with his students, Sam believes strongly in building social connections with his colleagues – in the workplace and beyond. His interactions with staff are guided by the “best advice my father ever gave me”, which is to “go along, get along.” He identifies that there are a number of ‘cliques’ among the teachers who do socialise with each other, but observes that larger, more inclusive social events are in short supply.

So yeah, as like a collective group at Veupoint, I would say I don’t really see it… there is not really the teambuilding, the team-bonding sort of stuff that does go on in Korean schools for example. I’m sure you know all about ‘hoshik’, office drinking - I think that’s a great philosophy. It’s a great way to bond the team together. It gives more of a chance to kind of share ideas about teaching, but because it’s [at Veupoint]: “I come in, I prepare, I teach, I leave”… and that’s pretty much what everybody does, there’s not really that chance to share ideas, to share methodology, unless you specifically go and hunt someone out and say, “How would you do this?”

When it comes to co-teaching classes, Sam’s principle of “getting along, going along” again guides the role he plays. In general, he prefers to take the path of least resistance – therefore he usually adopts an assisting role, particularly if the other teacher is more controlling than he is.

In terms of resources and leadership, Sam rates the school system at Veupoint highly. He feels that Penny is a “helpful and organized boss” and that there is a general sense of camaraderie among teaching staff that makes it a comfortable environment for him to work in.
Although he feels that there could be more extra-curricular social interaction between staff members at a collective level, it is very much a secondary concern for him.

Overall, Sam’s participation in the community of practice is peripheral – it is legitimised by his previous teaching experience, but both management and teaching staff know that he is contracted for a fixed term. However, Sam does not see himself as being marginalized. His level of non-participation, especially with regards to institutional processes outside of the classroom, is strategic. His approach of ‘going along, getting along’ means that he “ticks the necessary boxes” in terms of management expectations as well as maintains smooth relations with his colleagues. As a result, he is able to avoid confrontation, while simultaneously channelling his energy into endeavours (such as extra-curricular socialising) he values more.

Although employed for longer than many casual teachers, Sam’s way of adapting to the working culture is largely reflective of workers starting out in the context, or those only being employed on a short-term basis. For newly-appointed workers who are keen to establish themselves, the same cautious ‘not rocking the boat’ attitude is also generally adopted. In a job market typified by job precarity, sporadic bursts of available work, and short-term contracts, it could be argued that this pragmatic stance is the safest for an employee with little say or decision-making power to adopt.

In contrast, Lisa’s connection to the school is historical and richly complex. As the participant with the longest term of employment at Veupoint, she has a very strong emotional bond with the organisation that trumps pragmatic concerns. Although by no means clinging to an idealized vision of Veupoint, Lisa does get nostalgic about the “the way things were”. She has mentioned more than once that Daniel (principal) had once said to her in a passing
conversation that “this industry does not reward loyalty and commitment”, and although she feels it’s true, she projects an image of resistance to this notion. In other words, one gets the impression that her showing loyalty and commitment to a system that takes her for granted is almost a kind of resistance against the machine from within – by engaging with it on her terms.

Unlike Sam, Lisa is very outspoken in staff meetings and other social forums within organizational life – particularly when she feels there are issues that need to be dealt with. As an institutional ‘memory bank’, she is in a position to compare current plans with managerial initiatives from the past and tell people if these were successful or not. However, in terms of a collective shared history, those with occupational connections to Veupoint that extend beyond ten years are greatly outnumbered by those who do not. It often appears as if the past is an impediment to current managerial initiatives – these often seem to require a clean slate or a short memory. Therefore, Lisa’s contributions are often treated as an annoyance by other staff members, rather than a serious contribution.

In one of the staff meetings I observed, a situation arose out of a misunderstanding based on what Lisa had said – to her this was another example that demonstrated a paradigm shift in relations among staff – from a communal, ‘family’ of very different individuals who could have “earnest debates” with each other, to a more “professional” culture which to her felt “colder and distant” and more focused on “short-term objectives”, a milieu in which “argument is a bad thing”:

Andre: I want to quickly focus on that… your attempt there in the meeting, to do that… Why was it important for you?

Lisa: Because I think we can learn from it. I got poo-poo'ed when I said, “Well look, I've been here seventeen years”. “Oh bravo”… but I didn't mean it in that way. My
whole teaching career has basically been here. So, to me, over a teaching career... and that length of time and the changes... You can look back and see what worked and what didn't work. If you look at most of the teachers here... they’re all in the now... because the majority have maybe been here two years at the most. And so they don't have the benefit of looking back and saying what worked or not... like if you just came into school now, as a new teacher – what would you actually know about the school?

We should learn from history, and it's not just a rose-tinted view of history... So for someone in the meeting to say scathingly “Oh that was ages ago”, they’re missing the point. It’s not the ages ago that's important. Why are we referring to ages ago compared with now? That was my point, but I think it was missed...

For Lisa, it feels as if age and length of service are conspiring against her – instead of these being seen as advantages – the reactive and outcomes-focused organizational culture that has emerged does not reward her long-term service and her experiential knowledge. In fact, these are now serving to marginalise her – to a point where, as a result, she feels more detached from the community in a manner she has not experienced in earlier times.

As mentioned in the previous section regarding teacher-student relationships, Gabriela has also become more ‘professional’ in her interactions with staff which to her signifies a greater distance between her and other practitioners. Unlike Lisa, her feelings of detachment arise partly from, as mentioned previously, “good mates” leaving Veupoint. In addition to that, Gabriela had had a very public friendship with another colleague at Veupoint, which for personal reasons, unfortunately also blew up very publicly – i.e in the work environment. This intense friendship which over time led to a very acrimonious severing of ties, impacted on the occupational community for a period of two years – as both Gabriela and the other person involved continued to work at Veupoint.

This was a very difficult time for Gabriela, but it was also in these adverse conditions that she felt that she received a good level of support from Penny (DOS). Penny’s helpfulness during
this period strengthened her commitment to the school, as she was helped “above and beyond” what could be expected.

Yes, she [Penny] talked to both of us, together and separately. What she did actually was to help me more than she helped [other teacher]… because it was probably affecting me more than [other teacher], or it was more visible how it was affecting me, because of my personality… than how it was affecting [other teacher].

I knew my life was going to change here - because I was feeling so sad at that time. And I told Penny the reason why I’m still in New Zealand is because of my job. And now I’m really unhappy in my job - I don’t want to come here, I don’t want to be here. I wake up in the morning and I don't want to come here. So I felt depressed, and she would feel that.

And because of that, she [Penny] would always be really observant of how I was. But then [other teacher] left, and things were calmer again - but again probably because of that incident, that made me create more distance in how I relate with my colleagues… in the sense that I have a great relationship, but maybe I don't pretend to have friends, or best friends as before. Maybe we can have a chat, we can have a drink, we can go for dinner, but I don't want to mix that [work & friendship] anymore.

Although Lisa can remember a time when Veupoint staff were “more than just colleagues”, the majority of my research participants can only relate to the professional ‘era’ – and in terms of professional collaboration and support, there is a high level of satisfaction in terms of collegial interaction as it pertains to actual work liaisons. As Emma says, in response to me asking her what she would tell a young prospective teacher:

I think from an advice point of view, watch and learn from other teachers and don't be afraid to ask questions and get advice from other people...everyone at Veupoint has always been very helpful to me...I've never had any people you know, say, “No, I'm not going to help you, I'm not going to help you”. They've always been lovely.

Emma goes further though - to provide insight into another thought that possibly plays on the minds of a great many teachers starting out, and which sometimes might affect to what extent they solicit the services of experienced teachers around them. In response to me asking her how she would characterise the professional community at Veupoint, she has this to say:
Andre: So how, how would you describe the staffroom situation at Veupoint?

Emma: From the point of view of knowledge - for me, there's a hierarchy. Who I deem to be of use for me knowledge-wise, meaning who I feel I can learn from. I also think this comes down to accessibility. I know I can ask you certain things, but also there's a point where I think I won't ask too many questions, or you'll think I don't even know my job. So you kind of, so you hold back a wee bit and you know, I won't ask you even if I'm weak in that area of language even though I might really want to, because I don't want you to think I'm stupid.

Here Emma outlines an interesting tension between a practitioner’s desire to know and their desire to appear knowledgeable to those in the work environment they’re in. In terms of observed moments of reticence on the part of teachers who have joined the Veupoint team, it does appear that this has significant explanatory power when it comes to asking why, even in a community perceived as helpful and supportive, some teachers might not ask for help as often as they perhaps need it.

Despite numerous obstacles, personal fears, and contextual constraints, teachers in private language schools do still manage to find ways in and around lessons to engage with each other socially as well as professionally. Granted, it might not resemble the close-knit community to Sam which he associates with his time teaching in Korean English schools, but it is still a community. It is also important to observe how collegial relationships are shaped by the system in which they are situated.

For five hours of the working day, teachers are engaged in classroom teaching. In and around these contact hours, they need to make time for meals, planning of lessons and administrative duties. Unlike other jobs, the ‘doing’ of teaching takes place in isolation from your peers – in the classroom. At Veupoint, the cultural idea of “going the extra mile” is a powerful force, to the extent that teachers who ‘stick around’ do tend to spend a significant part of the rest of the
time around lessons interacting with, helping and explaining things to students – work that is unpaid for by the company. This extra time to support learners also subtract available time for collegial interaction.

In addition to this tightly wound daily cycle of pedagogic activity, is the elongated ebb and flow of students entering and exiting the school system on a weekly basis – unevenly affecting teachers, with some needing to write reports and complete other forms of documentation related to students leaving. Coupled with this are weekly institutional events, such as staff meetings on Wednesdays and farewells on Fridays. Again, these administrative considerations impinge on available time. Along with fluctuations in student enrolments come high rates of staff turnover. Many collegial relationships forged rapidly, potentially also get severed just as quickly. Everything is in a state of flux. Relationships become very transient, and perhaps a psychological defence mechanism to expending too much emotional labour on a weekly basis is to become more detached.

In sharp contrast to teachers, academic managers enjoy a high level of daily interaction with each other. This is in large part due to the fact that their job responsibilities overlap to the extent they do – i.e. for every enrolled student, each administrative employee needs to perform a set of duties pertaining to that individual. This can only be achieved through close liaison with each other. For many institutional procedures, documents and items of information might also be passed ‘to and fro’ before finalisation.

A good example of the regular interaction between administrative colleagues could be observed in the student intake sessions I observed during the first three months of the project. While engaging in student intake discourse, both June and Penny engage in simultaneous
‘banter’ for most of the process. Although June’s interaction here resembles the way she socializes with teaching staff to a large degree, Penny’s social engagement with June in this context provides a glimpse of the “real” person – there is an absence of the “professional distance” that she talks about maintaining with teaching staff.

It's hard for me to get to know people that well because I don't think I should be getting to know people well when I'm their manager… I mean Ava [the head of teacher development] and June [ADOS] know me quite well, more than the teachers - and Daniel [the principal] knows me really well...

June’s perception of how her position influences relationships with teachers is markedly different from Penny’s desire to keep the personal and professional separate. As ADOS, June does occupy a management position which involves extensive decision-making with regards to teachers, the curriculum and institutional policy-making. However, she does not appear to see herself as ‘elevated’ above teachers in the school hierarchy.

Being called ADOS says that I’m sort of above teacher level, but I don't see myself as above teacher level. I try and communicate with people on an equal footing and do my job in a way that I hope lets people see me as a peer rather than someone who’s above them.

Penny’s stance on her position as DOS is further removed from the organizational culture I joined in 2002 when I took up work at Veupoint first. June’s relaxed and more accessible standpoint is much closer aligned to ‘how things used to be’, which is perhaps another reason why the long-term teachers seem to favour dealing with June. However, it is also true that many teachers, particularly the young and new, are very appreciative of being in an environment that is so tightly managed by Penny. Her micro-managing of situations instils a sense of stability within a fairly chaotic system. For Penny, collegial relationships are also very important – however, her strongly instrumental reasons for these are sometimes clearly visible to employees, and some of them resent feeling as if they are part of a “PR experiment” as Lisa says. In Penny’s own words:
In my previous workplaces there's always been this gap between management and teachers where it sometimes seemed like it's us against them. I tried really hard not to create a gap, or to lessen the gap that may have been here when I arrived... If I am a flexible person and someone that teachers can come and talk to about something, then that makes the workplace a lot more positive... I think a workplace works better if you seem to be working with your employees, not up or above them... I mean, I'm obviously their boss...

I'm your boss *(laughs)*... but at the same time I want to try and create something that's positive, where people feel that I'm approachable if they have feedback or they can come and see me if there's a problem. At the same time, I do need to, I mean I don't socialise with anybody here because I still need to maintain, not physical distance but professional distance...

As the DOS, Penny enjoys the challenges as well as the intellectual stimulation of managing people and systems. Unlike the uncertainties inherent in her teaching career and previous administrative roles, she seems to have found clarity of purpose in her position as director of studies. One of Penny’s primary aims is to ensure that there are open channels of communication and that processes “function smoothly.” For her it is really important that there is cohesiveness between management and teaching staff – she works earnestly on maintaining good workplace relations (i.e. the “personal touch”).

As a self-identified “perfectionist”, June sets very high standards in terms of job performance. This is clearly evidenced by her meticulous follow-up of teachers’ progress reports for example. As ADOS, June sees the need to maintain a delicate balance between “providing guidance” to teachers and giving them the freedom they need to develop their teaching repertoires. June feels that Veupoint does it well, with academic management as well as more experienced teachers playing “mentoring roles” in interactions with newer teachers.

In participant accounts, the majority of teaching practitioners express a preference for the management styles of either Penny or June – although professionally speaking, they’re both
held in high regard. In essence, the preferences are stated more along the lines of emotional connection or by referencing personal histories. For Gabriela, Penny has always been a pillar of support:

It’s just different. I really like Penny’s style… and the thing also is that my relationship with her has always been, of course professional. I've never been close to her at all, but I've always felt that she would give me a little bit of extra help… or she would be a little bit more understanding because of the different situations I have been through while living here and while I've been at the school.

Emma sees it along lines of approachability, and she thinks June is easier for her to talk to:

No, I feel I could, if I wanted to go and speak to her about things. I actually feel that Penny’s not particularly genuine about her own self with the staff. She doesn't seem to… it’s almost as if she's presenting a front. Like she's "Morning!" and you're like, “Ah, I'm not really sure if she means that”… It's just I see June as more blunt and I like people to be like this...

As already mentioned, Sam holds both Penny and June in high esteem professionally, feeling that they maintain a good organizational system, and most importantly, give him the freedom in the classroom he needs.

When it comes to the relationships between the academic managers, it is clear that these predominantly run deep. In many respects, Daniel exhibits a strong paternalism when it comes to June. Having worked with her extensively prior to Veupoint, the two of them have a long shared history. Daniel was also the person who made it possible, financially and in terms of freeing up time, for June to do her DELTA qualifications. When asked about doing the DELTA, June has this to say:

I guess it was a combination of wanting more, and a bit of pressure from above [from Daniel]. It was things like “I think it would be good for you to do that.” And also, I mean I wouldn’t have paid for it myself probably, not only because I couldn’t afford it, but also where I was mentally – I wasn’t thinking long-term. It was actually Daniel - he said, “We’ll pay for it, if you stay with us for another two years” [at the teenage
school], and in my mind I thought, “Fuck, there’s no way I’m going to hang around here for two years.” Anyway I did, and he thinks it’s really funny now because he's still getting value out of me...(laughs).

Like June, Ava shares this same historical work relationship with Daniel. Whereas June worked as ADOS in the teenage school Daniel founded, Ava was the DOS there. Of course at Veupoint, Ava is the head of teacher development and teacher trainer, while June was again ADOS. For Penny, arriving from the outside as DOS, and into such a closed circle of shared experience was daunting at first. She frequently references feeling a self-imposed pressure “to prove myself to Daniel”, and for the first two years of her tenure, she expended a great amount of effort to do just that – with initiatives on the academic and administrative front. For her the turning point came when she was given full control over the 2012 AGM (Annual General Meeting) after asking to run it – to her this signified the fact that Daniel trusted her implicitly and that she had earned her autonomy.

I was really pleased with the way it [the 2012 AGM] ran. I’d organized it really thoroughly, that's probably quite obvious - because everybody kept saying I was a stickler for time (laughs)... Last year I don't think it ran that effectively. Teachers didn't think or feel that their feedback had been listened to, because it was done with Daniel leading the whole thing. I think it can be a bit overpowering and overbearing when it's done that way... Daniel’s just basically let me take over the academic side of the school. I don't have to ask him to do anything anymore... (laughs)... He trusts me completely, which is great, and allows me to sort of explore things in my own way without being limited. I'm very autonomous; I basically manage myself now...

4.4 Conclusion: relationally speaking

Throughout this chapter, the faint traces of participants’ life and career histories surfaced in their articulations of the present. What has also emerged is an understanding of the primacy of the student-teacher relationship in terms of how teachers view themselves professionally, and also how they are viewed by the collective - colleagues and managers. At an individual level, there is a strong moral dimension that comes to the fore, which is often expressed as a duty of care towards the student which goes far beyond any instrumental motivation to just
provide a good service for a paying customer. At the same time, as exemplified by Gabriela, the teacher-student relationship also potentially serves a nourishing and enervating role for the practitioner.

Concurrently, it is becoming clear that the daily lived realities of the participants are very different along the managerial / practitioner divide. Collegial relationships are shown to be complex and personal. Although a certain mode of professionalism is subscribed to by all participants, Penny takes up the strongest position where she articulates her role as director of studies necessitating keeping the personal and the professional completely separate. This largely means maintaining a certain distance from teaching employees.

Others, such as Gabriela, have, due to negative experiences, become more hesitant about forming friendships with colleagues – and therefore exhibits a higher degree of detachment from the community now, this being what she labels as more “professional”. For Lisa, the school used to be “a second family”, and with every passing year, she feels it is less characteristic of one – in many respects she credits “misplaced notions of professionalism” as cooling previously existing collegial relationships that were more tight-knit. Sam also does not perceive a very closely bonded group of staff, but as a practitioner with the shortest tenure – it is just something he observes, he is not emotionally invested in the school to the degree that Lisa was and is.

Teachers’ and academic managers’ notions of professionalism are frequently expressed in relational terms. This finding is reflective of a number of studies conducted on language teacher identities using Wenger’s (1998) social theory of identity formation (e.g. Tsui, 2007; Clarke, 2008; Nagatomo, 2012). In addition, as Gabriela and Lisa’s accounts of collegial
relationships show, a core component of their professional sense of self is rooted in the experiential, which again connects strongly with Tsui’s (2007) account of the working life of Minfang, an EFL teacher in China.

It is also clear that the realities of the workplace and school system create very different dynamics for collegial interaction along the manager / practitioner divide. Teachers are more frequently affected by colleague turnover, and the ‘doing’ of their work is mainly done in isolation from peers, with each teacher being in their own classroom – potentially another reason why the student-teacher relationship becomes as important as it is. For academic managers, collegial interaction is almost taken for granted – it is part and parcel of their ‘doing’ of their work. In addition, the long-term shared histories of the academic managers at Veupoint (namely that of Daniel, Ava and June) also contribute to a sense of continuity and stability for those at a managerial level. Penny, although an outsider, has moved into this inner circle, especially now that she feels she has “proven” herself to Daniel.

Further fissures and complications are on the horizon - where role expectations and notions of the teacher-student connection as well as collegial relationships confront the system itself. This forms the primary focus of the next chapter.
... the storytelling organization consists of many struggling stories, each a particular framing of reality being chased by wandering and fragmented audiences. In its plurivocality, each story masks a diversity and a multiplicity of voices. As organizations evolve, new voices tell the organizational story lines, often changing the meaning of the stories or invoking change within the organization by revisiting the old stories.

- David M. Boje, *Stories of the Storytelling Organization*

## 5

### Idiosyncratic Journeys: Intersections, Divergences and Parallel Universes

#### 5.1 Introduction

In a system such as Veupoint’s, which is characterised by constant change and the daily exigencies that crop up as a result, the word ‘flexibility’ is often uttered. Emerging as an important theme across participant accounts as well as the observational data, we need to examine this word more closely, as it appears to be subject to a plurality of assigned meanings within the research context. Although it is loosely associated with positive notions, there is also a more uncomfortable implication of its use in relation to employee autonomy and decision-making power.

What will be shown is that flexibility within the system (e.g. rolling intake) frequently engenders a form of top-down control from academic managers - as an attempt to ensure minimum standards and address immediate concerns generated by the instability. This
becomes evident in the manner in which teacher development sessions and formal observations are run, and also how the curriculum is administered.

What is revealed is a system in a constant state of tension – between business prerogatives on one hand (i.e. rolling intake, service delivery) and pedagogic validity on the other (i.e. accurate assessment, meaningful learning outcomes). For practitioners this is shown to be an uncomfortable situation – as employees they are expected to take both commercial interests and pedagogic practices seriously.

5.2 The tyranny of what’s practical and the cult of flexibility
The epitome of flexibility within the private language school system is the business practice of continuous enrolment, or ‘rolling intake’. As explained previously, it means that students are able to enrol at Veupoint in any given week, as well as choose for how long they would like to study English there. It is first and foremost a business strategy, and not borne out of pedagogic considerations. Both managerial and teaching participants (see Table 1, p. 42 and Table 3, p. 46) found it difficult to discuss it as an organisational feature at any great length – a frequent response was that they had not given it any great deal of thought. Within Veupoint, and the other private language schools they had worked in previously, a ‘rolling intake’ system had always been in operation. The overriding impression gleaned from interview data was that continuous enrolment was perceived as the ‘natural’ way of running a private training establishment – in some respects, it had garnered an aura of immutability. For managerial participants it was almost impossible to envision conducting business in any other way – they could not imagine another operating principle that could ensure some measure of profitability.
In Penny’s view, rolling intake is synonymous with a service provision that can be tailored to the individual customer:

Well I've always worked at schools where there’s been continuous intake... I've never really experienced anything else other than that - because of the industry and the fact that you have to be very flexible if you've got a business to run.

So you have to be able to cater for students who want to start at any time. I think that it works ok here. It means that a class is never very stable or consistent in general English for a long time, and I know that can be hard on teachers, and the class as well, but I think it works fine in terms of what we are trying to achieve - which is being flexible for any student who wants to start at a time that suits them.

Therefore, one of the key notions of flexibility in the context, particularly for academic managers, is tied to that of a system that can efficiently accommodate a wide range of learners with varying study needs. In other words, and by loaning another business term, private language schools provide a form of “just-in-time” education, or more accurately, “just-in-time” training – when the customer needs it.

June expresses a similar sentiment when she outlines the key reason underlying the system – “it’s all about finances really.” She envisions the company losing out to competitors if the operating system was changed. In this way, the institution’s practices are seen to be constrained by the status quo in the industry as a whole.

It helps the company survive pretty much, but no other schools, except English language schools, operate like that. Like universities, high schools – there are always terms where you enter at the beginning and complete a certain course in a given period of time. I guess it's difficult in this industry to run like that.

Although teaching participants acknowledge that a rolling intake system can be problematic, they do not obsess about it. In general, it is seen as an inevitability that a teacher needs to adapt to. For the majority of teachers, flexibility is seen as a personal quality that you need to
possess in order to be competent within a private language school system. In other words, flexibility is a positive and desirable attribute that allows the teacher to cope with their teaching responsibilities, as well as the unpredictability of a private language teaching system.

Lisa does not feel personally “intimidated” by general English classes affected by rolling intake – she has always viewed herself as an accommodating person who can deal with the demands of the system. She attributes her long-term affiliation with the school to her willingness to take on new challenges and having a high degree of flexibility.

When I first started teaching at Veupoint, I never said no to anything from the very beginning. I took anything that was offered me - I would teach children, teenagers, high school prep classes, and exam classes [e.g. IELTS, FCE, CAE] when they came up... I’m fairly fearless about trying new things - I like the idea of learning new skills, so probably, except for TECSOL and TESOL, I’ve pretty well taught everything else here and I think that’s helped. So as far as my personal development is concerned, I’ve actually jumped in the deep end as often as I could, and it’s had dual benefits. It’s helped me learn a lot as a teacher, but it’s also kept me in work...

Similarly, Sam is pragmatic about a ‘rolling intake’ system, and even sees a few advantages:

I don't really have a problem with it… it's a fact that we're getting students who can come for a limited period of time only. This is when they have holidays, this is when they have the money, this is when they are able to come, and that's different for students from around the world, because of whatever factors at home. So I think it's a necessary thing - I also like it for the fact that you're always getting new faces, you're getting somebody new into the class - it changes the dynamic, it keeps things fresh and exciting.

Gabriela, having taught in a variety of educational contexts, can see advantages and disadvantages to having the same group of students for an extended time period (as in primary and secondary education), and having a constantly changing group of learners, each with their own variable study periods (as in private language schools):

I don't particularly mind. It can be good or it can be bad, depending on how you look at it. I’ve had experience of working with the same group of students for one year, and sometimes it’s great, because you can build a special kind of bond with students. They
know you really well after being with them for one year - they know you and you know them.

But sometimes, if you don't enjoy teaching that group that much, that year can be pretty long! So it has pros and cons... I don't particularly mind, because I came to a school [Veupoint] that has those rules [rolling intake] already established - so that's what it is.

I mean it would be nice of course to have a consistent group of students but this would be really complicated in our industry I feel. So I just accept it for what it is. You're training students, training them to follow you, to follow your technique, your instructions and all of that - and then they're gone.

Surprisingly, this flexible system requires a certain level of rigidity in certain dimensions to function. In other words, providing a tailor-made learning experience on such short notice requires a set of operational policies and procedures that are relatively uniform – ensuring the potential for the greatest number of learners to experience a consistent level of quality instruction and pastoral care. The learner feedback process is a good example – in this system, it becomes prioritized and excessively micro-managed. Learners are primarily customers who expect certain levels of service provision, even though these might not always be reality-based.

The more rigid elements of the institutional system are also often embedded in the mundane and routine aspects of daily work, and so they are taken for granted – with the result that they remain invisible or unexamined for the most part. A good example of this is simply work hours themselves – for teachers, these are effectively “set in stone”, as Lisa points out:

    We don't have flexibility in our daily schedule... the hours are set when we are actually in the classroom, so there's no flexibility there - only flexibility around that. And of course, the time around class hours is unpaid (laughs). This only being paid for contact hours 'thing’… why plan at all I sometimes wonder...

    And if you put the longer breaks back [30 minutes - see chapter 3; key systemic changes; 2012] ...people like me thought, “Yay, home at three, or yay, I can leave at three thirty and be able to do other things.” The irony now is that I find with the shorter breaks [15 minutes] every day... you end up having to do extra stuff and
planning on the weekend. Effectively, you’re losing thirty minutes in total per day…
time that you used to have between lessons… And of course now that the change to
shorter breaks has been made, how could we ever get it changed back?

With regards to the change in break times, Penny’s management rationale was that it had been
implemented to ensure that the school’s timetable was more in line with the classroom hours
offered by other private language schools in the Auckland catchment area. This was
perceived to be desirable for students who wanted to finish school earlier. For teachers
however, break times were important ‘pockets of time’ - for liaison between teachers
regarding upcoming lessons, language queries and other forms of mentoring.

The trade-off appears to be that the more flexible the system becomes in its unceasing efforts
to accommodate the customer, the more constricting it becomes for the practitioner. In turn,
the incremental changes to the system that are implemented to enhance efficiency and
flexibility result in a gradual process of deprofessionalization for the teacher – as their own
decision-making power is eroded in the name of ensuring “minimum standards”. In private
language teaching contexts, the loss of time such as this is profound – it is often in and
around the rigid schedule that true professional development happens. Time poverty results
in educating devolving into mere training (see Widdowson, 1993).

For teachers, dealing with the daily demands and exigencies thrown up by this self-same
system, as well as the duties related to the classroom itself, this slow encroachment on their
autonomy does not pass unnoticed – but it is also true that it is not always scrutinised.
Frequently, what has been found in the study is that teachers’ tenacious sense of a moral duty
of care towards learners rises above these systemic infringements on their pedagogic freedoms, and compels them (often at an unconscious level) to doggedly pursue an internal code of conduct that challenges and resists the system from within.

A primary contention of this thesis is that these ‘ghostlike’ acts of transgression, taking place behind the scenes, and in the ‘black box’ of the classroom, are what prevents the system from collapsing in on itself. It is also argued that, for as long as these practices remain ‘invisible’ and materially unrecognized, they represent a form of exploitation – which at a deeper level exposes a social class divide. On the practitioner side of the class divide, we find a labour force with seemingly high levels of symbolic capital and prestige, but with very little material reward for the intellectual contributions they make and the emotional energy they expend in the course of their work performance.

To start uncovering these fault lines in the workplace, the rest of the chapter is divided into two main sections. First, we take a closer look at what Veupoint offers its teachers in terms of professional development. Included in this part are opportunities offered by management, as well as formal observations, which are related to accountability and audit criteria. In addition, we also need to examine the curriculum itself, especially how it relates to learning outcomes and pedagogic practices.

5.3 Professional development and accountability measures

Although professional development suggests or is often most closely linked to formal organisational initiatives, I use the term here to include informal interactions between practitioners where the focus is lesson planning, support or mentoring, and other such activities that have a pedagogic element. Based on personal experience within the context as
well as fieldwork, it is quite clear that impromptu and ad-hoc collegial discourse is a major component of each practitioner’s “apprenticeship of observation” (Lortie, 1975). Although I had initially, in the early stages of the research process, envisioned observing these interactions (e.g. collaborative lesson planning for Friday team-teaching classes), the reality of the situation was that it was almost impossible to consistently capture these spontaneous liaisons.

In the case of collaborative lesson planning for example, teachers negotiated meeting times around their different daily schedules. Often, due to unexpected developments during the week, these appointments would be renegotiated. As a researcher, I frequently could not adjust my own schedule and research program quickly enough to attend the new meeting time for the purposes of observation. At other times, teachers would find a chance ‘pocket of time’ and spontaneously decide at that moment to do some collective planning. This often led to participants coming up to me after the fact and apologising for forgetting about letting me know about their quickly chosen planning slot – as they knew I had wanted to observe it.

Of the informal interactions I did manage to observe, these made me painfully aware of the ‘strangeness’ my research presence brought to such a collegial interaction. In contrast to classroom observations, and the fieldwork relating to institutional processes, such as staff meetings, these practitioner-initiated appointments often involved only two people (at the most three), often leading to a very stilted conversation, as both participants were too conscious of me being there as a ‘third wheel’. Therefore, from a logistical standpoint as well as an awareness of how intrusive my observations of these interactions seemed to be, the decision was made early on not to collect data relating to these events.
As a long-term employee of Veupoint as well as a researcher, it was a difficult decision to make. I remain convinced that the essence of professional development within a teaching environment revolves around the ad-hoc informal interactions between colleagues. However, what follows is a focused examination of the more formal procedures and events related to professional development in the context. First, teacher development sessions (TDSs) will be discussed, as this was one of the main institutional processes chosen for the research project. Representing the overlap between professional development initiatives and accountability measures, we also explore the institutional procedures related to formal observations.

5.3.1 Teacher development sessions

Teacher development sessions are part of the in-house programme for professional development, and are held once a month (see Appendix 5 for a 2013/2014 schedule). These take place after school, usually starting at 3:45 pm and running for about an hour up to 4:45 pm. Most sessions are given by Ava, the head of teacher development (HOTD) as well as Penny, the director of studies (DOS), with back-up from June (ADOS) – although the latter presents less frequently. Since December 2013, June took over responsibilities as the new DOS (upon Penny’s resignation). Although teachers are welcome to make their own presentations or ask to lead a session, this did not occur once during the research periods of this study.

Sam is candid about his prime motivation for attending teacher development sessions.

When I first arrived, they were unpaid, the in-house ones... I know it makes me sound really cheap, but I don't work if I'm not getting paid... Why should I be busting my ass to do all this extra work, if you're not going to pay me for it...

In line with his by-now-familiar pragmatic approach, Sam tends to see teacher development sessions as valuable if they are connected to institutional processes that, through better
understanding of these, save him time at work. Out of the sessions he attended, he felt that only one of them was truly useful for him. He valued the session on speaking moderation, because he felt that the management team (DOS + ADOS + HTD) did a good job of “breaking down the whole process.” What they did was show a video of two Veupoint students engaging in a pair discussion and went through the moderation procedure while teachers were doing it at the same time in small groups. Scores in the various speaking categories (accuracy, fluency, vocabulary range, pronunciation, interaction) were then compared and discussed – accompanied by troubleshooting of significant score discrepancies.

Sam is more negative about another session on learner autonomy – he criticises it for employing too many of “the same activities that we give students and giving them to the teachers... like ‘All right everybody, fill in the blanks’... really, are you kidding me?” What he found surprising and ironic is that a focus on learner autonomy seemed to be presented in a way that did not give the teachers attending much autonomy.

In contrast, Lisa places more value on the in-house teacher development sessions than Sam – she views them as superior to the external language teaching workshops that are attended once or twice a year.

I think the concept of them [in-house sessions] is usually quite good... again it can be a bit of a rush because of the time, but that’s understandable... I think mostly they’re useful and I tend to go to them... We asked for those, so it’s good that they’re providing them.

The tacit rule regarding teacher development sessions is that they need to be attended, although it is not compulsory in terms of contractual obligations. For Penny and June, in-house sessions planned during a calendar year try to strike a balance between responding to specific teacher requests for sessions and addressing teaching issues identified during formal
observations. In other words, issues “that teachers need a bit more development in… we want to make sure that the teachers’ skills are high enough to achieve what they should be achieving in the classroom” (June).

Penny feels that the trend in in-house sessions has moved more towards “reflecting or evaluating your teaching” and further away from “task-type sessions.” However, she thinks that there is a need to still do task-type sessions:

We don't want the whole of the TD sessions to become about methodology and reflection and things like that... we still need to put some task-type sessions in, like concept checking questions next week...Because we feel that teachers sometimes forget the basics, and that comes up in the observations quite regularly…

The session on Concept Checking Questions (CCQs), one of the sessions (see Appendix 4) which I formally observed, was presented by the head of teacher development. As described above by the director of studies, it was a session based on returning to “basics” – a management response aiming to address issues identified in the recently-concluded round of formal observations. The session followed a very similar format to a typical input session on the TESOL courses I co-teach with the head of teacher development. The main topic areas covered in chronological order were: defining CCQs, when to use CCQs, CCQs for vocabulary + core concepts, CCQs for grammatical structures + core concepts, identifying irrelevant CCQs, and the golden rules of CCQs.

Both Sam and Lisa were actively engaged in their respective pairs and contributed to whole class discussions frequently. Discussion became animated during feedback regarding the core concepts of the example lexis items rocket / space shuttle and it is representative of how the teacher development session itself transpired to a large degree. Lisa was paired with a fairly
new teacher, and she ended up being quite domineering in her pair discussions, while tending to fade into the background during whole group feedback. Sam on the other hand, had a very egalitarian discussion with his partner, but in this particular segment, also expressed strong disagreement in whole group feedback – up to a point until he thought about ‘going along, getting along’.

The above discussion was a good example of how true animated debate tends to crop up within teacher development sessions. Even though it is tolerated by the collective to a certain degree and for a short period of time, there also seems to be a critical mass that is reached – at which point a number of individuals, and especially Ava and Penny, will jump in and through commentary try to redirect people to move beyond the ‘sticky point’. The typical comments that will eventually be aired are usually along the lines of: “Come on guys, we don’t want to be here all afternoon” / “Let’s not get too philosophical / academic / wanky” and so forth.

If we inspect the topics and areas covered by the 2013/2014 teacher schedule (Appendix 5) a few clear key patterns emerge. First, teacher-requested sessions are often connected with issues that are not so much about transformational development of teaching practices or long-term projects (i.e. some form of practitioner or action research), but about finding ways to cope with the frequent challenges thrown up by an unstable and chaotic system based on ‘rolling intake’. A good example would be the 2014 session on the 26th of March (Coping with Mixed Levels). Due to a weekly intake, new students enter the system every Monday, and they are placed in morning and afternoon classes after only a short written test and a spoken interview (lasting about 5 minutes) – which does not always provide adequate
evidence for accurate placement. Therefore, students can easily be “misplaced” during their first week – meaning that they are either in a class whose collective level is higher than theirs or in one that is lower.

As demonstrated by the student intake process, there are a host of other variables that could also result in students being placed in classes that do not necessarily reflect their English level (e.g. availability of spaces at the ‘right’ level, extra-curricular factors etc.). In periods when there is a large intake of students on a Monday, this “misplacing” (intentional or unintended) creates a ripple effect across the school – and creating a high number of mixed level classes for teachers to cope with.

The session on dealing with mixed levels was a topic chosen by teachers. It is reflective of a markedly reactive (rather than proactive) approach to teacher development sessions, where practitioners seem to choose issues that have cropped up in their daily work realities and then ask for a session connected to it. The end result is that these topics often have a very situational feel, as they are often borne out of current problems facing teachers in their classrooms. Certainly, these sessions can be useful, and it does appear that a number of teachers feel that they help in terms of dealing with problematic classroom situations. However, it is also true that they do not necessarily encourage practitioners to take the initiative or to extend their pedagogic knowledge beyond the expressly pragmatic approach needed to survive the “daily grind”.

Second, the management choices for teacher development sessions often seem to reflect a “return to basics” attitude that reveals an imperative to preserve minimum accepted standards, or in Sam’s words, “a base level of competency”. These are in general reactive too – as they
are a form of follow-up that is connected to aspects of pedagogic practice found to be lacking across a number of formal observations of teachers previously held. Accompanying this process, are considerations regarding external audits from the NZQA and EnglishNZ – addressing these also satisfy the goal of “upping standards overall, which look good for the auditors…” as Ava explains. Falling into this camp are sessions like the one outlined earlier (CCQs – 21 Nov. 2012), where management had decided that the formal teacher observations held earlier in November had revealed a general trend of problematic CCQ use in classroom lessons. Looking at sessions held in 2013 and 2014, ones also belonging to this group include: 11 Dec. 2013 (Error Correction), 26 Jun. 2013 + 19 Feb. 2014 (Controlled vs. Freer Practice), and 7 May 2014 (Pron. – Drilling techniques).

Another dimension of the “return to basics” attitude is where teacher development sessions involve preparation for an upcoming administrative duty tied in with, for example, assessment of learners. An example of this would be the TD sessions held on 20 March 2013 and 11 June 2014 (Speaking moderations). These were sessions that served to “train up” new teaching employees as well as “remind” long-term teachers of the procedures involved with speaking moderations. On one level, this helped establish correct protocols for conducting moderation with colleagues, and simultaneously served as a means of gauging the uniformity of staff assessments of speaking skills – again an attempt to “streamline our assessment systems” as Penny puts it.

A formal professional development programme that appears to be mainly focused on perceived shortcomings (i.e. “back to basics” sessions), situational classroom problems (i.e. sessions that employ the words, “coping with…” or “dealing with…”) or preparation for institutional accountability procedures (i.e. moderation sessions), is problematic and
worrisome with regards to teacher agency. What appears to have happened is that a pattern of
top-down control has been established with regards to formal professional development,
which, through its emphasis on the above 3 areas, has discouraged teachers from contributing
their own sessions. An unspoken position has been reached by practitioners new and old,
where they find it difficult to envision what exactly they would base a session on if they were
given the opportunity. A subtly prescriptive pattern of academic managers talking ‘down’ to
teachers (albeit unintentional or unconscious) has become entrenched in the professional
development system.

The above-mentioned situation has serious implications for teacher empowerment. What is
lost is an opportunity for teachers to reflect critically on their practices and to develop new
ways of seeing the classroom. The three strands of focus for teacher development sessions
are all situated in a short-term pragmatism that eschews theorizing and abstraction as “wanky”
and “academic”. In the long-term, this short-changes practitioners in that they do not
participate in developing a professional language for describing their everyday practices. For
Freeman (1993), this is one important area where improved pedagogic practices lie:
“[Professional language] provides an alternative ‘identity kit’ that allows the teachers to
recognize what they think, while reorganizing and critiquing it” (p. 494).

Ava does acknowledge this issue to some extent, and her attempts to include more reflexive
sessions which give teachers opportunities to share, explore and do research reflects this.
Sessions such as the ones on 16 October and 10 September 2014 (Mini-research topic
discovery) illustrate her efforts in this regard. Unfortunately, practitioner reception of these
more ‘free’ and exploratory-style sessions have been lukewarm. The main criticism has been
that they require teachers to do research that extends beyond the session itself and then
involves reporting on that research too at a later date. Although the idea of it is welcomed, the main issue is that it encroaches too much on teachers’ free time. In a teaching system where practitioners teach 5 contact hours per day, and apart from this time at the coalface also have to plan their lessons, time is a scarce commodity. Added to the mix is the time spent on paperwork and administrative duties generated by a system constantly changing on a weekly basis because of continuous intake. To add insult to injury, only the 5 hours in the classroom are remunerated in the form of wages or a salary.

When true exploratory and teacher-initiated professional development activities require this level of personal sacrifice without material recognition of teachers’ efforts to improve their practices – it should be no surprise that they are coolly received. When managerial opinions seem to reflect an attitude where teachers’ continued efforts at self-improvement are expected and demanded; while at the same time creating a more convoluted ‘efficient’ system that robs teachers of the time they could potentially free up to actually engage and interact professionally – then deprofessionalisation is occurring.

What has emerged from the research data is an understanding that private language schools, even in their professional development programs, tend to suffer from short-term thinking that is reactive in nature. Teachers trying to cope with chronic time poverty, administrative workloads and systemic demands that compete for their attention, at the expense of issues of pedagogic concern – find it difficult to make time for exploratory and teacher-initiated professional development activities. Managers trying to deal with external audit requirements and the need to “train up” a steady stream of rotating, temporary members of staff so that they can cope with the institutional demands of the system – find it difficult to avoid using
professional development sessions as a managerial tool – to address perceived shortcomings, to ensure minimum standards and to address immediate / situational concerns, as well as “orient” newcomers.

What of the long-term teachers? They are the true ghosts in the system when it comes to professional development. As a reward for their commitment and loyalty, they undergo a veritable Groundhog’s Day of déjà vu experiences – as they witness a steady repeat of professional development initiatives that do not provoke them, feed their imaginations or encourage them to explore. Perhaps that is the price they pay for a slightly higher level of job security.

5.3.2 Formal observations

Although already referred to as they relate to teacher development sessions, we need to look at formal observations more closely too. Conducted every 6 months in general, they represent an accountability measure required by external auditors from government and industry bodies. However, the current management team also see formal observations of classroom lessons as a mean of “keeping tabs” (Ava) on what teachers are doing in the ‘black box’ of the classroom. As with research conducted in the classroom though, the observer’s paradox would seem to play a part in what managerial assessors of pedagogic practice would actually see when they sit in on a lesson. To what extent would what they observe reflect the reality of the observed practitioner’s daily teaching? Lisa sees formal observation thus:

And so you kind of do a ‘play the game’ lesson. My problem with those observations is that no-one's being natural in them - you're not teaching the way you normally teach. I swear that's probably true for most observation lessons... When we're observed by Penny in particular, we are not being ourselves. Ava recognised that, because she said to me last time, “Well, when I'm going to observe you, I know that you are not being
you, not your normal you”. To a degree, you're fully aware that you're being observed and no-one likes that feeling - you can get prickles on the back of your neck if you think someone’s staring at you...

For experienced teachers formal observations within private language teaching almost feel like a return to your CELTA graduate days, in the sense that you are expected to complete a lesson plan using the same format you used on your teaching training course. In addition, academic managers use observational checklists very similar to those used on CELTA training courses too. Often experienced teachers talk about trying to “go back” to an earlier teaching period in their life, because they feel that their own pedagogic practices have moved a considerable distance beyond the same rudimentary criteria they seem to still be evaluated on. Gabriela expresses her feelings about this matter in this way:

Yeah, because it's just going… I don’t know if the word is ‘going back’, but it’s just that you’ve kind of started building your own ways as a teacher - and now you have to go back to the basics. And maybe as a teacher you kind of get rid of certain things or use different things - because you feel what things could be more or less effective with your students.

But with that [formal observations] it is like going back to the basic things…it is a weird thing that happens every time I have observations. The fact that we have to follow the CELTA rules as if they were like the Holy Bible of teaching. So, I still find it a little bit blurry, a little bit grey.

The sentiment above is articulated by other teaching participants frequently. In part, this could be attributable to the fact that practitioners, through experience, progress fairly rapidly beyond the basic training a CELTA certification provides. What is interesting to note is how formal evaluations do not appear to capture this process meaningfully. As Prabhu (1987) proposes, teachers’ actual classroom experiences, over time, aid teachers in building up a body of diverse positive pedagogic results, from which effective practice rationales are drawn, and which could be referred to as a practitioner’s “sense of plausibility” (p. 106).
The managerialism inherent in the conducting of formal observations stems from the view that auditory measures somehow guarantee minimum acceptable standards of performance. How? If teachers tend to do ‘play the game’ lessons that do not reflect their daily practices but do the job of satisfying the self-same criteria items whose ‘boxes’ need to be ticked, how does an observation help to ensure standards? Observers are not actually ‘seeing’ the standards whose levels they are supposedly having to gauge. This becomes even more questionable when we consider that formal observations for every practitioner only occurs perhaps 1-2 times per year. Emma’s outburst accompanying her discussion of formal observations sums this up:

Like when Penny used to say, ‘You’re a great bunch of teachers.’ Like well, how do you know, because you don’t…What does once a year tell you? If you just have one formal observation and one peer observation - what does that tell you really?

In terms of academic managers’ perception management of formal observations in the work context, some mixed messaging tends to occur. On one hand, there is this attempt to downplay their significance in an attempt to keep teachers from stressing out about them. At the same time, the DOS and ADOS tend to emphasise that formal observations are important because Veupoint has “high standards”. This is critiqued by Gabriela:

What I did feel a little bit, was a change in speech - when they [June and Ava] said “Okay we’re going to start with formal observations, this is just something that is a requirement for NZQA. Don't worry, just a standard lesson “blah blah blah” - do what you do, what you normally do. And that's what we did - but then when you get the feedback and all of that, they have set standards and they even said that, “We have very high standards.”

So in another way it wasn't just a requirement for NZQA, so a “take it easy” kind of thing. It was actually a “yes, we have really high standards - so where are you in the standards and what do you have to do to reach the standards?” Which is good, but maybe it would be better to be consistent with what is said.

An added innovation introduced to the formal observation process in 2014 was that of follow-up observations, which were introduced by Ava and June. In essence, the idea was that, after
your formal observation, a few key areas would be highlighted for each teaching practitioner as “areas to work on” (June). Following the formal observation, teachers had the opportunity to choose one of these areas to work on, and pay specific attention to it in their daily lesson planning and execution. When teachers felt more confident in the area they had chosen to work on, they could then contact June or Ava and ask them to come and observe them teaching a lesson or lesson segment that involved the aspect of teaching they had been focusing on. This follow-up observation would be a lot more informal and shorter, although Ava and June would still write comments pertaining to it for the teacher. The follow-up observations are optional – teachers choose to ask for them if they want them.

Overall, teachers have been positive about this particular institutional change, and quite a number of them have taken up the offer of receiving follow-up observations. For Emma, it is a great opportunity for self-improvement – she feels, as reflected in her earlier statement, frustrated by the lack of organizational feedback on her teaching practices, she wants more of it. For many teachers, this follow-up has added an element of professional development to an infrequent occurrence, which is a welcome thing.

In terms of the formal observation itself however, there is a predominant culture of teachers spending a lot of time preparing for their observed lessons – which to some degree guarantees beyond the already considered fact of changing the way you behave when being observed, the fact that your lesson, whatever it is, will not reflect the reality of your daily teaching practices.

Exceptions to this rule would be Chris and Sam. Both of them expressly avoided “overplanning” their lessons “like everybody does” (Chris). For Sam, it is pointless to excessively plan for an observed lesson – however, it is not only out of a concern for not
presenting his real, everyday teaching, but the fact that the time spent preparing for that lesson seems to be financially unrewarded and therefore “not worth it”. In addition, Sam having adopted a different approach from the other practitioners, was surprised with how his formal observation revealed a rather large gap between his own thinking about teaching in the Veupoint context, and that of the academic manager who observed him, namely June. In his own words:

I've had one formal observation from June who came to watch my class, and she was generally positive... I think I put on a very different sort of observation than she's used to, because it seems that most of the teachers will specifically plan for weeks and weeks and weeks in order to put on this perfect observation lesson. So, I don't really see the point in that... I banged out my lesson plan in about 20 minutes the night before... I did a class discussion about capital punishment... It's a controversial issue, a difficult issue, it's got lots of vocabulary that students don't know... it is a level 4 [pre-intermediate] class, so they're not a high level... they're high enough that they should be able to make their ideas known... so I'll be nervous about it because it's such a controversial issue...

One of the comments that I had put on in the lesson planning section of “potential problems” with this issue was… I said there could be a moral disagreement with this whole topic... There could also be cultural conflicts, because I had Saudis in my class and they have capital punishment, and in a very different way than North American capital punishment... So one of the comments June put in her observation notes was "Why do this topic at all?"... So the idea was why bother... if you know that you're going to have these potential conflicts, why bother doing it at all.

So yeah when she made this comment on my observation, it really surprised me... I mean, isn't the purpose of what we're doing to get students to be able to speak on a variety of topics that they may or may not be comfortable with... If I stick to their comfort zone they're only going to be able to speak about things inside their comfort zone... And that's certainly not the way life is... sometimes you have to talk about uncomfortable subjects. So I found it odd that I got censured for talking about a controversial issue in what was essentially a discussion class...

The situation sketched out above has interesting implications in terms of querying what formal observations are supposed to be for, and it is also revealing in terms of a managerial mind-set fixated on avoiding problems – a highly instrumental orientation that is more the product of the desire to run a system smoothly than to encourage and applaud a potentially stimulating and provocative lesson that could challenge students as Sam says, to get out “of
their comfort zone”. Sam’s account also highlights the re-evaluation that has to occur when two colleagues discover that they have a different orientation or perception of what learning is supposed to be.

The audit culture in and around formal observations, coupled with a top-down managerialism, reveals a system of teaching practice evaluation that looks at education from a highly technicized viewpoint – where standardised checklists and criteria are somehow magically able to sporadically assess teaching quality and practitioner expertise within an hour and a half of observation.

As typified by Gabriela in an earlier section, formal observations force her to “go back” to an earlier form of teaching which seems to be more ‘acceptable’ according to a fixed set of assessment criteria determined by institutions external to her teaching context. For experienced teachers who relate strongly to Gabriela’s sentiments, formal observations are akin to a denial of the teaching self they feel they have become. It is almost as if they feel that they have to ‘devolve’ to more closely fit a pre-existing set of criteria, which they seem to be perpetually judged by, and which they are often convinced they have transcended through accumulating years of experience.

In this way, formal assessment of teaching practices can potentially serve to render the teacher a spectral entity - as practitioners either have to try to adapt to an earlier more acceptable ‘self’ that does not really exist anymore for the purposes of observation. For teachers like Sam, who resist planning differently for observation lessons, their honesty in practice is often rewarded with censure or criticism.
5.4 The curriculum and pedagogic practices

Our attention now turns to matters of the curriculum and pedagogic practices. To deepen our understanding of practitioner and manager perspectives at Veupoint, it is necessary to examine the structures in the work environment through which instruction is delivered, and the resources constituting the content of lessons themselves. To this end, a closer look at the syllabus is warranted, and the contrasts between General English morning and afternoon lessons require drawing out. In addition, exam course offerings and teacher training courses are dealt with separately, as they differ significantly from the General English classes. Closely tied in with instructional materials and lesson structures are the main forms of assessment used by the participants to evaluate learners attending Veupoint classes. The problematic nature of conducting meaningful assessment within a ‘rolling intake’ system is discussed, as well as the difficult situations that crop up for teachers when they are involved in the testing processes.

We then take a step back from the ‘nuts and bolts’ of the curriculum to explore practitioners’ and academic managers’ overall perceptions of pedagogic practices in general. An attempt is made to identify how the educational context, pedagogic practices and curricular activities potentially combine to influence participants’ views of language teaching.

5.4.1 The syllabus

General English morning classes

Veupoint students enrolled in the General English programme attend morning classes from Monday through to Friday, with each lesson beginning at 9:00 AM. The first teaching slot lasts for one and a half hours up to 10:30 AM, when there is a 15-minute break. At 10:45 AM, students return to their morning class for another hour, at the end of which it is
lunchtime. Therefore, in total, morning classes constitute two and a half hours of instruction. General English morning classes are available for all levels of learner, from beginner through to advanced.

In terms of the syllabus, all General English morning classes have set textbooks assigned to them. These are all of the ‘global’ course book variety and include well-known ESL titles such as: New Headway, Cutting Edge, Face-to-Face, English File, Inside Out, and so on. As the school operates on a 10-week instructional cycle, teachers are expected to cover roughly one course book unit per week. For textbooks with more units than that, introductory chapters, or “filler material” as June calls it, are left out of the syllabus.

In the AM classes, teachers are expected to in any given week balance a focus on grammar and vocabulary with adequate skills practice – especially in terms of receptive / productive skills’ activities that allow for use of the target language and lexis contained in that week’s textbook content. Every 5 weeks, students are given a progress test based on the material covered over half of a cycle. The general expectation is for learners to progress to the next level once they’ve completed a 10-week cycle. Certainly, this does not occur all of the time; students do repeat instruction at the same level if their results coupled with teachers’ assessments do not warrant a shift upwards.

Although teachers are welcome to supplement the course book with additional resource material or self-created activities, they are also expected to cover all the textbook content which will be tested every 5 weeks. Since 2010, these tests have been standardized – with all the 5-week tests for every level and course book assembled in special test folders for use at
the appropriate time. This is in sharp contrast to when I started at Veupoint; at this time teachers were expected to make their own tests – based on what they had covered over a month-long period.

As has been quite possibly surmised already, a fixed 10-week instructional cycle operating within a rolling intake system is problematic. New students enrol every Monday, and therefore begin instruction at any week within the cycle – it is highly likely for some students to join a class in the last week of a 10-week cycle for example – which means that they would be taking a test mostly covering material they have not been in class for.

In the broadest terms, as with other General English classes, teachers are potentially faced with a changed class configuration every week – as learners exit the system and leave class, and new students join. These altered group dynamics pose a set of unique challenges, as teachers are perpetually required to juggle the two tasks of forging new relationships with some learners, and maintaining existing ones with others. This systemic instability also means that group-building initiatives or any pedagogic innovation that involves incremental or gradual skills-building is easily scuppered due to a specific group of learners not being together in any given classroom as an unchanged group for any great length of time.

Since standardized tests for AM classes have become institutionalized, there has been a noticeable trend of teachers to some extent ‘teaching to the test’. In other words, practitioners will check what lexis and grammar items a test covers and then make sure they definitely do those parts of the textbook material prior to a 5-weekly test. This is particularly problematic when, due to a variety of reasons, communicative opportunities or skills practice in lessons are ‘passed up’ – in an attempt to cover the tested items in time for the test.
General English afternoon classes

At Veupoint, the General English afternoon classes have a similar schedule as that of the morning classes. PM classes consist of two lesson slots – with PM1 classes running from 12:45 PM to 2:15 PM, followed by a 15-minute break. At 2:30 PM, the last afternoon lesson begins – this hour-long lesson is called Conversation Class.

In terms of content and structure, PM classes are markedly different from the morning classes. First, PM1 lessons and Conversation classes are distinct from each other and separate. In other words, students generally have different teachers for each afternoon slot. Therefore in General English, students normally have three different teachers in one day – one in the morning for the whole duration, and two in the afternoon. In addition, in terms of material covered, there is very little connection between the lesson in PM1 and that offered in the Conversation Class.

PM1 classes do not use any prescribed textbooks and as a result, the onus is much more on teachers to create content or to assemble suitable material for every week of the cycle. The PM1 syllabus is organized around weekly topics, and teachers are free to use non-morning resources related to the topic of the week, as well as create their own lessons. As a guide and a starting point, the resource shelf houses a file for each PM1 class level – in which various resources owned by the school that are topically linked to that week’s theme is referenced. These files also contain a number of extra resources or ideas related to the relevant topic of the week.

In PM1 classes teachers are expected to provide a balanced weekly sequence of lessons, which would have provided students with sufficient skills practice in Reading, Writing,
Listening and Speaking (around the specific topic for that week of course) come the Thursday. The PM1 classes are expressly focused on skills work, and teachers are not allowed to do extensive grammar-focused lessons in these slots. However, lessons incorporating lexis as it pertains to input or output material is acceptable. Also, lesson plans integrating the different skills with each other are also welcomed.

Ostensibly a chance for teachers to free themselves from following a set text, PM 1 classes are often sold as opportunities to experiment and to be creative. At the same time, as can be predicted, practitioners react to this ‘freedom’ in different ways, both positively and negatively – and the same goes for students too. Although a number of teachers relish the chance to come up with their own lessons, others find it stressful and time-consuming to design two afternoon lessons for every day. Although the school is well-stocked in terms of resources, it is also true that there is a certain amount of usage saturation in PM1 classes when it comes to the most popular and most recent resources – which prompt many teachers to cast their nets further afield – for example, the Internet. All of these extra sources of material require significant blocks of time investment that many practitioners do not feel they have. Incrementally, what has become more commonplace is what could be termed an encroachment on teacher’s very necessary ‘down-time’ every day. Instead of taking a rest at break times or lunch times, teachers now more often than not are preparing lessons and completing paperwork.

Conversation Classes in the last hour of the day are reserved for spoken and communicative activities. Teachers are expected to cover various dimensions of spoken English with this class over a given week, and like PM1 classes, teachers are responsible for the design of these
lessons. Over a given week, teachers are expected to present a series of lessons focusing
alternatively on fluency, accuracy, pronunciation and functional spoken English.

For Gabriela, a sensible approach to afternoon classes would be to “merge” PM1 and PM2
(i.e. Conversation Class) classes with each other:

**Gabriela:** I feel like it's too much sometimes to teach three classes in the same day…
3 different classes in the same day. I still believe that we should have two – that
Conversation class and PM1 should be merged together. We should just focus on the
other skills and also speaking in PM1, but PM2 should be an extension or extra further
practice related to what we did in PM1.

**Andre:** Right, so the same group of students for both PM1 and PM2?

**Gabriela:** Yeah, the same group of students… I wouldn't mind that. And even
though here sometimes they say, “But some students here finish at 2:30”, yeah that’s
true… but we could still do some speaking practice there - they just will miss the main
speaking class. But I don't feel that it would be an impediment to join those two things
- and for us just to have one – in other words, only two big classes to plan for, instead
of three during the day.

Lisa mirrors Gabriela’s sentiments regarding afternoon classes, but for her the focus is on how
short conversation classes are (1 hour), especially if you consider that they are a different
group of students than the ones you taught in PM1. For her, it is also about fatigue on the part
of the teacher:

**Lisa:** Those afternoon classes... How do you ever get to know your students, if you
only have them for an hour... five hours a week in the afternoon. I’m kind of
wondering about conversation classes - how valuable they are... It would be better to
have one class for the whole afternoon and make sure that you brought in a good solid,
speaking element into that class. And I think it would be less stressful for the students
too... I think they’ve done it to accommodate *intensive* students...

**Andre:** Right…

**Lisa:** I’ve had an intensive student say to me... “Oh we need more speaking in PM1”
...because they are not getting conversation that much in the PM1 class it seems.
People are often thinking, “Oh they are going to be getting a solid conversation class
so maybe I will focus more on other skills. One way of solving some of the stress
from those afternoon classes would be to actually get rid of the conversation class...
students don’t particularly like them anyway. My personal feedback is that they’re not
that valuable... if you have teachers under stress, that’s probably the lesson that’s going to get the least energy put in to it, because they are tired... they’ve been so busy worrying about getting the PM 1 class organized...

Lisa’s speculation that conversation classes exist to accommodate “intensive” students is backed up by my queries to academic managers on why the afternoon classes are divided as they are. At Veupoint, there are three broad types of student enrolled: full-time, part-time, and intensive. Full-time students are enrolled in all daily classes (AM, PM1 and Conversation Class). Part-time learners only study for half of the school day – most commonly they will attend morning classes, but not those in the afternoon. Intensive students study during the morning, and also attend the PM1 class – but they do not attend the conversation class hour.

The main reason that afternoon classes are divided as they are at Veupoint is to accommodate those learners who want to “knock off early” (Penny) but still study for longer than on a part-time basis. This extra study stream has become a unique selling point within the company’s marketing literature, and whenever teachers complain or bemoan the pedagogic and planning difficulties that go along with it, the stock management answer is that it is a vital part of promotions and cannot be changed.

PM1 and Conversation classes run from Monday to Thursday. However, on Friday, lessons deviate from the normal pattern. Instead students attend what is called Friday Options. Taking place in the same time slots as the other PM classes, Friday Options cover a wide range of activities that are meant to give students a chance to mingle and interact with students from other classes and levels. Activities are organized along three main level bands, namely: Lower levels (1-3) / Mid-levels (4-5) / High Levels (6,7 +).
Activities are arranged in categories, with each week of the cycle presenting a different category of activity – these include: Skills for Life (lessons focused on practical aspects of NZ life, e.g. “safety in the city”); Real Life Listening (using authentic materials, such as radio news excerpts etc.); Movies (+worksheets); Board Games. In conjunction with Friday Options, students who are not interested in any of the offerings, can elect to do self-study instead in the Learner Access Centre, or empty classrooms near it. Self-study entails using learner-selected materials (e.g. homework, own reading books etc.) or accessing study materials from the self-access centre to use. Self-study students are monitored by a pair of teachers, who provide assistance where necessary.

Exam courses

As a result of the increasing demand for high-stakes testing preparation, every passing year sees Veupoint accommodating more and more learners who need to prepare for Cambridge exam courses such as IELTS, FCE and CAE. Veupoint runs a number of exam preparatory courses per year for each of the external English examinations students need to take.

As opposed to General English classes, exam courses have fixed starting and finishing dates. Academic IELTS courses are offered at a low, mid- and high level, with each of these lasting 6 weeks. For FCE and CAE exam courses the duration is longer – anywhere from 9 weeks to 12 weeks.

Although these three courses mentioned above are certainly the most well-attended exam courses, there are more sporadic offerings of other types of exam course – depending on whether there is student demand for it. Examples of these would include: BEC (Business English Course), (ESP) English for Specific Purposes, and (EAP) English for Academic Purposes.
A trend among teachers has been an increased shift towards wanting to teach the exam courses. In the chaotic context of a ‘rolling intake’ system, exam preparatory courses, although requiring more marking and record-keeping – are seen as small outcrops of stability. Teachers spend a longer period of time with a specific group of learners, and often these students seem to have higher levels of motivation or dedication to their studies. The syllabus itself is very controlled and “mapped out” (Emma), and “you don’t have to spend ages coming up with novel stuff every day” (Lisa).

**Teacher training courses**

Veupoint offers learners interested in teaching English in their home countries the opportunity to do TESOL and TECSOL teacher training courses; the first being for teaching English as an L2 to adults, and the latter focusing on teaching English to children. Involving both a theoretical and a practical component, these two courses are commonly seen as the most demanding ones Veupoint offers. Both are intensive courses and last for four weeks. For assignments relating to learner needs analysis and experienced teacher observations, TESOL students often observe Veupoint teachers in the classroom – this normally eventuates through Ava asking for teaching volunteers at a staff meeting – teachers who do not mind being observed by students.

Although the majority of teachers do not mind the ‘intrusion’, there are those who consistently refuse to be scrutinised in this way. It is also true that certain teachers feel pressurised to a certain degree to consent, as there is “an unspoken fear of being judged inadequate as a teacher if you say no to being observed… what are you hiding?” (Emma). Although this sense might be self-imposed, it is possible to see how it could be powerful enough to get a teacher to agree to an arrangement they did not necessarily need to.
With TESOL and TECSOL courses running on average 2-3 times per year, a significant burden is placed on the system – quite a few additional non-required observations are added to participants’ teaching schedules. With observed practitioners being evaluated by teacher trainees, there is a very strange dynamic that is introduced into the school system – sometimes it eventuates that a previous language student of yours is now looking at your classroom practices as a trainee teacher.

In essence, like with any new course offering, the two teacher training courses represents a profit-oriented training establishment trying to find ways to diversify their educational ‘product’. Although the complexity and the added stresses that is added to the organizational system through these courses is noticeable, the ease with which they become part of the fabric of the institution; and the speed at which an ever-changing employee population forgets their entry into the context and consequent impact on it, ensures that courses, policies and other managerial interventions become entrenched at a very fast pace.

5.4.2 Progress tests and assessment
As briefly referred to earlier, General English students are tested in their morning classes every five weeks of the 10-week cycle. Test material is based on the grammar points and vocabulary covered in the morning class during this time period. Tests are normally held on the Monday morning closest to the elapsing of 5 weeks from the cycle’s start, as well as the Monday nearest in proximity to the concluding of 10 weeks of the cycle. In addition to the grammar and vocabulary test on this day, is a short receptive skills test – either reading or listening. Reading and listening tests alternate – therefore, in one 10-week cycle, students present for the whole period would do one reading test and one listening test. Learners in the General English programme are not tested on afternoon class material or work covered.
In addition, on the Thursday prior to each Monday test day, students are given a productive skills test. Just like receptive skills, this test alternates between writing and speaking. So in other words, in the 10-week cycle, each General English student would be tested twice – and after the second test, would have been formally assessed in all four skills areas (Listening, Reading, Speaking and Writing) and have had two lexis and grammar-focused tests, with each covering five weeks of course book work.

On the Wednesday after the tests, teachers are expected to have completed their progress reports for their morning class students. In addition to the test scores for the latest round of assessment, students are also given global scores in all four English skills, using a system which is based on level descriptors derived from the CEFR (Common European Framework of Reference for Languages) framework. Although the test results do influence overall global scores, they are not meant to reflect them wholly. Morning teachers are expected to consult with their students’ afternoon class teachers in the determination of global scores. Only after this collegial liaison, do teachers write up their overall grades and assessment. These are then handed in to the DOS or ADOS, who add administrative details to the report (such as attendance percentages) and check that they have been completed satisfactorily by the teacher. The two academic managers are essentially playing a ‘gatekeeping’ function here – reports that are deemed unsatisfactory for whatever reason are returned to the teacher for re-doing. Common reasons for non-acceptance include: untidy handwriting, ‘questionable’ assessment scores, missing information and so forth.

On the Friday morning after Monday testing, teachers conduct ‘tutorials’ with their morning class students. Teachers are required to design a student-centred lesson or activity that once started, can be continued unsupervised. Once up and running, this ostensibly frees the
teacher up to conduct one-on-one feedback with students, whom they call out one by one for a private consultation away from the learner group. These face-to-face meetings generally last between 5 to 10 minutes. However, the length of time spent with a student depends on many factors, including: the level of a student’s satisfaction with their learning, their English levels and their test performances. At this ‘tutorial’, teachers give students all their test results as well as their progress reports. In addition, they discuss students’ progress and what could be done to improve in various areas of their English. Learners are also free to ask the teacher questions about their learning or the class. Friday morning lessons conclude with a 15-minute period during which learners complete a feedback form regarding AM and PM classes, their homestay experience, extra-curricular activities and so on. The teacher leaves the class during this time, and usually appoints an individual in class to collect the learner feedback sheets, which are then handed in at reception – after which they are given to the director of studies.

If the 10-week cycle of instruction and its attendant assessment system outlined above was synchronized with a fixed 10-week term of study; in which students enrolled at its start and only left or renewed their studies 10 weeks later, the instructional climate and progress reporting procedure would be a fairly straightforward affair. However, in a school operating on a ‘rolling intake’ system, progress reporting and assessment becomes a surrealistic nightmare for teachers and academic managers alike. This is particularly true for teachers who have just joined the system and are still trying to find their feet in the context. At the best of times, assessment is a fairly complex activity that requires careful thought and consistent record-keeping. When, as a neophyte in the system, you are preparing lessons, teaching, experiencing an influx and concurrent exit of students (even during test weeks) –
and you are then required to, in addition, administer tests, mark them, liaise with other
teachers to assess overall learner achievement, file a progress report – all by Wednesday – it
is no surprise that stress levels spike during these 5-weekly occurrences.

As mentioned previously, the learners within a specific class will, due to the rolling intake
system, represent a wide range of different enrolment periods and starting dates. Therefore,
at any given period of testing, the learners taking the test are very unevenly prepared for it. It
is worth thinking the situation through more thoroughly. For example, in a typical class
consisting of 14-15 learners, 2-3 students might, come test time, have been present for the full
5 weeks of instruction – in other words, they will have received instruction pertaining to all
the elements present in the progress test. Another 4 students might have been present for 3
weeks of instruction prior to the test, meaning that they have been absent for 40% of the
items covered in the test. Perhaps 4 others have been there for 2 weeks only, meaning that
they missed out on 60% of the material that will be dealt with in the test. The remaining 4-5
students only arrived in the week before the test, and therefore they’ve perhaps been exposed
to roughly 20% of the lexis and grammar items which will be present in the formal
assessment.

For learners, this testing can be incredibly frustrating. Although the majority of teachers
make a concerted effort to downplay the significance of test results (in light of the reality of
what was outlined above) and re-assure students, many learners find it difficult not to be
influenced negatively by the scores they attain. Combined with the strong desire on the part
of most learners to keep “levelling up, as if learning English is some kind of computer game”
(Chris), teachers often find themselves dealing with very tricky situations during the progress
testing time period. These ‘minefields’ can range from very angry learners demanding to
progress to the next level upon learning that they did not score high enough for this to happen; all the way through to learners who take an almost forensic interest in every aspect of their learning, necessitating a 20 minute to 30 minute tutorial session which makes it difficult for the teacher to finish their sessions with every student in class.

And right at the end of this potential ‘powder keg’ of a school day, teachers are required to give learners a feedback form in which they evaluate instructional quality. To some extent, it almost appears farcical to do this so close in proximity to what is often a ‘bad day’ for learners. And yet, the primary reason why this testing regime exists as it does is to satisfy externally-mandated accountability criteria – either from the government (in the form of the NZQA), and also from industry bodies (such as EnglishNZ).

It does appear rather difficult to imagine how such an artificial testing regime in any way guarantees quality instruction and true student progress. In many respects, the assessment conundrum in private language education is a clear example of when commercial ethics and pedagogic objectives are in direct conflict with each other. Within a rolling intake system (put in place by business prerogatives), the progress testing system (as demanded by external audit regimes) cannot function effectively – and contributes to untenable situations for both learners and practitioners.

The favourable pedagogic choice is clear – remove the rolling intake system in favour of fixed terms (as used by nearly all other educational contexts) which are matched with the progress testing system, and concurrently, allow new students into the system at fixed times that match the timetable. The continued profitability of New Zealand educational systems that operate in this manner do pose uncomfortable questions for private language education
managers who insist that they would not be able to operate profitably if they did not use a rolling intake system. In many respects, it appears that large numbers of practitioners and managers are aware of the inherent weaknesses of the current system, but what seems to be happening is an extended, elaborate industry-wide ‘game’ of chicken, in which nobody is willing to change their manner of operations, for fear that it will be their financial death, and be to the advantage of their competitors. And while the game is being played, it is this selfsame rolling intake system that introduces an unmanageable and chaotic precarity to the working lives of teachers. This in turn complicates, and at times, degrades their interactions with learners – a relationship that is at the centre of their notions of a professional self.

Testing systems for exam courses are rather more straightforward – for exactly the reason General English class testing is not. Overall, exam courses such as FCE, CAE and IELTS are run for fixed periods of time. Except in special cases, students start their exam preparation courses on the same day, and finish on the same day as well. Although the final form of assessment for these courses is external (meaning that Veupoint does not administer the test they are learning towards), the students all receive the same amount of instruction and guidance. The same applies for the ‘mock’ exams they are given during an exam preparation course – generally, “students are in the same boat prior to a ‘mock’, because they had the same period of learning beforehand” (Chris).

5.5 Conclusion: perceptions of pedagogic practices

The description of the syllabus and pedagogic practices relating to different types of classes and forms of assessment at Veupoint goes some way towards helping us form an understanding of why perhaps private language school practitioners and managers do, at times, appear dismissive and critical of academic language teaching and learning research, as
well as published language teaching material. This includes a certain distrust of teacher training for the industry too (i.e. CELTA / TESOL training courses). There are a great many variables and daily exigencies, pedagogically, environmentally and administratively, that do not seem to be taken into account by the previously mentioned sources of teaching practices or approaches. In addition, practitioners often have to be thinking on their feet as unexpected situations crop up in and around the classroom - for which their training did not prepare them. As they incrementally gain experience, they seem to drift further away from the ‘idealized’ practices often presented as best practices in teacher training courses, regardless of the fact that these criteria do come back to ‘haunt’ them in the form of formal observation criteria.

Lisa is sharply critical of what she labels “methods” teaching – which she associates with a ‘cookie-cutter’ approach that she believes “marginalizes” certain students, leading to them “falling through the cracks.” In her lessons, she places a lot of emphasis on reading and its role in developing students’ ability to “self-educate”, and become more autonomous. Three primary values that keep emerging from classroom observations are those of creativity, imagination, and spontaneity. In this way, she describes her role as that of an empowering facilitator, working towards a situation where learners rely on her “less and less”. This also necessitates, in her view, “moving away from these bloody sanitized course books when possible.”

Lisa’s commitment to creativity has put her under heightened pressure in a school system that has changed significantly under new ownership. With an increased focus on “professionalism”, time has become an even more precious commodity. Lisa freely talks about stress caused by doing more paperwork while “having to generate ideas for lessons” continuously. Although she acknowledges that using pre-prepared lessons available to
teachers and “recycling” her own materials would decrease her stress levels, she is not willing to sacrifice her core values.

In this system, that [recycling materials] would work better... If I had stacks of stuff and folders that I just recycled... I can’t imagine teaching like that, but I can imagine how much less stress it could be for me... It’s probably part of my personality... I’d be bored with just repeating the same thing...

Lesson planning and marking have started colonising her private life more than before – and she finds herself doing work on weekends. Even though she resents this incursion on her free time, it also appears that she is not prepared to give up her principle of a “willingness to do anything” to compensate for time lost elsewhere. This ethos of flexibility and willingness is the principle she believes has kept her in work so long, as well as helped her professional development as a teacher (see chapter four). To this end, we see her being involved at a deeper level with the school as the staff union representative – which involves a fair amount of liaison and time. A further illustration is the fact that she volunteered to take part in this research project during one of the busiest times of the year for a union representative.

Unlike Lisa, Sam carefully watches the time he spends on teaching and planning – and his very pragmatic stance results in him deciding to leave the premises after a specified time each day. At the same time however, Sam’s extra-curricular interaction with students is far higher than other members of staff – in these contexts he feels he can “reach the real student”; for him these social events outside of school is “my second classroom”. In one way, it is a rejection of the idea that instruction is happening in the classroom alone. Sam’s sentiments about grammar seem to extend to his overall perspective on professional and academic discourses about teaching.

That’s the problem with a lot of the theory, is that just like in economics, this equation works better if you take out the people… That’s a central joke in the study of economics and I think it works great for theories of teaching – all these theories work
wonderfully, if you’re teaching a robot… But if you’re teaching a real human being you might as well crumple it up, toss it out… that sounds a bit too strong, and that’s not exactly what I mean, but theories of teaching don’t really take into account individual personalities and individual feelings.

Another related dimension to Sam’s overall approach is his willingness to let students take the lead in a lesson. This is clearly illustrated in the third classroom observation I conducted in which a student-initiated discussion developed into a full-scale lesson taking up the first half of the afternoon (Appendix 6).

Sam’s personal approach translates into students feeling comfortable enough to venture beyond the textbook in their queries about language – which can extend to the “taboo”. For him, “openness to discussing anything” in the classroom is a point of pride. Sam, in his interviews as well as the teaching I observed, privileges a focus on meaning and communication within his lessons. Grammar is frequently treated at an accelerated pace, and he often expresses a dismissive attitude towards its value. He describes a key component of his teaching philosophy as wanting to show learners “language as a real living thing, not this stultified fossil that you see in grammar books…”

For Sam, teaching experience trumps qualifications and training. He harbours a certain level of mistrust for academic research and teaching theory. His privileging of learner interest and engagement also means that he feels that there is little value in extensive lesson planning. His willingness to take learner direction and accommodate learner-initiated discussions means that deviation from prescribed material is frequent. However, his low level of investment in lesson planning means that he feels at his most autonomous when there is a clear course structure that he can play around with.
Gabriela questions the validity of established industry methodology and practices (i.e. CELTA) from another perspective that reflects her position as a NNEST practitioner:

I mean following CELTA standards, which we all are supposed to follow… But to what extent are those standards that reliable? I mean of course, there’s methodology, there’s steps to follow, but sometimes I question them…. Because I am and I have been a learner myself, so I question sometimes how things are supposed to be developed… because the way they are developed from the perspective of the teacher – who we don’t know if they’ve had to learn another language themselves before. Not a learner’s perspective, so I don’t know…

In terms of language learning, June sees one of her roles as being a creator of materials that reflect the real English world beyond the four walls of the classroom. This commitment to authenticity she attributes to the period of classroom experimentation that coincided with her doing the DELTA course.

I certainly went down that track of trying to give students more exposure in the classroom to what they were going to hear outside the classroom… not dumb it down… which I felt that lots of the books do… I will very rarely use a listening out of the textbook now, because I just think that it’s not actually assisting the students really… It is making them feel good because they can understand it, but when they are actually outside the classroom, they quickly become aware of how different authentic speech is.

For June, being an efficient classroom manager is essential. However, she also feels that she is able to maintain a level of “equality” with her learners at the same time. Although June acknowledges the challenges of developing rapport with learners in her sporadic “relief teaching” capacity as ADOS, she does not miss the all-consuming role of “perpetual planner” that full-time teachers contend with:

You know when you’re teaching full time, your brain’s never really free of thinking. When I teach fulltime, I’m always thinking about what I’m going to be teaching and how I’m going to do it, and thinking about staging and all of that kind of thing… Like when you are on the bus coming to school, when you're at home, or catching the bus home. That bit I don't really enjoy in a teaching job… I like to sometimes just go home, and not have to think about work...
For June, an important part of being a teacher is being able to adopt a professional role in the classroom, which leaves all “personal baggage” outside the classroom - she believes emotional self-regulation is important. She also believes that there’s a misperception among teachers of what the school expects of them in terms of lessons and delivery.

One thing that I’ve said before is that teachers think that they have to do these special, dazzling lessons, but in actual fact they don't... They just need to go in there and teach the students with solid lessons - where students are going to leave the classroom with some knowledge that they didn't have before they got in there. They think that if the students aren’t enjoying their classes, then they need to do something wham! – you know, fantastic.

There are so many different ways of doing a reading and doing a listening. It's about adding variety to your tasks - to everything that goes on in your classroom, not being predictable all the time. And that doesn't necessarily mean you're not following a standard lesson format in the book.

What if it is the actual content in the book that is anodyne and unengaging? Especially with morning classes, teachers are ‘trapped’ – they have to cover a global course book, the content of which makes up the standardised test students will take. A number of participants mentioned the pressure felt from needing to have interesting lessons and yet being chained to a mediocre text. Their various critical remarks regarding morning textbooks (e.g. “boring”, “fake”, “not based in reality”, “all about consumption”) echo some of the findings of scholars who have confronted the issue (see Gray, 2010; Tomlinson & Masuhara, 2013).

In terms of expectations of teachers, Penny echoes the sentiments of June. Teachers’ primary involvement with the institution is as classroom instructors – where they need to be consistently teaching “solid, good quality lessons” that “clearly target what they [students] need to practice.”
As academic managers, both June and Penny’s involvement in personally teaching is minimal. For them, teaching has become akin to a ‘hobby horse’ activity that they use to supplement and provide some diversion from their administrative responsibilities. The actual being in the classroom is what they both enjoy, on the rare occasions that they do teach. It is quite interesting to put the words of June together, as has been done above. In one respect, she demonstrates how she has personally moved away from published material in favour of authentic content. And then, when discussing what she expects from Veupoint teachers as an academic manager, her thinking changes subtly.

As ADOS, June does not want teachers to aspire to “dazzling” lessons – she wants them to stick to “standard lesson formats”, which she believes can be modified in numerous ways – and which are sufficient in pleasing the student-customer. As academic manager her focus quite clearly becomes ensuring a minimum standard of quality instruction that is acceptable to the consumer. When talking about her own teaching practices – she claims the right to experimentation, deviation from published materials, and uses her DELTA training as a form of legitimisation or ‘earning the right’ to be more experimental in her approach.

And yet, arguably the desire to produce “dazzling lessons” on the part of the practitioner, and the desire to ensure teachers consistently present “solid lessons” on the part of academic managers need not be mutually exclusive. They both stem from a keen focus on the learner themselves, and for practitioners, perhaps there is some impetus generated by a desire to create standout lessons – an objective that serves to provide them with motivation to teach.

But something more subtle is here at play. When June talks about consistency and a series of “solid lessons” she reflects the ability and opportunity that exists for the academic manager to
take a long view with regards to syllabus and lesson sequencing. As academic and course planner, she has been given numerous decision-making opportunities that promote a more extensive curriculum-development stance. For teachers operating at the ‘coalface’, immersed in the daily reality of teaching in the chaotic system that is created by rolling intake, they are often, as Emma puts it: “only as good as your last lesson”.

In private language school environments, teachers seem to be, to a large degree, forced by the context (and the rolling intake system) to teach from lesson to lesson, experiencing a large degree of time poverty. Coupled with regular student feedback procedures that serve to direct scrutiny onto a teacher’s practices, it should not be that surprising, that regardless of management’s exhortation that solid lessons are ‘good enough’, most teachers operate under a self-imposed pressure to make each next lesson a “dazzling” lesson. Private language teachers have much less time to create a favourable impression on their learners, and they know it better than anyone else.

Teaching in any context is for the most part a challenging and stressful affair – within a ‘rolling intake’ system, it appears that certain pressures on teachers are experienced at an even higher level of intensity. This does not bode well for the psychological and physical health of practitioners, especially in the long-term. Research conducted in Germany (Kieschke & Schaarschmidt, 2008) identified teaching as a high-risk profession in terms of excessive, unhealthy workplace commitment and levels of potential burnout. A primary underlying reason for this classification was the increase in “regimentation and external interference” (p. 435) in teacher’s working lives, which in turn led to a loss of autonomy.
Another question to ask is what “solid” means. Time and again, academic managers in the study would use words like “solid lessons”, “professionalism”, “quality teaching” in an undefined manner, possibly assuming that I shared their evaluative framework. This is a common feature of organisational interaction too – the use of words such as those above without them ever being defined. On one level it allows for a level of ambiguity that means each individual can inscribe their own value framework on their occupational environment. This superimposition works as long as there are no opportunities or events that force two opposing conceptions out in the open to confront each other.

The ripple effects of a ‘rolling intake’ system are felt across the institution, and by all of its stakeholders. It also has significant implications for how individuals experience their jobs and their interactions with students, teachers and management. Yet it is invisible – it does its work anonymously through proxy procedures as shown to some degree in this chapter.

Generally speaking, participants do not really consciously interrogate or connect continuous enrolment with the various issues they deal with in the classroom and the school environment outside it. With the rapid student turnover characteristic of a rolling intake system, assessment practices have emerged as being markedly mismatched to this business operating principle. Evaluation of learner performance is significantly influenced and rendered unevenly applied by contextual and logistical factors, as well as unspoken norms. Due to the exaggerated effect that students can have on the delicate and unstable dynamics of a class from week to week, teachers appear to sometimes, particularly during the 5-weekly progress testing period, engage in a PR campaign of ‘damage control’.
What happens when an entire system and organizational culture becomes slanted in the
direction of ‘damage control’? For one, all procedures and interactions become chained to the
present, leading to a level of systemic dysfunction which, over time, is normalized as it
embeds itself. For a closer look at this phenomenon we turn to chapter six, in which we draw
out this particular feature, as well as interrogate key institutional processes falling outside the
immediate orbit of the classroom.
We fumble about that elephant that we call “the organization” and dutifully report on the warts, trunks, knees and tails, each of us reporting confidently that we have found the nature of the beast. But it is worse than that, for we are not even looking at the same beast.

- Charles Perrow, Perspectives on Organizations

6

The Death of Memory: Transience and a Culture of Perpetual Crisis

Management

6.1 Introduction

In the context of private language education, perception management is an ever-present feature of organizational life. At an individual level, we have already examined how practitioners and academic managers choose to represent their work. To a certain extent, the struggle to carve out a professional identity within a for-profit educational system entails accepting and dealing with uncomfortable tensions arising from attempts to reconcile pedagogic prerogatives with commercial objectives. Depending on the person’s position within the organisation, the nature of this struggle differs as well as the role expectations they need to conform to.

If we take the isolated nature of teachers’ working realities, ensconced as they are in their own classrooms for the majority of the working day, and juxtapose it with the rather fluid and interactive way in which administrative and academic managers generally are able to liaise
with each other, it would not be outlandish to assume that this role-defined gap creates a
cultural chasm when it comes to staff relations. In addition, a further implication is that
administrative and managerial work presents more opportunities for expressions of collective
solidarity and more frequent articulations of overall company goals. The physical nature of
administrative work fosters an appreciation for a combined effort to achieve important
objectives. To achieve the same level of ‘togetherness’ among teaching staff, the
organization relies heavily on a more immaterial representation of its culture to perpetuate
functional work regimes, but this is a complicated endeavour, as staff turnover is more
pronounced among teachers.

The above-mentioned situation is deeply implicated in creating a fairly intractable hierarchy
when it comes to decision-making power in the company. The ‘flat’ structure of the
company when looking at the teaching staff belies the fact that, as a group, they are highly
subordinate to what is decided by management in terms of the school’s overall policies and
direction. This is frequently difficult to accept on a personal level for practitioners, as this
starkly contrasts with the large amount of decision-making power accorded them within the
four walls of their own classrooms. To have your workplace autonomy only intensely
located in one area of your working life (i.e. the classroom) can be very frustrating, especially
in situations where teachers feel that company decisions have ignored the pedagogic
implications of a decision – and when they weigh in on the debate, their contributions,
although perhaps acknowledged, are not acted upon or seen to help shape organisational
initiatives.

In this chapter my focus turns towards the cultural aspects of organizational life. I frame the
discussion here in two parts. I begin by exploring the notion of a company operating in a
milieu of short-termism, shedding ‘outdated’ notions of legacy and “family” in an attempt to avoid the fragmentation of communal bonds. I then move towards the second part of the discussion: the fact that in more recent times, employees have witnessed a marked shift in priorities towards a more ‘professional’ regime. I examine this shift in terms of its impact on collegial relations among staff, and in particular, on those between long-term practitioners and temporary or relief staff. This is followed by a brief dissection of the effects a specific period of organizational crisis can have on staff relationships.

As with the previous two chapters, the rolling intake system’s impact on organizational life is also examined, with the focus this time being its influence on certain key institutional processes, namely: staff meetings, farewell ceremonies and learner feedback systems. What emerges is a dominant organizational culture of perpetual crisis management. This prevailing culture is largely reflective of a chaotic and unstable system, which in turn is predicated on the pedagogically questionable operating principle of ‘continuous intake’, which promotes reactivity, not proactivity.

6.2 The notion of ‘family’: all in the mind?

A recurrent theme of institutional discourse is the notion of Veupoint as a family. This nurtured myth wends its way through the interactions between teaching and administrative staff, and extends to the student body too. For long-term employees, it can also be an internalised perception borne out of the social relations fostered by previous management teams, and perpetuated by practitioners as well as learners. It is clear from observational data and interviews that the idea of Veupoint as a family still exerts a powerful influence on the collective. However the paradigm shift in managerial thinking (from 2006 onwards); towards a ‘professionalism’ that views its primary objective as providing the customer with a
diversified portfolio of English training products, necessitates asking the question whether the
notion of a Veupoint ‘family’ has become mainly an internalised psychological construct and
managerial tool, with ever-decreasing representation in the lived realities of staff and learners.

Having worked at Veupoint for 17 years, Lisa has seen different managerial cultures come
and go. With regards to social relations with colleagues, one of the most frequent metaphors
used by Lisa to describe the community of practice is that of a “family” – although she has
begun to question whether this is a sentimental view on her part. Loyalty and commitment
typify her relations with colleagues as well as management.

I noticed on the door when I came in that poster, “Welcome to the Veupoint family.”
This doesn’t feel so much like a family anymore. Now there’s kind of that feeling
when everybody grows up and leaves home, and goes off and does their own thing, or
whatever. It did use to have the sense of family... I mean, it sounds like I’m living in
the past but all I’ve got to compare is now with what it has been like over the past
seventeen years...

For Lisa, a clear example of the overall, incremental change in organizational culture can be
found in the way annual general meetings (AGMs) operate. When Veupoint was still being
run by the original owner and founder (up to 2006), the annual company meeting was called a
‘hui’, a term which Lisa finds significant, as she associates this originally Maori word with
meetings that are inclusive, and gives individuals an opportunity to air their views. She
references the 2011 AGM to illustrate her point:

We’ve had a change of ownership and stuff too. I wonder how much of what is being
done is coming from Australia [head office of new owner of Veupoint]. I’m sure
Penny has to meet performance targets as well... So it’s really hard to know exactly
where it’s [company policies and directives] coming from. If you think about our last
AGM [2011], there was no discussion. There was supposed to be, but we were all
sitting there like we were pupils at school, and our principal is sitting up there and says
this this this this this, and that’s the end of the meeting. Nobody talked, a couple of
people said something, but they were all management… There was very little
discussion...
And *hui*, the change of that word. I mean *hui* was a good word, because *hui* means everybody has a chance to say something... Sure, it might have been more drawn out, but there used to be a lot of creative thinking that went on in there [previous *huis*]... I think we’re cutting creative thinking, I think that’s what’s going on. It could be what’s expected from our side, I don’t know... I have no idea... We don’t ever find out do we, as teachers... We are sort of clustered down here like little worker ants - doing their job and we have no idea what the Queen is thinking ... *(laughs)*

Although Lisa shows a willingness to try and understand the reasons behind the changed dynamics of annual staff meetings, she also clearly laments the loss of having a say as a practitioner – to her this represents a concurrent loss of creativity, in terms of not having all staff members contributing their ideas to the future plans of the company.

Admittedly, the 2012 annual meeting was run differently as a response to overwhelmingly negative feedback from teachers (as already referenced by Penny in chapter four). In response, Daniel gave Penny control over the next annual meeting and let her run it. What Penny did was to create a ‘system’. Three weeks prior to the AGM, all staff members received a feedback form to complete well before the meeting was held. This form asked employees to note down their thoughts on a number of issues, including: changes in the last year at Veupoint that “have been successful” and “not so successful”, and “3 main changes you would like to see”. Apart from these general categories, academic staff members were also asked to comment on teacher development sessions and their effectiveness. For administrative staff, a section was added that asked for their suggestions regarding institutional procedures they were a part of.

Penny collected all staff feedback forms a week before the AGM (usually held at the end of November), and then collated these into key discussion points, which in turn formed part of the agenda for the meeting. The agenda was then given to staff members to read through in
advance prior to the meeting. Attached to this agenda was a new meeting format too. Each management speaker was given 10 minutes in which to summarise key events from the year concluded and to look ahead to the coming year. The owner of the school gave one presentation, and so did Daniel, as principal. Lastly, Penny, as academic manager (DOS) also gave a brief speech. After these, administrative staff and teaching staff separated from each other, and within this big division, smaller groups were formed in which the collated feedback points were discussed – with one person in each group taking minutes. A week after the meeting, staff members received a summary of key suggestions made and future actions to be taken.

Administrative and teaching staff feedback on the ‘new’ format AGM was largely positive, and as mentioned earlier in chapter four, it was an important moment in Penny’s own career trajectory at Veupoint, because she felt that, having been given more autonomy, she had rewarded the principal’s trust in her by running a collective event very efficiently. In her third interview she emphasises the careful thought she had put into planning it:

Anyway, getting back to the AGM, I thought it ran really smoothly. I did think very carefully about those groups... That's why I put people into groups... there are staff members here who don't get on with each other... I know that, and I wanted everyone to be able to have a fair chance to speak and not feel they were being judged by another teacher that they may not have a very good relationship with... or, you know, they mightn't have felt so forthcoming with information had I put those two particular teachers together...

So that was the reason behind the grouping... it wasn't because I was being a bossy cow... (laughs)... I wanted to get the maximum amount of feedback out of everybody, and I wanted to put them in the most comfortable group to get that opportunity.

So I think it went really well... I mean Ava, June and I all met earlier in the, the morning, we went through ... we brainstormed our own ideas so that we could feed things in and see what kind of comments came out of those...
The same meeting format for AGMs were used in 2013 and 2014, and it is now the ‘new normal’. Apart from Lisa, another non-participant teacher, and I, the remainder of the teaching staff have never been to a *hui* at Veupoint. How does the changed format of the AGM compare with the *hui* of yesteryear? Well, it certainly is more efficient, and from a quantitative point of view, each person does realistically have a higher chance to contribute. And yet, for individuals who valued the social element inherent in a *hui*, the AGM has no soul.

Where a *hui* felt like a family gathering, where a significant portion of the event was dedicated to social bonding, the AGM feels like a clinical, surgical operation – the outcome of which we know about a week in advance. What has been lost is an organic get-together, during which administrative staff and teaching staff mixed with each other – the result being a ‘messy’ but interesting cross-fertilisation of ideas. As Lisa put it earlier, “we’re cutting creativity”.

Brainstorming between ‘goalposts’ of collated feedback and the intentional ‘insertion’ of ideas and suggestions from the academic management team (Ava, June and Penny), predetermined at an earlier, exclusive meeting between the three of them, seems more like an exercise in public relations, than a true meeting of minds. In the name of efficiency, teacher and administrative staff feedback has been managerially ‘channelled’ down a few pre-selected tracks.

The AGM is a good example of an ‘innovation’ which the majority of employees feel positively about, having a number of unintended cultural consequences that do change the social relations among staff members. As shown above, the new AGM now runs with admin
and teaching staff separate from each other for the discussion of the agenda action points. This compartmentalisation is further cemented by the way managers also join the groups – Daniel joins the admin team, and Penny, June and Ava usually each spearhead one of the teacher groups. Penny’s idea about the groups as outlined in the interview excerpt above, needs to be considered carefully.

Penny’s rationale of getting the “maximum amount of feedback” from everyone necessitated grouping staff members in ways that minimised the impact of ‘tricky’ social relations among specific employees. This micro-managing of outcomes is a distinguishing feature of Penny’s management approach, and it lies behind many of the ‘systems’ she has implemented at the school during her tenure. Her own personal dictum of “maintaining a professional distance” shapes her actions, and this aligns well with an attitude that appears to operate from a vantage point where social relations among staff are ‘intellectual puzzles’ for her to solve as a manager.

I’ve actually realised since taking on the director of studies job, that I like managing people... I like, probably the word isn’t bossy and a control freak... (laughs)... I really like the management part of my job a lot... I like managing all the teachers and dealing with all the teachers, and I like the liaison and the relationships that I have with the other admin staff... and the other people in management. I like that a lot more than the everyday, face-to-face interaction involved with being in the classroom...

I like organizing things, and I like organizing people… (laughs) That sounds really weird... (laughs) when I say it out loud... I really just like to have things very, sort of clear-cut and logical... I mean sometimes it is like a puzzle, my job... it’s trying to fit things in that don’t fit neatly into place...

Perhaps unconsciously, Penny is articulating a subtle positioning of the teacher within the Veupoint system here – as a variable that needs to be moved around the chessboard of daily operations, with as little emotion interfering as possible. For ‘systems’ people, Penny’s approach is sensible and good practice. For other employees who see their work as primarily
relational and who need the social interaction with peers to feel energised and ‘nourished’,
this managerialism can alienate them – leading to feelings of detachment and purposelessness.

One clear result of such a management style is a steady, accumulative proliferation of
paperwork – with each new system that is implemented, come a new set of things to fill out,
document or circulate. And with each new form or piece of paper, a certain measure of social
distance from each other is created. Whereas in earlier years, employees would perhaps
engage in face-to-face interaction to resolve work issues – this serving a dual purpose of
socially connecting and getting work done - now most routine institutional procedures are
mediated through pieces of paper.

It would be unfair to assert that the increased load of paperwork is only the result of a
management style however – for a number of these institutional processes, the attendant
paperwork and documentation is required by the audit regimes Veupoint is beholden to –
those of the NZQA and industry bodies. To some extent, the performance standards which
stipulate that private language schools now have to have a ‘paper trail’ require managers like
Penny, if the school hopes to operate effectively and simultaneously satisfy the external
requirements placed upon it.

So how does the notion of ‘family’ connect to the picture sketched out above? It is my
assertion that, with each systemic ‘innovation’ put into place (such as the ‘new’ AGM), the
opportunities for informal, ad-hoc social discourse has been replaced by standardised
procedures that minimise or micro-manage collegial interactions in and around work duties.
Although perhaps having only a small effect in isolation, each new ‘system’ when added to a
gradually increasing number of routinized procedures, serves to dismantle, piece by piece, a
by now ‘outmoded’ organizational culture of ‘family’, which originally gained purchase through the very social interactions mentioned. The notion of ‘family’ becomes a myth, and perhaps a marketing tool, but it can no longer be utilised to accurately describe the changed social dynamics within the work environment.

In an unstable and chaotic work environment such as Veupoint’s, a rolling intake operating principle ensures that ‘systems’ outlast the majority of employees and customers. The ultimate irony is that they inevitably become more ‘trustworthy’ than people – for many employees, they [‘systems’] are ‘islands’ of stability in a constantly changing sea of entering and exiting personnel and students. But systems do not respect loyalty and commitment, they only provide a procedure to follow in the now. They do not respect shared histories, just as they do not reveal their own genesis – they are one-dimensional and taken for granted; and therefore frequently escape criticism when things break down. When the system does not function well because of its own inherent instabilities, human scapegoats are generally found – sometimes these are managers, sometime they are teachers – learners do not always escape blame either. Within such an anti-social system, the death of the ‘family’ is inevitable. It only lives on in the figments of some employees’ imaginations.

Without shared histories, there is no chronology or legacy to speak of. Loyalty and commitment can only be rewarded if the history of people and organisations are remembered. Private language schools are in many respects ahistorical. With such a fixation on the now, work becomes akin to an eternal present (Fleming, 2015). And this is what I conceptualise as the death of memory. When long-serving teachers and administrative employees commit themselves to an institution whose systems are ahistorical in focus, their career trajectories
that have led them into the now are not respected, valued or used as a resource. When people are only measured by their presence and performance in the now, they have become ghosts, haunting the system.

So, if the notion of ‘family’ is perhaps not enacted much in the institutional structures anymore, how does it still perpetuate itself in the school environment? The answer lies in the way individuals choose to defy the anti-social properties of the ‘system’ – through their interactions with students (not clients), and the dogged persistence they exhibit in creating communal spaces of ‘non-sanctioned’ interaction. Despite the best efforts of the system to control the social environment of its workers; teachers and other members of staff, as well as students, humanise the system in unexpected and covert ways. This is expanded on in chapter seven, where we examine the forms this grassroots resistance adopts.

6.3 Relationships and affective bonds among staff members

6.3.1 Part-time/Relief teachers and long-term employed teachers

The ahistorical nature of the private language school system and its rolling intake system does not bode well for long-term relationships between colleagues. As I have illustrated in the previous section, the notion of “family” is mainly ideological, and the reality of work is more accurately typified as governed by transient connections and frequently occurring exigencies. It is not too surprising that this happens in a system that is ‘flexibly’ arranged for the customer. Therefore, the temporary nature of the service provider (teacher) – customer (student) relationship can be expected to be replicated at a collegial level, as fluctuations in student enrolment directly impact on the retention, hiring and cutting ‘adrift’ of staff members who need to ‘match’ the student numbers at any given time.
Even though Sam represents a group of teachers with shorter-term connections to Veupoint, it is also true that his year-long tenure reflects a much longer engagement than the numerous part-time and relief teachers that might appear and just as quickly disappear at Veupoint over the ‘peak’ periods of student enrolment. Although these teachers are not, and could not, form a part of this research project, it would be remiss not to make mention of them, because they are the teachers who are most affected by the injustices of the ‘rolling intake’ system. These are the practitioners who exist in a twilight world of temporary work arrangements typified by a modern-day capitalistic nomadism. They are also ghosts in the system, as they wander between institutions, hoping to eventually find a stable, fixed contract of some kind. They are a significant sub-culture of private language school teachers that can claim membership to an ever-growing group of workers labelled as the ‘precariat’. If two of the primary aspects of professional identity reside in the relationships between practitioners and learners, as well as between them and their colleagues, then we have to question to what extent these nomadic teachers are given meaningful chances to professionally grow – as they flit from one job to the other.

So, what opportunities exist for collegial relations to develop or not develop between longer-term employees at Veupoint and this group of temporary teachers? On a certain level, there are strong bonds of solidarity or empathy on display when it comes to part-time or relief teachers. The primary reason is that, before securing their own longer-term teaching assignments, most practitioners were in the same boat. In participant interviews, the instability of this initial (or in some cases, persisting) period of work insecurity therefore features regularly in the responses given to me in reply to the question, “What advice would you give a teacher just starting out in this industry?” Penny focuses on the notion of flexibility in her reply:
If I think more generally the advice would be - are you willing... *(laughs)* …are you willing to get into an industry where immediately you will not find a permanent full-time job?

Are you willing to be flexible enough to be able to take what you can get to eventually get your foot in the door somewhere? Are you happy that this could be a reasonably long process... And are you patient enough to wait, and is it something that you are so passionate about that you are willing to wait... Because that’s the problem with those new teachers is... they don’t realise that you can’t just walk into a job in our industry...

Participants in the research project have experienced this first-hand. For Sam, who does not yet want to settle down, this insecurity is not a problem, as he is not tied to a specific place by family or other commitments. An itinerant teacher, his pragmatic approach is just to go somewhere in the world where they might, at this moment, need a teacher.

Like a long-term contract somewhere, is not on the horizon at this point. I’ve thought of it, in that eventually I may have to settle down somewhere… that it’s going to come to the point where I realistically can’t continue to be an itinerant English teacher… However, I think the fact that I know that I’m leaving soon… As soon as I arrive, I already know that I’m going to be gone within a set period of time, and so it gives me a lot more freedom, to kind of buck the system a bit … I can tick enough boxes that I don’t get fired, but I can do what I want at the same time… whereas if I were going to try to establish myself in a school for a long period of time… I would have to jump through more hoops...

“Ticking enough boxes to not get fired” might be a pragmatic philosophy to adopt for Sam, but this attitude does potentially become problematic in a teaching context also populated with employees with longer-term commitments. Inevitably, through the buddy system and the role expectations placed on the shoulders of employees with fixed tenure, teachers like Sam sometimes strain collegial relationships by doing the bare minimum in an organizational culture like Veupoint’s where “going the extra mile” *(Ava)* is expected. It roughly translates into other practitioners ‘picking up the slack’ due to a sense of responsibility towards the institution – but the net result is often that the employee who does this spreads their emotional
and physical resources thin in the process of doing so. The situation outlined above is somewhat of a sticking point for Gabriela:

Sometimes I would like teachers to take it more seriously, especially those new teachers. Something I feel that, and sometimes they’re not new teachers… and this is a bit of a criticism - and of course they took this career probably because they want to travel, and as an excuse to travel; or they have something to go and do as they go around the world - but they don't take it seriously enough. I take my job very seriously and my profession really seriously. So that makes me feel… it upsets me a little bit to see people just doing it as a Plan B…

What is already hinted at in the excerpts from Sam and Gabriela’s interviews is a very complex social dynamic in the staffroom, with a host of unspoken tensions potentially residing in the social relations between differently employed teachers. It is understandable that, for Gabriela, who has clearly chosen English teaching as a vocation, dealing with teachers who have a “happy, go lucky” attitude can be frustrating for her. Part of the irritation is borne out of the fact that she has spent considerable effort and money to become a highly qualified teacher – she has been to teacher’s college for four years, obtained a Spanish and an English CELTA, and is currently doing her masters in TESOL. Within the flat structure of the teaching staff environment, resentment of ‘fresh’ CELTA graduates looking to earn a bit of extra ‘dosh’ and perhaps spend a bit of time overseas taking in the sights, being, for all practical purposes, on an equal footing with experienced staff, can sour relationships – especially if they are seen to exhibit much less commitment than other teachers.

At the same time, we must also ask whether or not it is fair to expect a different attitude from temporary teachers who have perhaps found it very difficult to ‘break in’ to a school system for any significant period of time – time they have needed to build their rudimentary teaching skills, time they have needed to acclimatise to the realities of teaching as opposed to a month-long intensive course’s fake simulation of reality, and time they have needed to focus on
pedagogy, instead of wondering where the next pay cheque is going to come from. In addition, it is not unreasonable to expect, especially in intellectually challenging occupations, for employees being given an opportunity to become familiar with the organizational culture they have entered. As is continually asserted in this thesis, the potentially strained relationships between teachers is often the product of a dysfunctional system – a system revolving around a ‘rolling intake’ principle – which can be directly implicated in the job insecurities of a great many teachers.

The immediacy of the private language school environment means that, just as learners quickly enrol in the system, so teachers are also speedily needed to teach them. Conversely, teachers can also quickly become surplus to requirements, as a large group of students exit the school. In terms of collegial relationships, this means that the hiring of staff occurs frequently without considering aspects related to institutional ‘fit’ for example – hiring is often done ‘on the fly’, and without premeditation – certain teachers are given teaching assignments in order to satisfy an immediate pragmatic need. Just as a single learner can change the social dynamic of a class they attend, the same could apply to a hastily hired teacher, injected into a new community of practice without ceremony.

It is clear that the social dynamic between teachers can be complex, particularly along the divide between core, long-term practitioners and those on temporary assignments. However, it is also true that the daily demands of the job, and the fact that, for the most time, teachers are instructing learners separately from each other in different classrooms, means that there are opportunities for annoyances to dissipate and become less bothersome, as work itself forces individuals to allocate their emotional and intellectual resources to the fulfilment of their own duties.
Although long-term teachers on fixed contracts often have higher levels of job security, the sense that you are guaranteed work for the foreseeable future can be a comfortable fiction. The volatility of the private language education industry itself and its intimate connection to the global economy means that a number of seemingly distant events in the macro-context can have dramatic effects on the job prospects of practitioners in the research locality.

And when an unexpected emergency or crisis rears its head, more often than not even long-term employees are forced to confront the uncertainty of their own tenure. Concurrently, a crisis confronts a community of practice with some uncomfortable truths about their work environment that can impact on their collegial relationships in various ways – including an intentional severing of communal bonds. To examine this more closely, we need to look at a period of organizational upheaval at Veupoint that occurred near the beginning of my second research period.

6.3.2 A community in crisis: organizational upheaval and its consequences

Over a three-month period from October to December 2013, an organizational crisis developed that would have far-reaching consequences. What unfolds is a powerful example of how different perceptions of an organization can crawl out of the woodwork in times of upheaval. It also demonstrates that a lack of transparency in certain vital areas of organizational activity can have a detrimental effect on the community as a whole.

The roots of the crisis of 2013 can be traced back to 2011, when the Christchurch earthquake put Veupoint’s second school, located as it was in the CBD, out of action permanently.

Without going in too much detail, the net result was that the company took big financial losses, which the main school in Auckland (our research site) needed somehow to recoup. Needless to say, this resulted in added pressures for all employees at the Auckland school as
even a stellar year in which all teachers and admin staff performed brilliantly would only
serve to claw back some level of profitability from a very precarious financial position. This
was pretty much the story of 2012 and 2013 too, but here matters became more complex,
because our own situation coincided with an industry-wide drop in student enrolments.

As Daniel the principal describes it:

In terms of business, we had declining enrolments for the first three quarters [2013],
and then we had a stonking fourth quarter that mitigated the loss to a certain extent...
and gave us hope for the business to come in the next year… So for three quarters we
were really under the hammer in terms of cost control and staffing, and so on...our
numbers were dreadful. It was the same across the board for our key competitors –
they all suffered large drops, and this is on the back of a 2012 that had declined, which
in turn was on the back of 2011 - when the effects of the earthquake had started to play
out… So it was a very stressful time for everyone...

Starting at the beginning of 2013, Daniel already saw that serious cost-cutting measures
needed to be implemented to keep the school operating – primarily in terms of various
minimising of expenses and staffing decisions. A number of admin members were asked to
take up part-time instead of full-time roles – this affected three individuals. By June, when
matters were not improving, Daniel personally took a 5% pay cut as a personal commitment
to minimising expenses wherever possible. A further three members of the administrative
team had left by this stage. Although cutting jobs was perhaps necessary due to the financial
climate, a looming gap in the marketing department necessitated the hiring of two marketing
professionals in an effort to bring in some fresh ideas and initiatives.

By October 2013, the situation had become untenable (see chapter three). An emergency
meeting was held in which the situation was explained to teachers. This was quite a shocking
revelation because most employees had had no idea of how dire things were. Penny herself
had been caught off-guard and had been informed only a little earlier than the teachers. The
proposed solution that came out of the meeting was a job-sharing and time-off roster, where teachers took their annual leave earlier or went part-time – in a desperate attempt to stave off redundancies.

When I asked Daniel why he had waited so long to apprise teachers of the situation, his rationale clearly reflects the fear of in any way interfering with staff morale which he knows is intimately connected to learners’ (customers’) sense of well-being:

   It all is so interlinked…unless the admin and marketing is great, then we’re not going to have the students to grow the academic staff, and vice versa…if we’ve got teachers who are grumpy, and who are not valued…and the admin keeps on letting them down and this that and the other, um…you’ll lose money… (laughs)…Therefore the last thing to do is upset the teachers and the students…

To Daniel, not upsetting the teachers entailed withholding the economic travails of the school until it became absolutely necessary to tell them. Judging from the reaction of teachers to the sudden news of the financial situation, I am not sure if this was necessarily the best course of action – a common sentiment from the teachers who were angry were that they felt betrayed by not being told sooner. In addition, not being told sooner meant that the financial repercussions of taking early leave or going part-time had not been planned for, so the personal economic repercussions of Daniel delaying telling teaching staff made their situations more difficult to deal with.

Penny, having felt that by now she had earned the right to be kept apprised of all company matters that could be important to her role, was very unhappy at having been blindsided. It was also educational in a certain sense, as she fully realized that some aspects of the business had a certain level of opacity in terms of how they were reported and to whom:

   This really came through recently when all the teachers had to put forward annual leave [re: emergency meeting] – had we known how desperate, I didn’t know how
desperate times were... all I knew was that, “Penny, you need to tell the teachers to take annual leave.” “Why? Why haven’t you told me this before?” Because there’s no access to the financial information, or there’s no communication of it, and that’s why it all happened so quickly...so it ended up being a really big knock-on effect...

Having been instrumental in the appointment of two new people in the marketing department and having pushed quite hard for these changes in the lead-up to the October 2013 emergency redundancy talks, she was horrified to know that she had pushed for these changes, at the same time that the company was experiencing intense financial hardship – a fact, that had she known it, would have potentially given her pause for thought in terms of decision-making.

When I asked Daniel about when he had known things were financially rocky, he had told me from the beginning of 2013. Clearly, the channels of communication in the administrative department also suffered from a compartmentalisation that seemed to create a culture of information-sharing based around the “need to know” principle. For Penny, who felt that she had earned her managerial autonomy through her proven track record with the academic side of the school, getting her fingers burned by branching out into the marketing activities of the school was the final straw. At a higher management level, budgetary details and financial data that would have impacted on her principal-sanctioned marketing activities were not shared with her, and she felt that she should have known about them, in order to do her job, and her extended duties (in terms of marketing) properly. She decided to resign, and announced it to a shocked teaching staff during November 2013. Gabriela captures the feeling of staff members succinctly:

People all felt very unstable and scared, like the head of the school is going - who is going to take that role? And for some reason we believed that June wouldn't do it - because she hadn't done it before, so why would she do it now?
Although it is clear that Penny had always been ambitious and that she would “outgrow Veupoint sooner or later” as Daniel puts it – it is also true that the events of 2013 probably added impetus to her decision. In her own words:

I just felt that if you don’t agree with big decisions that the company's making, it's time to move on. And I felt that way because I could see a benefit to parts of the company, but it wasn't cohesive enough for me - it’s just that they weren't sound business decisions and they didn't have enough thought involved in them. And some of them affected my team of teachers, you guys, without consultation with me. Decisions were being made across... over the top of my head, regarding the academic side of the school, and I wasn't pleased with that and it happened quite regularly.

I mean I've been pushing forever for a really thorough marketing strategy - the marketing department really need to be in touch with each other, and they're not and it's just frustrating. I felt like I was going around in circles for something that should be quite straightforward… Information isn’t communicated across the company… nobody can make good decisions about their own role…Nobody knows how well the company is doing – the finances are operating as a silo, it’s operating independently from the other functions of the company…

So those are the two key factors why I decided I was going to move on and I think I made the right decision and when I see what's happening now and what's happened recently with the way things have been dealt with – in terms of just simple things like annual leave and the bits and pieces that we discussed in [contract negotiations] you know we could've avoided a lot of those problems had we had open lines of communication, and had people made, you know good business decisions that were thoroughly thought through, instead of being reactive to something.”

What has emerged from an examination of the financial crisis is the realization that there are highly differentiated levels of information-sharing practices within the company. Firstly, due to the sensitivity of the teacher-student (who is also a customer) relationship, teachers are often kept in the dark of very important institutional developments that do affect them.

Secondly, the different administrative departments also withhold certain items of information from each other. Just as teachers are thought to be best served by focusing on what happens in the classroom, academic managers are expected to focus on the academic aspects of the school, and not become involved in other departments, particularly those relating to financial
matters. This is a dangerous cocktail, when important decisions are made blindly, without knowing what the financial repercussions of these decisions will be.

On a cultural level, this apparent lack of transparency on the part of the leadership of the company resulted in a breakdown of trust between the teaching staff and management. It was also the catalyst for the director of studies leaving her post, as she also felt betrayed by not having been given advance warning of the school’s financial situation, leading to a loss of face in front of the employees she was supposed to take care of.

Fortunately for the company, operations normalised quite quickly after the redundancy scare – student enrolments picked up, and instead of having to find a replacement for Penny, two lateral movements in the company, namely that of June (previously ADOS) stepping up to the role of DOS, and Ava (previously only HOTD) taking on the additional duties of ADOS on top of her existing responsibilities as HOTD, allowed for a smooth managerial transition. Be that as it may, it is also true, that the company would have to expend great effort in rebuilding trust among the teaching staff, which would take time.

6.4 Perpetual crisis: when systemic dysfunction is the institutional default

If we turn our attention away from critical incidents such as the redundancy ‘scare’, and focus on the more mundane and routine aspects of organizational life, it is noticeable that the idea of crisis does not necessarily disappear. Within the rolling intake system, the idea of crisis can to some extent be seen as a regular feature of an unstable system. Although certainly not large or consequential enough to each cause a seismic shift in social relations such as the redundancy crisis did, each working day is filled with small, immediate concerns that need to be addressed in a speedy fashion. In addition, to function properly, the school has to be
transparent to everybody – even though in its own information-sharing practices internally it might be more opaque. Ava communicates this contradictory situation thus:

We have to be completely open to our students…don’t know if our students actually understand that because cultural comes into that…we have to be completely open to government as well, government comes in and audits us…we have to be completely open to English NZ because they come in and audit us too…so the nature of us being a private training establishment but having to actually be answering to everybody is quite weird…The other thing I think is the nature of an English language school is that we’re a company and this is where education and profit don’t mix…(laughs)…We’re a company that has to make money and to make money we have to keep clients coming in…and we don’t want our clients to go to another school because competition is extremely high…So we have to look good for many reasons and in many aspects…our progress, our quality, our parents [homestays], our policies and procedures, whatever, our NZQA rating, so… but our main goal is to make money so we can, I don’t know, stay open? [laughs]

Just as the relational aspects of organizational operations combine with the pedagogic concerns of practitioners to shape their notions of professionalism, so too do contextual features present in the more mundane institutional processes play an influential role in moulding the perceptions of participants with regards to their role performances. When participation in these routinized aspects of working life demand constant recalibrated actions and decisions, the negative impact of this constant state of ‘high’ alert in the form of burnout and persistent stress levels are often masked with positive-sounding vocabulary such as the word “flexibility” – hiding the toll it takes on the body, mind and spirit. The fact that these stressors are ever present means that through their mundanity, they gain a legitimacy that many individuals feel they do not have the right to publicly question and confront. The result is that resistance goes ‘underground’.

Although not a specific focus in terms of institutional processes to observe due to its confidential nature, the learner feedback system has emerged as a key organizational feature that affects the lived realities of teachers and managers. It is also a good example of how a
culture of perpetual crisis management operates. However, before examining learner feedback, we first turn our attention to two other organizational procedures, namely staff meetings and farewell ceremonies. Here our concern is more to see what image of the organizational culture they represent, which provides a backdrop for the discussion on perpetual crisis management.

6.4.1 Staff meetings

Staff meetings (Appendix 7) are held every Wednesday after morning class ends – during the first part of the one-hour lunch break. They are generally viewed by participants as a staff bulletin board – Sam describes it as being given a “heads up of what’s going on”. For June they are “a way of bringing teachers together to give them information”. Penny views meetings as “a bridge between admin and teaching staff” and they provide her with an opportunity to apply the personal touch: “It’s my one time in the week that I can have everyone in the room together at one point.”

Cognizant of the fact that meetings are during the lunch break, Penny has adopted an “8-minute rule” which she tries her best to stick to. For Sam, June and Penny, staff meetings serve their straightforward purpose which does not really extend beyond that of information-sharing – primarily from the top down, as in from management to teaching staff. In contrast, Lisa questions the value of holding staff meetings at all - if they do not include a forum for teacher-initiated discussion of pertinent issues.

The problem with staff meetings again is time... so there’s kind of an agenda which we race through... You can see most people chafing at the bit... That’s why the union meeting was really good today, because a lot of people would like to say some of those things in the staff meeting on a more regular basis... I mean how valuable are they [staff meetings]? If we’re only being told what’s going to happen, why not just type it up and put it on our desk and not have a staff meeting?
June’s own perspective of meetings is that they are there for teachers “to quickly get what’s happening on a weekly basis” and that it doesn’t serve as a forum for the “nitty gritty points”, unlike Lisa. For Sam, the faster meetings are concluded, the better – he prioritizes his lunch break.

The fact that I’m sitting there looking at the clock the second I get into that room... looking to leave so I can go get my food... It kind of takes away from my willingness to participate in this little venture... (laughs)

Lisa’s earlier suggestion of instead typing up the agenda and handing it out has been considered by Penny. However, there are personal and logistical reasons why she prefers to continue with face-to-face staff meetings:

I have thought about other ways of doing staff meetings... Yeah ok, I could write up the minutes and hand them out to people to read, but A - people don't read them...and B - they get lost on the desk… And then I lose the personal touch with teachers... and I'm trying really hard to keep it together [staff cohesiveness]...

Primarily due to the time constraints associated with them, staff meetings are generally focused on immediate pressing concerns. They are a means of communicating the most urgent messages to the teaching staff and to give them a glimpse of what lies ahead. For example, teachers will often be given “warnings” of a large upcoming intake on Monday – in other words, asking practitioners to “be prepared to have your classes shaken up” (Emma). On the odd occasions where teachers have raised more serious concerns, such as for example a difficult situation involving a classroom situation, they are asked to see Penny or June privately to discuss the matter. With regards to academic processes, any long-winded inquiry results in teachers being directed to write down their issue in the next quarterly written feedback form on academic processes.
The overall trend when it comes to staff meetings is a culture of avoidance of conflict, and it is symptomatic of the teaching staff when gathered together as a collective. Although covert expressions of resistance to disliked managerial directives or school policies is in abundance at an individual level or in the small cliques that develop away from formal meetings, they are not observable in staff meetings. Potentially it stems from an overall feeling that staff meetings are a “necessary evil” and “just one of those things you have to do” (Chris). Therefore any concerted effort to truly discuss something of great import is viewed as a diversionary measure that threatens to delay the very important lunch break.

With the way teachers’ free time has already been shown to be colonised by the planning of lessons and administrative paperwork, it is clear that another potential forum for true collegial interaction (i.e. a participative staff meeting) is out of reach due to time constraints. To some extent, the time deprivation produced by the system serves as an indirect measure of control. As the inability to truly discuss matters becomes a regular feature of collective processes – grievances stop being aired, and they stay in the ‘heads’ of the people who think them.

In terms of my research and data collection, staff meetings were valuable in that they often brought other aspects of organizational life to my attention. In other words, instead of being valuable in their own right, they were more useful as a means of sensitising me to some of the key events or institutional processes that would be a feature of the work week. As a result, there is a faint footprint of information gleaned from staff meetings in a great many other sections in the thesis, as they helped draw my attention to these issues.

Staff meetings represent an institutional effort to impose order and structure on a very chaotic system. The idea is that with the weekly “bulletin board”, teachers will be prepared to deal with the exigencies thrown up by the system, because they would be anticipating them better,
because of the information they received at the meeting. Staff meetings are experienced as primarily a top-down, one-way information-sharing exercise because the daily exigencies of maintaining the ‘rolling intake’ system imposes time constraints that limit in-depth discussion. Conducting student intake on a weekly basis results in an institutional culture of perpetual crisis management – in which logistical and economic demands are prioritised.

### 6.4.2 Farewell meetings

Farewell ceremonies take place every Friday during the morning break. These meetings have a dual function – to farewell ‘leavers’ and to provide existing students with an organisational ‘bulletin board’. The meeting ends with a designated teacher calling up ‘leavers’, who assemble at the front in a large group and are then ‘farewelled’ by students, teachers and management. For all the participants, farewell meetings are valued in terms of the institution-student relationship – as a ceremony of appreciation and “recognition for having coming to the school” (Sam). For Penny, farewell meetings are an important component of her idea of the “personal touch” and the desire to present students with a public display of a happy management and teaching team who enjoy their workplace. She emphasises the necessity of appearance:

> We need to look like a cohesive team - that's one of the images I want to get across to the students... is that me and the teachers, we’re together, we work together... And we like each other in general, and we like working here. I think that's an important message to give the students...

Penny views farewell meetings as a public reflection of her professional image as director of studies. An illustration of the value she places on these gatherings is evident whenever teachers do not attend farewells or are demonstrably late – she strongly expresses her displeasure.
The significance of farewell meetings for June (ADOS) focuses on students and them being “comfortable”. She much prefers the new shortened system – she feels that the old elaborate farewell ceremony marginalised “shy” and reticent students in favour of the more outgoing “showponies” who relished being given a public forum.

Farewell meetings were primarily changed due to a few instances of negative feedback from students – who felt that they [meetings] were “eating into their paid class time” (Penny). Changes are understood by all participants – in addition Sam, who joined the school under the new system, has no experience of the way things were. He sees farewells as just one of the administrative duties he has to perform as part of his job description.

As a long-serving teacher, Lisa misses the old farewells – in her view, they were more memorable and she feels that the majority of students enjoyed them very much.

It’s not really a farewell when you whip all the students up to say the same formulaic, “Good bye and good luck!”...And they’re gone... You can see them think “Is that it?” Time has become the reason why everything is going the way it is...And when the changes were announced, they [management] said “Oh don’t worry... all the ones [students] that knew the old system will eventually leave and then they’ll know that this is the norm”…

Lisa has vivid memories of specific farewell meetings – what specific students said or did. She remembers the students who made personal mention of her in their speeches and thanked her for her teaching. She also recalls the gifts or flowers she sometimes received from appreciative students. In general, the old format of the farewell meeting had an important rejuvenating role for Lisa as a teacher – she received personal recognition for her efforts, and there was an element of fun and unpredictability in them she valued.
The formulaic ritualism and ‘production line’ quality to farewell meetings is in part a consequence of conducting them on a weekly basis, which in turn is a direct result of the rolling intake system. Whereas the previous ceremonies had an element of spontaneity to them that challenged their ‘sameness’, the new format has removed this potential for unpredictability. For teachers like Lisa, the fact that students were all given the potential opportunity to publicly express their thanks served to re-energise them for the demanding work of teaching. A heartfelt individualistic expression of gratitude can possess an incredible mileage in terms of feeling valued.

One of the clearest means of identifying how denuded farewell ceremonies have become of any originality is in the way the leaving mantra “Goodbye and good luck!” is used by teachers and students alike. It has very quickly become a sarcastic phrase, overused for any mundane exchange of goodbyes between individuals on days other than Friday. Although students do appreciate the fact that there is some form of leaving ceremony, Friday farewells are a potent reminder of the transience of the whole student-school relationship. As a student of mine commented quite matter-of-factly in class one day, “I’m always saying goodbye! I don’t like it.”

6.4.3 The learner feedback system

As with assessment procedures, a variety of connected processes make up the network that is the learner feedback system. The step-by-step complaints process is explained to students on their first Monday at school. Management have an open-door policy - students can schedule a meeting with the DOS at any time during the week. Penny sees students in this capacity on a daily basis - June assists when required.
After the conclusion of the progress tests every month, teachers give students feedback about their progress and test performance, and students have the opportunity to tell the teacher about any classroom matters of concern. On the same day, teachers give students a monthly feedback form to fill in at the end of class. These ask the students to evaluate morning classes, afternoon classes, homestays, and extra-curricular activities offered by the school. These are rated in terms of enjoyment, usefulness, and variety. For school leavers, there is an additional end-of-study feedback form they complete in their last week at the school.

Dealing with learner feedback and complaints, and following up on them, is a big part of the daily routine for both Penny and June, as can be expected within a ‘continuous intake’ system where new students enter the institution on a weekly basis. A recurring theme is that of managing expectations and doing “damage control” (June). There are many facets to a student’s experience of the school and therefore June’s main aim is always to “lessen” problems in a way that will make learner’s overall experience a good one. She acknowledges that “you’ve got to look after the customer pretty much” even when they are “not always right.”

June divides learner problems with teachers in two big categories – one relates to classroom practices while the other concerns teacher personality. For classroom practices, management can create an “action plan to turn the negative into a positive” (Penny) and chart changes over time to see if learners feel that matters have improved. With issues regarding personality, very little can often be done – and whatever is said or done requires extreme tact and sensitivity.
The learner feedback system does not feature much in the data connected to Sam. As he has stated, he has not experienced any “blowback” with regards to learner complaints – therefore it does not worry him. His extensive socialising with learners outside of the classroom functions like a safeguard to a large degree against negative feedback.

For Lisa, the learner feedback system looms large as it has impacted on her in the recent past. In the first instance, a student in her morning class had given critical feedback regarding her lessons. According to Lisa, it was all “because of just one person.” The end result of this episode was meeting with Penny – after which a series of observations of and by the head of teacher development was scheduled. The extent of the ‘solution’ has left a deep impression on Lisa – she feels singled out by it and it has eroded a great deal of her confidence.

The second event was connected to the conversation class Lisa ‘inherited’. I watched a lesson with this group in the last hour of my first classroom observation with Lisa (31st October, 2012). Lisa had been experiencing classroom management difficulties with these learners. There was a small group of European teenage males within the larger group who were very disruptive. This problem preceded Lisa’s teaching of the class – on her first day back she recalls teachers saying things like, “Oh poor you, you’ve got so-and-so in your class.”

However, by the time she started teaching the class, some of the more introverted and studious learners had had enough. A few of them complained about the class to Penny and as there had been no formal complaint before, the historical nature of the issue was not understood but rather unfairly associated with Lisa taking over that class. The conversation class lesson I observed was an explicit attempt by Lisa to address the issue. The lesson
started with a discussion of why students in class had chosen to learn English in New Zealand. During feedback, Lisa emphasised the variety of different reasons learners had for being there. A pyramid discussion followed, in which learners collaborated to come up with a basic set of rules for classroom behaviour. There was a high level of engagement in the task, and in general, most students had a chance to contribute – it appeared that Lisa had laid a good platform.

A few days after the lesson, Lisa decided to inform management about what she had done – to show that she was actively working towards a long-term solution.

If you have bad behaviour or a discipline problem in the classroom... which you don’t very often get in adult classes - you’re not going to fix that overnight, but you work towards ways of fixing it… which is my way of doing things...

I felt it was quite a bad day when I went to say what I’d done to try and help resolve the issue, and was told... well it wasn’t recognised really what I’d done and they [management] were going to do what they were going to do anyway... I felt like what I’d worked towards and it had taken me days to get there…that was pulled out from underneath me...

What had been decided was that another teacher would take over that class, and Lisa was allocated a different class from the following week.

You know, I’ve had no feedback... no feedback whatsoever about what was said to those students... It’s not being mentioned... Ok, I’m not teaching them anymore, but I think I deserve to know what was said...

Lisa makes a number of references to the learner feedback system in her interviews – it is clear that the emotional impact of these two above-mentioned episodes have been great. Although she understands the value of learner feedback and the need to have such a system in place for accreditation purposes – she feels that information gained through it is flawed, due to the way it is collected. As a result, she feels it should not be taken as seriously as she
perceives it to have been. This is especially mentioned with regards to the monthly ‘paper’ feedback forms given out after progress tests. She quite strongly feels that these do not reflect classroom realities or true language learning concerns.

Gabriela has also felt marginalized by the learner feedback system on occasion. With reference to a specific event in an IELTS class she was teaching, she felt that she had been positioned unfavourably by the comments made by a student and that the management response had been disproportionate. Although the end result was actually favourable for her, she remembers it because of the negative emotional impact it had made.

I haven’t had many incidents, but the last one was quite frustrating for me. It was actually when I was teaching my first IELTS course. Of course I didn’t know who the person was, but one student said that I was not giving them enough tips… when it came for them to do a task. They wanted tips for the exam… more tips, more tips. And I told her [Penny] that I was doing my best… it was my first course so I was kind of also learning… but doing my best.

And then someone went and complained, and because of that, you know, Penny called me in and she was like, “Yeah, students are saying that you… or a student is saying that you are not giving enough tips.” I thought okay and then she said, “…and I’ll observe you tomorrow morning.” And I was like, okay… I was really shocked, because I felt that she didn’t trust me - and I felt attacked and discouraged and frustrated. And I was like... the way that I reacted was pretty negative at the beginning. I was like, yeah… I got really upset and then I kind of like said, “Okay if you want to observe me just go for it - if it is what you need to do, you need to do what you need to do.” And that's connected to this idea of feedback. Like one person doesn't like it, and the measures taken were a bit extreme...

Penny did observe Gabriela the next day and wrote a formal report on the lesson, detailing 25 instances when she had given students tips during the lesson. This was then provided as evidence that she had been doing her job. The net result of this incident was that the observation had served to back up Gabriela and defended her pedagogic practices against a student-directed criticism. However, when Gabriela thinks back on it, the emotional resonance is still very strong as an “awful, horrible experience”. To her it felt as if she was
not being trusted, and to be put under sudden public surveillance like that, being observed by “the boss” in front of her students, she felt betrayed.

Sometimes I feel like this game of the feedback can be a little bit tricky for us… because we can be under pressure or you know… feedback… they don't trust us. Because I felt betrayed somehow you know – like, you don’t trust me, you’re going to come and see my lesson just like that? Because one person said that I'm not giving enough tips… So I was quite upset and quite sad, but then it ended up being alright.

To the extent that Gabriela and others give primacy to the teacher-student relationship in their perceptions of their professional selves, means that events such as these make a deep impression on the individual that is not easily forgotten. It is particularly traumatic for teachers who see their job as a calling, as much more of their sense of self-worth is wrapped up in their profession. An additional consequence of an incident such as the one outlined above, is the experience of a moment of clarity akin to an epiphany for the practitioner of the customer-oriented system the private language teacher is a part of, and the accompanying awareness that their work is susceptible to even the whims or capriciousness of the ‘customer’.

Andre: Did you know who the student was?

Gabriela: No, she would never tell me… Sometimes I would like to know who says that - to see… I know we shouldn't take it personally, but it will help me to take it more personally or not - based on who is making that judgement. You know what I mean?

So if I know who it is, maybe I could see… yeah this person is a really hard-working student… for her or for him I would work better. But if it's a student who maybe just wrote it because it was the first thing that came into their head… or they had a personal thing with me that week maybe - the way I would take it would be different. But then when you get feedback like we get it, you feel a little bit in limbo. Because you look at them in the classroom the following day, and then you think, “Who the fuck screwed me over guys?”

In a rolling intake system, learner feedback is elicited and responded to frequently and with speed, as the above examples show. Within the service orientation of a company where
learner’s period of enrolment can be as short as a single week, managerial responses to feedback are necessarily made without perhaps the adequate time needed to fully understand the underlying reasons behind a complaint. This creates added pressures on the teacher and complicates the student-teacher relationship. As also demonstrated, it has the potential to result in disproportionate measures taken by management to resolve an issue. It also results in a constant muddying of the waters where it is really difficult to discern whether learner feedback is indeed based on pedagogic problems or personality clashes.

With education as a product, the customer’s rights are enshrined to a degree that renders the teacher the shadow partner in the relationship. Again, the teacher becomes a ghost in the system. When students discover how sensitively attuned the learner feedback system is to their needs as paying customers, it can easily be abused and directed unfavourably towards the practitioner. The perversity of the system dictates that pragmatic teachers who are less invested in their teaching practices appear to experience less concern and worry regarding learner feedback. For those who see teaching as vocational, the impact of one memorable incident of negative feedback can haunt their practices for a substantial period of time. It is a strange way to reward those who actually care.

To their credit, the academic manager, in the case of Penny above with Gabriela, responded in a way that was meant to protect the reputation of the teacher involved. But observational and interview data reveals that frequently, the extent to which academic teachers ‘back up’ their teachers is heavily dependent on their own individualized assessments of their instructional quality (see Penny’s remarks in chapter four regarding ‘good’ teachers, p. 133). In instances where a teacher is deemed to be less skilful, it is possible for the student complaint to be given more credence – even though evidence might still be lacking.
In Lisa’s case, another student complaint led to a situation where she was observed four times by the head of teacher development – as a management initiative to ‘rectify’ what was seen as an instructional delivery problem. Lisa felt “completely singled out”. Before and since that episode, no other teacher has had the same level of scrutiny or corrective measures taken in response to a student complaint. Although again, like in the case of Gabriela, Lisa in the end valued the constructive feedback provided by the manager observer, it was the initial “lack of trust” she felt was displayed by Penny in response to the student complaint that really affected her emotionally.

Student feedback will certainly always be a contentious and sensitive aspect of teaching, regardless of the educational context. Teachers are evaluated by their learners from the time they step into the classroom up to the time they call an end to a lesson. It is part and parcel of the job. However, in a rolling intake system, learner feedback becomes a reactive control measure that might be responding too quickly to a complex situation which demands careful thought and deliberation before any course of action is taken. Yet, due to the rolling intake system, time is a luxury and decisions have to be made promptly. Although it might be possible to take the correct course of action speedily, the possibility of choosing a sub-optimal course of action also increases.

6.5 Conclusion: working in the eternal present

The intensification of practitioners’ workloads, as exemplified by a steady proliferation of ‘systems’ that replace ad-hoc collegial discourse with paperwork and fixed routines, works to dislodge the remaining elements of notions of “family” from the organizational culture. Alongside the temporary engagements typifying relations between practitioners, which is due to a rolling intake system that perpetually requires the short-term services of a nomadic tribe.
of wandering relief teachers, what results is an erasure of the historical dimensions of the workplace reality. I would argue that one of the most insidious effects of a continuous intake system is its ability, in concert with notions of ‘professional flexibility’, to create a collective form of institutional memory loss. This phenomenon serves to trivialize and marginalize the expressions of loyalty and commitment by long-term employees, while simultaneously placing heavier burdens of social responsibility on their shoulders – it is their job to prop up the dysfunctional system through their allegiance to a cultural value of “going the extra mile”.

Inhabiting the eternal present thus created, it is extraordinarily difficult (but not impossible) for employees to be proactive – as this mode of action relies on a historical chronology of past actions (failed and successful) which serve to inform decision-making about the future. Collective expressions of solidarity or shared purpose are infrequent and social interaction is restricted to small parcels of time in and around lessons, as the working day is dominated by questions of what and how – opportunities for asking why are limited.

There is cause for talking about an organizational culture of ‘perpetual crisis management’. The frequent turnover of staff also means that predominant organizational cultures can quite easily be ‘reset’ by management – resistance by long-term staff tend to be lost in the collective force of passive compliance by shorter-term staff members who treasure a semblance of job security they feel they can achieve by ‘not rocking the boat’.

It is unfortunate that such a close look at institutional procedures and structural aspects of the organization paints a fairly bleak picture of corporate working life in the 21st century. What is important to bear in mind though is that the anti-social behaviour of a dehumanising
system does not seem able to suppress the human spirit. Despite its best efforts, teachers and academic managers, as well as students, carve out communal spaces and rich, meaningful interactions in which to resist its attempts at total control. In the next chapter we will examine the forms this resistance takes.
Thus much more is at issue in educating than the transfer of knowledge, important as that is. The ways in which teaching and learning happen (or fail to) embody moral dimensions, for better or for worse. It appears there is never a moral vacuum in education: at every moment its meaning, values, and consequences for human beings hang in the balance, however microscopic the scale.

- David T. Hansen, The Teacher and the World

7

Hidden Practices: Taking Everyday Pot-Shots at the New Work Order

7.1 Introduction

It is clear at this stage that a rolling intake operating principle, in concert with managerial system ‘innovations’ targeting efficiency, regularly interfere with and impinge on practitioners’ ability to perform their pedagogic duties. To complicate matters, individuals, as well as the organisation as a whole, are beholden to external audit regimes (government and industry-led) that exert further pressures on an already unstable system.

Ironically, if the above-mentioned system and the various macro-contextual forces connected to it actually fully succeeded in their inherently anti-social endeavours to reshape the organisational landscape, I contend that it would implode in on itself. What has frequently been serendipitously uncovered in the research data are glimpses of an alternate reality – which is made up of an underlying web of “hidden practices” (Deerness, 2014) engaged in by teachers, and which serves to keep the organisational system functioning
from day to day. In his study, Deerness used the term “hidden practices” to describe the situations when “…behind the scenes, teachers were able to appropriate particular spaces for their own use, in their own way” (p. 195).

Understandably, these hidden practices have more often made their appearance in the observational data, for a number of reasons. First, admitting to actions one has taken to ‘buck the system’ could be seen by the individual to constitute a professional risk that could potentially affect their job status. Secondly, these forms of resistance or transgressions are mostly unspoken, although they are sometimes tacitly referred to. In addition, if a long-term employee speaks to me, a colleague with a similarly extended length of service, there is a certain acceptance of a common shared knowledge that does not need to be spelled out – in other words, a kind of ‘short-hand’ form of communication eventuates. The participant might mention an event, procedure or action taken in the context, that, because of the knowledge I possess as an insider, I can attach significance to in a way that goes beyond the actual words contained in the interview transcript. This does not mean to say that our interpretations are necessarily completely in alignment, it only means that there is a certain level of common understanding that does not need to be divulged.

Although resistance and transgression within the organisation is enacted in a number of different ways, it can also be argued that, on certain occasions, practitioners ‘buck the system’ surreptitiously to stay true to a pedagogic conviction or a moral duty of care towards their learners, and are not necessarily resisting in a truly activist manner. Simultaneously, they are implementing a hidden or unrecognized skillset, which can act like a social and pedagogic ‘band-aid’, covering the inadequacies of a dysfunctional and suspect system.
Organizational dysfunction is often articulated by academic managers (see Penny’s “…that’s when you get complaints” comment, p. 133) as the consequence of professional inadequacies on the part of employees. This is a stance useful for legitimizing ever-increasing measures designed to control and survey employee performance. Using a business rationale where the system has to be ‘fool-proofed’ against the potentially damaging idiosyncratic actions taken by employees, managers standardise organizational procedures and structures, so that “know-how can be objectified” (Adler & Borys, 1996, p. 67).

I would assert that this premise is based on a simplistic logic that does not hold true in a majority of cases. Instead, as I will attempt to show, it is in fact the opposite. Rather, the proliferation of quantitatively-sourced measures of control and audit found within organizations results in a steadily decreasing number of policy-sanctioned options available to employees to deal with the daily exigencies thrown up by the company system. This is to be expected, as institutional procedures are mostly designed by managers, not teachers. If teachers do not have decision-making capabilities in structural issues, then this asymmetry of power in the organisation leads to a gap between policy and ‘on-the-ground realities’.

In other words, policies and procedures cannot comprehensively cover the eventualities that arise at the ‘chalkface’. Additionally, within an organizational culture of perpetual crisis management, speedy responses have to be made. Therefore, practitioners’ transgressions are needed to keep the system functioning. As Meyer and Rowan (1977) describe it: “…participants engage in informal coordination, that, although formally inappropriate, keeps technical activities running smoothly” (p. 358). Operating within ever-narrowing
spheres of autonomous decision-making power, it becomes necessary for teaching practitioners to engage in low-level, minor acts of resistance to ‘get the job done’. And as Gherardi (1995) has shown in her ethnographic study, there is room for ambiguity - this ‘greasing of the wheels’ of organisational life can occur with an “unstable minimal accord” (p. 24) among employees.

Dysfunction is built into the system itself, and it actually needs workers to use their creative capacities, frequently in contravention of policy or unspoken norms, to address, on a daily basis, the systemic deficiencies that would otherwise cripple operations. Most commonly, the need arises from the fact that ‘rolling intake’ places immense time pressures on employees. To explore this phenomenon, we turn to key aspects of professional practice within the Veupoint context that have already been described in previous chapters. However, our focus now is to uncover the micro-political aspects of these activities or relationships within the institution. In order to do this, we turn to a number of key aspects relating to professional practice in which resistance and transgression are common, namely: assessment practices, classroom practices, the student-teacher relationship, and individual coping mechanisms.

7.2 “He’s a 3.1, but I think she’s a 3.2”: assessment practices

The cluster of assessment processes in the Veupoint context is a constant source of teacher frustration. A clear tension lies between teachers’ personal values of being fair and accurate in their marking, and the realities of a system involving short-term and variable study periods. Another conflict plays out between teachers’ beliefs that learners’ language abilities are not comprehensively captured through scores, and the value placed on them by learners
themselves. In addition, assessment also involves consistent record-keeping procedures and paperwork to satisfy external accountability obligations (i.e. audits periodically conducted by the NZQA and English NZ).

Although morning teachers are responsible for writing progress reports, test results are only one component in a student’s overall marks. Morning teachers have to liaise with a student’s two afternoon teachers (PM1 and Conversation Class) to arrive at an overall mark for the learner’s skills (reading, writing, listening, and speaking). Another score more directly connected to testing only is grammar and vocabulary knowledge. For assigning levels to a student’s abilities, there are level descriptors that should be consulted. Within each level, there is a sliding scale of 3 bands used.

To expand on this point, each General English class is assigned a number according to levels of English proficiency. At Veupoint this looks as follows:

1 Beginner; 2 Elementary; 3 Pre-intermediate; 4 Low Intermediate; 5 Intermediate; 6 Upper Intermediate; 7 Advanced; 8 Proficiency.

On their first day at Veupoint, students take a placement test which assesses grammar awareness, as well as reading and writing skills; and also participate in a short interview which assesses their listening and speaking skills. The results of these determine their placement in a class according to the levels listed above. However, as demonstrated in previous chapters, the placement of students is also influenced by non-testing variables (e.g. availability of places, instructors teaching at that level, cultural mix and so on).
For progress reports, teachers utilise a list of descriptors that outline the general language proficiency in the 4 skills (reading, listening, speaking, and writing) and grammar awareness. For each of the class levels outlined above (1 through 8) there is a suitable descriptor in the five language proficiency areas. What follows are a few examples:

Can express his/her opinion on general topics, exchange and request information as necessary and participate in simple conversations with correction and guidance.
(Speaking skill descriptor for Pre-Intermediate; Level 3)

Is able to understand a range of general and some specialised texts extracting main ideas, details and examples. Can comprehend most of what is said around him/her and follow the meaning of spontaneous conversations.
(Listening skill descriptor for Upper-Intermediate; Level 6)

Can recognise basic words, set phrases and simple messages in texts on familiar topics.
(Reading skill descriptor for Beginner; Level 1)

Can produce a fluid text linked reasonably clearly with adherence to format and layout. Can write on a range of familiar topics with reasonable accuracy.
(Writing skill descriptor for Intermediate; Level 5)

Can use basic past, present and future verb forms and is becoming more familiar with irregular verbs, questions and negatives. Can produce basic structures to express ability, daily routines and some future plans. Errors of usage are frequent.
(Grammar awareness descriptor for Elementary; Level 2)

So, if I am a teacher with a level 6 class, it is assumed that the majority of learners in that class should be ‘matchable’ to at least some of the descriptors for that level. However, mixed levels are an ever-present feature in a rolling intake system – particularly if one considers all the variables that influence decisions on class placement. Therefore, as a level 6 teacher I can,
for the purposes of assessment, assign a different level descriptor (e.g. other than 6; such as 5 or 7) for a particular aspect of the student’s language ability, say a level 5 descriptor for their writing skills for argument’s sake – if warranted.

A further refinement within each language skill or grammar awareness level is the sliding scale of 3 bands. This is essentially a second number that is added to the determined level for each language skill of the learner. Staying with the example of a level 6 teacher, I use the 3-band system to more accurately ‘place’ where inside the level 6 continuum I deem the learner to be. The descriptors for the three bands are:

1 = starting level / low for level and has a basic understanding of language systems/skills at this level to date

2 = partially completed level / average for level and has a good understanding of language systems / skills at this level to date

3 = completing level / high for level and has understood all/almost all language systems/skills to date

By way of example, if I had to write a progress report for one of my level 6 students and I evaluated their listening skills as average for the level, they would be assigned the level 6 descriptor and have the band 2 affixed to it – they would receive a 6.2. If another student in the same class was adjudged to have difficulty in listening for the level and that they were not ‘up to level’, they could be assigned the descriptor for level 5. If I thought that at the Intermediate level, their listening skills would qualify as high, they would receive the band 3 added to the level – as in they would receive a 5.3. Of course, these levels would only be added to the report once I had conferred with the student’s afternoon teachers too and they had agreed with my assessment.
For every skill, an overall level descriptor is arrived at in this fashion and noted down on the report. In addition, the grades from the progress test are also noted down. For every test score or percentage there is a conversion chart that places the student’s marks (within a range of percentage) as equivalent to a specific level/band assignment. For example, if a level 6 student got 89% for their grammar test, the conversion chart indicates that their level/band is 6.3. A score of 91% or above would push their level/band to the next level, and they would receive a 7.1. Overall descriptor/band scores are separate from the test results, and so these can be different from each other.

A number of hidden practices have inevitably emerged in teachers’ approaches regarding assessment, as they attempt to cope with continuous student turnover and tacit institutional norms. What emerges among teaching participants is a pragmatic approach that treats testing and grading mostly as a motivational tool for students, rather than an accurate assessment of their language abilities. I would argue that this is a healthy form of ‘disrespect’ – the rolling intake system renders assessment farcical to some degree. As has already been pointed out in the fifth chapter, the score a learner attains in a test for which they have only been exposed to 20% of the content, for example, is not going to be a very good indication of their true ability or their retention of learned content.

However, there is a tension between actual assessment practices and what teachers believe assessment should be. Sam explains his understanding of the ‘realities’ of the system in this way:

The one thing I don't really like is the unwritten policy in the school that the student has to improve in at least one section for every round of reports... And so sometimes, you get kind of painted into a corner where I don't really think this student deserves to go up in this, but they haven't gone up in this skill for three report cards... They've got nothing else you can put them up in, because they've just gone up in the other sections.
So I have to give them a bump in this... And the reverse as well, where you might have a student who does deserve to go up another level, or a grade point [.1,.2,.3] - but you can't because you want to leave room for the next teacher to have a bit of wiggle room to decide where they're going to put them...

So it's this idea that you have to show constant progress through the reporting that kind of limits you in how brutally honest you can be with the reporting. But again, I understand it, because the students want to see those numbers going up - it's important for them to stay motivated... So it's not so much an assessment tool, as it is a motivational tool.

Lisa’s frustrations with assessment revolve around time. Firstly she believes that the spacing between tests is not long enough to show learner progress in any convincing fashion - their frequency also adds to her own “stress levels” due to the time required for marking and filling out progress reports. Another issue regarding time is that of teacher liaison about students’ progress. Lisa feels that with increased workloads and shorter break times, teachers tend to consult each other less when they assess learners. The end result is that she does not always consult the afternoon teachers or the descriptors every time she makes her assessment decisions. She also finds that she tends to rely on the general indicators of student levels relating to their placement testing – particularly with students who are new and who she has not spent a significant period of time with yet.

All the teaching participants refer to primarily using their “instincts” when assigning levels to learner skills, and acknowledge that consulting the “descriptors” when making their choices happens rarely. Lisa and Sam justify and claim legitimacy for relying on their own interpretations of students’ levels by citing their experience as well as evidence that they’re in line with management’s criteria for assessment:

I think after many years too, you do get a kind of feel for the levels... I know when I do exam classes, and I mark with Penny, we’re pretty close in our assessments... especially writings... I think that’s just from experience, you know... you have got the descriptors in your brain... (Lisa)
The longer you teach, you get a better feel for it so... I know I should be looking at the descriptors constantly whenever I do like my marking... but a lot of it's just like... Ah ok, I think this guy, he's a mid-level intermediate student, so I'll give him a 5.2... I find them generally fairly accurate... When we did the full staff moderating of a speaking test... all the teachers had to come up with a mark... and then they had June, Ava and Penny doing their own marks and then doing the moderated mark... and I was essentially bang on... I think I was half a point different, than their final moderated mark... So yeah, I've come to trust my instincts for that kind of thing... I'm also perfectly happy to change my mark because I just don't care about it that much... (Sam)

According to June, many teachers, in particular less experienced ones, “use the test results too much to grade students”. That may certainly be the case, but one has to wonder how else new entrants into the Veupoint system are supposed to magically and deftly employ what is quite an elaborate and sophisticated assessment system that requires a substantial amount of time to understand and ‘get a feel’ for. This is even more problematic when one considers the fact that new teachers are constantly being injected into the teaching environment. The additional argument here is that an assessment system, such as the one employed by Veupoint, would work and be highly effective if learners were enrolled for fixed blocks of time – giving each teacher, with one particular group of students, the time to progressively chart their progress.

Both June and Penny promote continual assessment practices in the classroom accompanied by regular consultation of descriptors, in an effort to mitigate the instabilities created by running such an assessment program within a rolling intake environment. Although continual assessment is clearly a desirable pedagogic practice in any educational context, it is also true that in a rolling intake system this is a far from straightforward enterprise. To many teachers it almost seems futile, especially with regards to learners who only study at Veupoint for a very short time. Especially for new teachers, determining a student’s language abilities within a week of instruction is a remarkably challenging task. When asked if she does continual assessment, Gabriela has this to say:
Andre: Do you find yourself using them [weekly assessment sheets attached to registers]?

Gabriela: No, I don’t. I started using them when they first came out, but I kind of… I have my… I wouldn’t say I have my own system, but I do have a good memory and I trust my memory maybe more than I should. But I do trust my memory, and I don’t need that - I don’t feel a need. I do write their names down, and I kind of keep track of what they do - but not following that, not particularly that chart.”

Emma admits that she also does not use the continuous assessment sheets provided with teachers’ registers. The primary reason for her is the sense of helplessness associated with tracking students with variable start and finish times – in other words, every week the configuration of her class changes:

I think if you wanted to be real, you need some form of responsibility…you’ve got X number of students in your class… the trouble is they change all the time so I think, “I’ll start with my sheet,”… and I’ve got the names all written down then you’ll be like “Ah, they’ve left this week” ….there’s no real easy way of keeping tabs on students…

Although Ava acknowledges the problematic nature of assessing learners within a rolling intake system, she also feels that continuous assessment by teachers is a practitioner-student contract in a way – which extends beyond the contextual constraints or difficulties of a particular system. She also questions the validity of teachers using their “instincts” or “memories”:

That’s the big word I’ve been pounding on, evidence, evidence, evidence…not memory. But it’s got to be a teacher’s responsibility… for the good of teaching, for the good of learning… It shouldn’t be a policy that you have to do this bit of continuous assessment on this piece of paper – it needs to come from the teacher, from a passion for learning and for properly assessing the student…

However, despite Ava’s efforts in this regard, a school system with highly variable and constant student turnover constrains teachers, particular new inductees, in doing adequate or daily classroom assessment. June and Penny observe that teachers sometimes base their
assessment of learners on personality or attitude rather than actual performance. For the above reasons and others, June plays a ‘gatekeeper’ role for progress reports and leaving reports – she religiously follows up ‘questionable’ grades or overall marks, and queries teachers’ decisions.

Although understandable, playing ‘gatekeeper’ is also a questionable practice. To what extent can June query a certain grade or level/band without being a teacher of that student? It would be hard to imagine that her interactions with the learner, in her capacity as academic manager, would be more extensive than the learner’s teacher themselves. How is she deciding what grades need to be questioned? Is she basing it on a 5-minute interview she might have had with the aforementioned learner on the Monday during placement interviews? Could she be referencing a 10-minute conversation she had with the learner regarding a personal problem or classroom problem? The point being made is that the ‘gatekeeper’ function, although perhaps necessary in a teaching environment with such a large proportion of practitioners not necessarily comfortable with assessment systems – does little more than lend a veneer of respectability to a doomed enterprise. In many respects, like oil and water, comprehensive assessment of learners and a rolling intake system do not mix.

A private language school is between a rock and a hard place when it comes to assessment. Customers expect it and so do auditing bodies. To be accountable to various internal and external stakeholders, private language schools have to install assessment systems that purport to show learner progress in a way that is systematic and evidence-based. Teachers have to be held to account when it comes to their evaluations of learners’ language abilities. Unfortunately, this is an incredibly challenging task within an organisational context that is governed by a rolling intake system.
During progress test week, teachers administer the tests on the Monday morning. By Wednesday afternoon, they will have needed to mark all the tests, record the scores, liaise with colleagues to collectively assess each learner as to their overall language skill levels, and write a progress report for each of their students – in and around class contact hours. Without ‘gaming the system’ and treating the assessment procedures with a certain level of ‘disrespect’, it is questionable whether those reports would get done in the given amount of time. This is doubly true for practitioners who are new or unfamiliar with the system. By engaging in the ‘hidden’ shortcuts that they do, teachers deal with the time pressures they are under and ‘get the job done’. Without this ‘bucking of the system’, things would not function.

For teachers with a very short-term tenure at Veupoint, it is easy to ‘play the assessment game’. They quickly tend to find a workable method that allows them to some degree to fulfil their obligations. For longer-term teachers, who might end up also ‘cutting corners’, it is a lot more agonising, as they are constantly experiencing conflicting emotions in a system that constrains them in their ability to thoroughly assess the learner. It is much more a case of a system not allowing them to utilise their expertise in a meaningful way, than it is a case of them shirking their responsibilities.

In a time-poor environment such as Veupoint’s the result is that teachers make a trade-off. They perform a kind of a tactical completion of assessment requirements to a satisfactory level, and allocate more of their mental and energy resources to the act of teaching itself – a dimension in which they have a higher level of autonomy.

In the formal assessment of learners, we can observe practitioner resistance in the form of a tactical withdrawal of their time and resources from the testing system. Instead of becoming
overwhelmed with the impossibility of providing thorough and comprehensive assessments of every learner within a rolling intake system, they choose to use their “instincts” for assessment, and allocate the bulk of their efforts to other dimensions of their teaching – in the relationships with their students, the extra support they provide to learners with particular difficulties, and the planning of their lessons. Perhaps this is one of the few pedagogically sensible things to do, given the situation.

7.3 “When I’m in the classroom, I can be myself”: classroom practices

To all the teaching participants, the classroom to some extent represents a “haven cut off from all the admin crap” (Chris). When asked what would constitute a bad day, Gabriela fingers other dimensions of the teaching environment, but quite pointedly excludes the classroom:

I mean when it comes to teaching and being in the classroom I love that… maybe if there’s something that makes me unhappy, it wouldn’t be in the classroom itself. It’d be other things happening outside of the classroom - working with other people; we have to deal with bureaucracy and paperwork, and maybe those things would make me more upset than teaching.

Even though teachers’ lived realities have been colonised with increasing amounts of paperwork and administrative duties, the five contact hours in the classroom, certainly stressful and demanding in their own way, also do provide respite from all the other environmental factors that impact on a teacher’s time once they leave its four walls. The reality is that, apart from formal observations and other infrequent intrusions, the classroom is a teacher’s sacred space which they share with learners – the relationship with whom figures so centrally in how they perceive themselves professionally.
The principal aim of classroom observations in this study was markedly different from a great many other research projects focusing on this locale. To me, it was an attempt to observe my participants in all the various arenas of their occupational life, to get a more rounded understanding of their role performances within the educational environment – and perhaps, if possible, to see how they presented themselves differently here, in comparison with the staffroom, for example.

What emerged most clearly was a profound realization of the way teachers’ pedagogic practices had developed in highly idiosyncratic and differentiated ways from each other – consisting of a great mixture of ingredients; in different amounts; and cooked together in a variety of ways. Smatterings of past learning and teaching histories, admired methods cited from previous mentors and role models, and fragmented elements of teaching theory (old and new) combined together to present the learner with an instructional product that persistently defied the attempts by external forces to mould pedagogic practice into a specific, acceptable shape that could be measured, quantified and cut into equal-sized blocks.

This rich amalgam of practices observed resembles the findings of Breen, Hird, Milton, Oliver, and Thwaite (2001) in their landmark study, in which they investigated connections between the instructional practices of and principles espoused by language teachers. Individual teachers were found to have a very unique configuration of teaching principles which were enacted variably through distinct collections of routinized actions. It was discovered that a number of clearly-defined practices could be undergirded by one general principle, and in reverse, it was also found that one specific practice could be linked to a number of different principles. Collectively speaking, the authors report that:
“…beneath individual diversity in action in the classroom and the personal dispositions that guide it, there appears to be a collective pedagogy wherein a widely adopted classroom practice is… an expression of a specific and largely distinctive set of principles” (Breen et al., 2001, p. 496).

To pursue the earlier cooking metaphor a little bit further, each instructional dish (i.e. lesson) cooked by my participants had its own flavour. Some dishes were highly nutritional, others required perhaps just a little bit of extra salt. Others I observed involved the whole group taking part in the cooking, whereas with a few, perhaps it was clear to see there was a head chef. A number of these dishes I observed seemed to contain a secret ingredient that was not on any normal menu – and yet learners seemed to respond to and enjoy the meal, while at the same time appearing to acquire the target language presented. What seemed to be the key was the fact that learners were receiving a varied diet.

What was humbling at the same time was the realization that my research project had enabled me, thanks to the willingness of my participants, to get a privileged look at the teaching worlds of colleagues for far longer as well as more frequently than I could ever have had in any other capacity – particularly in terms of being employed by the same organisation. It was telling that I had needed to cut myself off from the organisation and return in a research capacity to be able to do this. I was fortunate also to have been a part of the community for as long as I had that my presence was perhaps less obtrusive than it could have been, had I not been known in a teaching capacity to my colleagues as well as to the learners in the room.

It was also in the classroom where it became clear that the act of teaching itself was quite regularly a practitioner’s biggest act of defiance against a system that kept threatening to create a soul-crushing uniformity of practice in the name of standards and accountability.
measures. It was also here where mainstream published ESL material was treated with the scorn it sometimes deserves. The classroom was where the teacher and learners created a collective space of what was to some extent impermeable to outside meddling. This collective space was certainly not without its problems, but it also did not have a scarcity of pleasures and tangible learning outcomes. At times, good learning dynamics appeared to resemble a space where both the teacher and their learners could perpetrate small transgressions against external expectations and mandates – small but meaningful expressions of individuality that resisted conformity and uniformity, and stimulated learning.

So, who are my participants when they are in the classroom? For Sam, metaphor is also a way to try and articulate how he thinks about teaching and the classroom, as well as a way to resist the simplistic “CELTA visions of a functioning classroom” as he calls them. What follows is an excerpt from his second interview (which took place after I had already done a classroom observation with him):

Andre: When you think about classes, how do you think about them?

Sam: I look at a class as like a, free-flowing sort of... where you've got a general topic that we need to discuss, we've got certain grammar points that I'd like to hit... I think of it kind of like a river delta... (laughs). There's the, I could take the straight path, straight down here, and that's what it seems a lot of teachers do - is they're looking for the quickest way to the ocean.

Whereas, my sort of class, I start here but I realise there's all these different branches I can go down, and occasionally get through all these big rocks of specific grammar in the way... to get to the rapid parts, of... Ok we're going to do the, the nuts and bolts grammar stuff now, but the way that we get to that point, you could follow any one of numerous streams. So the way I plan a lesson, or not plan a lesson, is I look at what are the topics of the day, what are some of the... what's the grammar I need to hit, what are the items of vocab I'm meant to include... But what's the theme? I understand that, that's all my plan is, I'm done in 5 minutes. Look at the book, look at the 2, 3 pages I'm going to do, ah ok, I guess this might take about an hour to do, maybe not I don't know - we'll come up with something. ... and then it's a lot of 'improv' when I'm up there...
Cause I find that if you try to plan before lessons… generally your estimation skills of how long something's going to take is always out of whack ... and of course with more experience that'll get more and more accurate, but... the problem is that each class is different… the individual personalities, the dynamic of the class can change day to day. So what yesterday could have taken me 10 minutes to do, today is going to take me 30 minutes to do. How do you plan for that? You don't, you just think of what, what's the key points of the lesson, the pages in the book I’ve been asked to teach - what are they trying to get across to the students… how can I do that?

The minimal planning time that Sam spends on his lessons belies the full attention his students receive and the immersive atmosphere he often succeeds in creating, as they frequently are ‘pulled into’ the collective construction of a lesson that emerges with the passing of class time, and which did not exist in any predetermined form on a piece of paper. On another level, and as he frequently reiterates, this small amount of time spent on planning is also a direct result of not being paid for it. In some ways, he resists ‘oversharing’ his own free time and mental resources if it is not going to be fairly remunerated.

Chris appropriates the physical space of his classroom through bursts of artistic expression. Every day, he will create an intriguing visual on the board next to the day’s date, which is written in a different type of script every day. He also exhibits the philosophy of a renegade street artist at times by ‘defacing’ the classroom with little hidden pictures and drawings done on surfaces that are meant to be kept image free. These are always done with non-permanent ink. A memorable example of his subversive art is a picture he drew on a classroom window of a man trying to look through the blinds and into the classroom.

The spirit of irreverence that is hopefully communicated above spills over into his teaching. Chris spends an inordinate amount of time playing with ideas to try out in the classroom. A notable example was in one of the lessons of his I observed in an afternoon class. The topic for the week was media and news and he was teaching a class of teenagers at this stage. The
group of teenagers were made up of learners from Brazil, Tahiti and Japan, and ranged in age from 14-17 years of age. The basic lesson plan involved getting learners to research a specific current news event in the computer lab, and to each write a newspaper report of their own – culled from a variety of news sources that reported it. Although a fairly recognizable premise, the way it was delivered and set up reflects his penchant for giving students “a lesson with a twist”.

As a lead-in, Chris wrote the sentence: “Teenagers do not know what is going on in the world” on the whiteboard. This was met with the expected loud expressions of exaggerated outrage, which he then swiftly redirected by challenging his students to prove him wrong. He then introduced the idea of a debate, and had them in groups brainstorming refutations of his statement. He then conducted a mini-debate (10-15 min.) in which he gave humorous examples in support of his statement and then allowed the different groups to try and convince him otherwise. He then made a show of pretending that he was not convinced by their arguments and let them know that the only way they could change his mind was by compiling a class newspaper with submissions about current news events from their respective countries. An editor for the project was appointed and it was his job to do the compiling as articles started being sent to him by e-mail. Spread out over two days, the lesson was a very productive exercise – which resulted in a class newspaper, of which every member received a copy.

For Lisa, any lesson is primarily about fluidity, about responding to the unexpected moments created by the interactions between learners when presented with a specific task, problem or item of language. A powerful example of this personally-held belief was demonstrated in a remarkably kinaesthetically-oriented lesson I observed her teach in the afternoon class to a
group of upper intermediate students. It was in some respects a functional language lesson for problem-solving expressions, which involved the students constructing a ‘bridge’ made from common household materials (e.g. paper, sellotape, pieces of cardboard etc.) The lesson then changed tack once the ‘bridges’ had been constructed, as each group were then given additional raw materials and they now had to instruct another group in how to build the ‘bridge’ they had already created.

The philosophical stance outlined above is possibly linked to why she feels so “hemmed in” by the additional time constraints imposed by every new systemic tightening of the teaching schedule – which she is fiercely resistant to. She feels as if a rather large paradigm shift as occurred in terms of education in general – a change that is not only connected to the contexts of private language schools. In her own words:

So in the class... if you're going to try and mould a lesson that's there to fit everybody and, stays within a specific boundary, and you can't go outside of that... to me that's not education... that's spoon feeding... and I never respond personally to that myself... and I don't think it works... you can learn some things that way - like we had to learn our times table when we had the imperial system, you know... I always tell students to read, rather than spending hours swotting up on grammar...

What is education? ... To me the idea of education is that you widen your thinking... you stretch your thinking... or listen to what other people have to say and see if that applies to you or your way of viewing the world... it's not a fixed method... I think in the universities today and schools... the aim is to pass exams and to get a degree and get a job... so you slot in to the system - the modern system...

I don't think education for education's sake really exists anymore, and maybe, how I would like my classroom to be - would be education for education's sake - where you... ok you might start with something, but it gets batted around, and there may not be a resolution, we all seem to have this resolution fixation now...

I’m not really resolution-focused… because resolution doesn't necessarily come to you here [in the classroom]... it could come days later or even not at all... should we always have a solution to a problem, or should we have a solution to a question... can’t it still be an open question?... That's what I find hard about ‘methods’ teaching... because you always seem… you've got to have a resolution at the end of the method...
And if you apply that to learning, you know... why do we have to have resolution... like passing an exam I suppose is a kind of resolution... it sort of neatly folds up, “Ok you've got that”... and the same with our classes, you know... “You've got to have a little warmer... you do the lesson and then, “Oh, ok... what did we learn?”... People don't always respond like that - “I learned that...” They may actually have a ‘eureka’ moment weeks later... a bit like the discussions we’ve had… Somebody asks you a question you haven't thought about, and you need more time... you need, you need to go away and think about it, and that's part of the education... what you're actually doing in the classroom is not always... you're not going to see it... you may not even see it that year... you may not see it till 10 years later...

The theme that runs through participant accounts when it comes to the classroom is a fierce resistance to being pigeon-holed. The act of teaching itself is an act of subversion, and here inside the four walls of the classroom, for the majority of the time, teachers can be themselves and avoid the myopic gaze of the system and its unjust demands. It is also here where teachers take ownership. To a large degree, teachers are locked out of curricular design and development by academic managers who are not willing or cannot justify to the business department paying them for other professional activities in the system other than being in the classroom. Teachers are also, for the most part locked out of having a financial stake or share in the organisations they work for. By contrast, members of the marketing team receive bonuses for landing additional agents or groups of students for the school.

What goes unrecognized is the financial value created by teachers who prompt learners to extend their study period at a school because of their learning and classroom experiences – the system is blind to this form of value generation.

And yet, the entire system depends on the work teachers do in the classroom – it is the basic reason why the private language school exists. And so the autonomy within the classroom is a double-edged sword. As a liberating space, it provides a haven for self-expression and the seeds for the growth of a learning community. At the same time, if teacher autonomy is limited to the classroom, this space also becomes a prison, from which it is hard to escape.
Having their decision-making power confined to the classroom, teachers are prevented from fully participating in an educational enterprise, or to have opportunities for diversifying their interests, without giving up the true thing they might, if it is their vocation, love – teaching itself.

7.4 “When I’m not in the classroom, just see me as a friend”: student-teacher relationships

A teacher’s relationship with their students within the environs of the school is governed by a great number of official policies, unspoken norms and personal values. This set of articulated and tacit codes of conduct also extend unequally into relations outside of school. What emerges from the research data is the sense of a very complex relationship that defies easy explanation.

A common feature of all participant accounts however, is a core value of being a “support system” (Sam) for learners who are often studying far away from their family and friends. This appears to be very similar to the notion of the ESL teacher as a “social worker” (Farrell, 2011). In this capacity, teachers are frequently confronted by situations inside and outside of the classroom where they are performing a role that not necessarily oversteps teacher-student boundaries (although it could) but certainly goes above and beyond their job descriptions. For the majority of participants, although their commitment to its premises vary, in intensity and the lengths they are willing to go to in its service, these situations entail a ‘grey area’ in which the personal and the professional are inextricably intertwined. Sam expresses it thus:

And, I think, a big part of being a teacher in a situation like this [private language teaching], is being that comfort zone, being the person they can come and talk to if they have a problem that is not related to English… Like, one of my students is embroiled in this love triangle with some other students... and, while I like to hear the
gossip, it's always fun… what is more important is, she needs someone to talk to…
parents are not an option because they can't really talk about that. Plus, she doesn't
really know anyone in this country all that well, other than the people involved in this
situation… So she needs someone she can rely on, to give objective, detached sort of
advice, but still supportive.

You're not there to baby these kids, you're there for a specific task. I’m going to help
you learn English… But at the same time I want you to know, that's not all I’m here
for, if you need anything else, that's what I’m here for… It's not quite being a friend,
but being friendly… if you see what I mean with that distinction.

As a young, single and itinerant English teacher, Sam is favourably positioned and willing to
spend the extra time needed to perform this role of counsellor and support system. In his
early thirties, he is also closer in age to the majority of his learners, who are university
students. Relationally speaking, learners can quite easily identify with and relate to him
socially. In one way, Sam also knows that, on a more pragmatic level, this role performance
aids him in the classroom. It is a way of acquiring social and symbolic capital that comes in
useful in the classroom when he needs to get learners on board with a pedagogic task.

In a rolling intake system, teachers who are able to establish strong affective bonds with their
learners rapidly have a great advantage. Although academic managers make an effort to
emphasize publicly that “teaching here is not a popularity contest” (June), many participants
reflect a viewpoint that to some degree they think it actually is, especially for learners who are
enrolled for a short time period. These learners do not often stay in the system long enough to
appreciate the pedagogic efforts of their teachers – instead their perceptions are shaped by the
immediate ‘experience’ of the school – for example, making friends, having a satisfying
homestay experience, and being taught by “funny”, “cool” and “sexy” teachers (these words
frequently appear on learner feedback forms).
In the same way that certain teachers are perceived favourably because of non-pedagogic considerations, other teachers might to some degree feel disadvantaged because of who they are. Older teachers might have to make quite a lot of effort to overcome unfair judgements stemming from stereotypical notions associated with their age. Likewise, extra social engagements with learners might be difficult to commit to for teachers with families or other relational obligations that take up their free time outside of the classroom. However, it is also a distinguishing feature that, to whatever extent they can, the participants make time for social engagements with learners outside of the school.

Emma, as an older teacher, expresses a desire for having the connection with learners that some younger teachers seem to be able to foster so easily. However, she also does not let it stop her from creating opportunities for socialising with her learners outside of class – and she does thoroughly enjoy these interactions:

Like with [non-participant teacher] for instance, obviously she's [nationality] origin.... and there's lots of [nationality] students. She's young, the same age as them... so she's going to always have some form of affiliation with the people that are her age and the fact that she can speak [language] and get to know them more intimately… In a way it's quite frustrating that they can say things to her in their language and she knows this information that you don't necessarily know... Because I'm older, I know they're not going to necessarily want to come out with me...I don't want to go to [popular student bar] or wherever... but I quite often, like with the older students, like [student name] and [student name], we'll go for cups of tea or coffee after work, because I like talking to them, I like finding out about people…

Gabriela challenges the notions about the teacher-student relationship that others hold by freely admitting that she sees some learners as true friends. As demonstrated in an earlier chapter, she has found herself gravitating more to students, after a few unfavourable experiences relating to colleagues. She actively resists commonly-held notions that there should be a distinction and a ‘line’ drawn in the sand to maintain some semblance of a professional distance. A key example of this stance is found in the fact that on a weekly basis
she organises a soccer game get-together with Veupoint students. Again, although her socialising activities are to her ‘nourishing’, it is also true from a pragmatic point of view that it creates a high level of cultural cachet back at the workplace for her, a benefit that teachers who do not make this investment do not have access to. She explains her position thus:

Sometimes I feel teachers are missing a great opportunity for thinking that [maintaining a professional distance from students]. If I was teaching 10-year-old kids okay, that would be one thing, but I'm teaching people who are my age… they could be my mates, and some of them are my mates. And I'm not shy to say it – and I know people judge me because of that, and I'm okay with it.

And I’ve also… over time I’ve learned that I don't care if I'm being judged or not. Sometimes teachers go, “I wouldn't give my phone number to students”. And you know other people go like, “Yeah no, I wouldn’t, of course not.” And then I go like, “Yeah I give it to them, so what?” It’s okay, no-one will die. I'm not breaking any rules.

Most of the extra-curricular activities that teachers engage in with students are not necessarily common knowledge or explicitly talked about at school – to some extent the more socially active teachers intentionally avoid discussing it – sometimes out of a fear of being judged by their peers, but also because it could be misinterpreted as ‘currying favour’ with students. It does not pay to be cynical about teacher’s efforts to connect with their students outside of school, and there certainly are, within my participants’ accounts, numerous examples of a genuine duty of care for the wellbeing of their learners and a desire to connect more meaningfully with them than the classroom situation allows for.

Within a short-term teacher-student relationship, extra-curricular social contact can be like the first six months of a relationship – strong affective bonds are established quickly and during a period when everything is still fresh and new for the learner, and they also need support to deal with what is perhaps acute cultural shock – you as a ‘teacher’ and a ‘friend’ insinuate yourself into large proportion of their overseas life and experience – far beyond the classroom.
This could be a good thing and a bad thing. Positively speaking, you could be the “support system” that the learner needs at that time. On the negative side, CELTA training does not prepare one for responsible psychological care – some situations might call for that.

What are the ethical dimensions of this activity? To what degree do students feel comfortable in sharing with you information regarding their perceptions of the school and your peers? These are difficult questions to convincingly answer. Certainly it necessitates teachers actively taking a well-communicated stance in their extra-curricular interactions with students when it comes to ‘thorny’ issues such as this. In Gabriela’s case, she believes that she has a moral code of conduct in this regard:

But I think it's good, and I have spoken with other teachers. There are so many different opinions about it… Like giving your free time to students, “What are you thinking?” or other teachers will be like, “But if I hang out with students, and if students see me in a situation that is not at school - then when I see them in the classroom, I can't, I can't draw the line… I don't know where the limits are.” In my case, I can draw them really, really well for some reason. That isn't something that bothers me at all…

Sometimes I feel that… when we give them that support, sometimes students feel that they can tell us many things about how they feel. For example, how they feel about certain teachers or how they feel about school life. And I always try to stay out of it. When they want to criticise somebody, I don't like that because I don't feel it would be professional. I'm quite close to my students… not all of them, but I have some students who have become my friends. But I would never talk to them about other teachers or how they feel about them.

Although teacher-student interactions outside of the classroom were not observable, its regular appearance in participant interviews suggests it to be a significant aspect of private language teacher’s lives – whether they engage in it regularly themselves or not, as well as the extent to which they engage in it. Also, within a rolling intake system, it appears to be a significant way in which teachers can favourably manage student perceptions of them, and it is a hidden practice in terms of the extent to which it is invisible in discussions or collegial
interactions. Certainly teachers as a collective or a group might socially meet with students outside of school, but the focus of this discussion has been more about instances of individual teachers engaging with learners in a way that they intentionally avoid broadcasting at school.

What the discussion so far accentuates is that little of what teachers do and how they interact with their learners does not possess a moral dimension. The question then needs to be asked what the psychological toll is for teachers who feel that they work in a system that confronts them with a commercial ethic that might be contradictory to their notion of taking care of the teacher-student relationship. This business rationale also discriminates against certain teachers by encouraging a short-termism in student perceptions that focuses on non-pedagogic aspects of their Veupoint experience.

7.5 Individual counter-balancing mechanisms

Teachers are under increasing pressure to find ways of coping with the workloads they now experience, as well as the extra number of administrative procedures they need to complete paperwork for. Two categories of hidden practices that have emerged from the data are strategies that are adopted by individuals, and tactics that are engaged in collectively.

At an individual level, Emma made the choice not to teach the Conversation classes, which run for the last hour of the working day. She feels that only preparing for two different groups of learners have alleviated a lot of the pressures she was experiencing. Instead, she now has freed up an extra hour of her time every day which she can dedicate to lesson planning. For Emma, the reality is that she can afford this arrangement. Her partner also works and his earnings are significant. Therefore she does not need the income that the extra hour represents.
For the other participants, this option is not really available. Chris has a family to take care of, and his wife is also a teacher. Their combined incomes only barely manage to cover their expenses. For Gabriela, having to pay for her Masters and also taking time off to complete assignments makes a similar decision untenable. Teachers often comment on the professionalism and visual attractiveness of Emma’s customised worksheets and the extra tasks she designs. She does enjoy doing this, but what she also freely admits is that she actually ropes in her children to help her locate and find resources. This again is a means of her dealing with time pressure, but simultaneously not sacrificing her desire to create new content.

Lisa has started to dedicate more of her free time to lesson planning. When visiting her on a Sunday to conduct my second interview, I found her seated on her living room floor, busy planning her weekly sequence of lessons. When I asked her for how long she had been doing this, she said that she had felt it necessary to begin doing it ever since the shortened break times had come into effect. She also has started doing work during lunch breaks in an effort to keep up with planning and paperwork. For Lisa, time poverty is the most pressing issue when it comes to her teaching practices:

I suppose from when I get up I’m thinking about work... during the week, and weekends now, which I didn’t use to do so much. A lot of my processing occurs... I get all my best ideas at home... I’m just a person that works better in a quieter environment where there’s not too much noise... and I find the teacher’s room gets a bit noisy sometimes... though a little bit less now because we haven’t got time... (laughs)... I’ve probably got formed in my head where I’m going in the day... I mean I’ve probably thought about it the week before too...

I don’t really feel I have any breaks anymore because we’ve changed them. Probably from when I come to work, I have this thing where I feel if I don’t get into the light of day, out of the building, I’ll scream... (laughs) ... so, I try and do a very fast, quick walk in the breaks if I can but I find the morning break and the afternoon break almost impossible now... So I try and get five minutes outside at lunch time... I notice I’ve started buying my lunch more just to do that, so it makes me go out…
It is important to note how time poverty increases exponentially in Lisa’s case. Firstly, because of shorter breaks, she does more work-related activity in her free time. Secondly, she also has less time to relax between lessons at school. This has clearly impacted on her physical and mental well-being. As referred to earlier, the work of Kieschke and Schaarschmidt (2008) demonstrated the negative impacts of working conditions on teachers’ health. Their recommendations make for sobering reading, as the solutions they outline seem to describe a reality opposite to that of a private language school:

Timetabling of school lessons should allow for appreciable phases of relaxation, rather than concentrations during blocks of time which demand sustained highest levels of attention and effort. There is also a need for a clearer separation of life at school and leisure time. The strong interdependence of both areas is due to the displacement of many school tasks into the evenings and weekends, hindering emotional distancing between everyday life at school and opportunities for regeneration…” (pp. 435-436).

Sam dedicates as little time as possible to lesson planning and administrative duties. A noticeable strategy he employs to save time is to get materials from other teachers. Although this is frequently a symbiotic relationship between teachers, in his case, it is quite noticeable that the sharing of materials is more slanted to his use of them, and is therefore in my view, an individual coping mechanism to deal with time constraints. For some teachers this is not a problem, but there have also been a number of negative comments directed at him by other teachers who feel that he is using them.

Well, I think the general camaraderie, that's been in the staffroom, it is helpful. I've got Emma on one side of me. Emma does far too much work... (laughs)... So she's got lesson plans for classes that she's never taught... and she's ready, "Oh, I've got something for you... doing this topic?... oh I’ve got this, this and this"... So she's always there to help out... [Non-participant] is a good sounding board, for oh, I’ve got an activity... what do you think I should do with this? ... Give me your opinion...

A more secretive activity that has emerged among teachers is the practice of repeating a communicative aspect of a PM1 afternoon lesson as a repeated standalone lesson with a different group of learners in the Conversation Class. Essentially this is a means of
decreasing afternoon planning time as you are killing two birds with one stone. For obvious reasons teachers are rather circumspect about it, because it would not be acceptable if management were to get wind of it. Again, the practice is more an emergency measure, when for whatever reason a teacher has not had the time to prepare a separate lesson.

With regards to Conversation classes, a trend has emerged where practitioners tend to present a high proportion of fluency tasks every week. The attraction of a fluency-based lesson of course is that it potentially involves less planning time and runs itself in the classroom once it has been set up. In addition, a fluency task is also fairly easy to develop within the classroom without prior planning time. In terms of policy, teachers are expected to cover Fluency, Accuracy, Functional language and Pronunciation aspects of speaking over a week of Conversation class instruction.

As is clear, individual coping mechanisms normally are about alleviating time pressures. By engaging in these acts of subverting the system, it can be argued that the self-same system keeps functioning, because teachers are on a daily basis adjusting their levels of preparation, intellectual effort and physical energy reserves in order to keep on working routinely.

### 7.6 Conclusion: necessary trade-offs

The hidden dimensions of teachers’ practices are part of the fabric of their working environment. Although generally not officially sanctioned or even recognised, they draw attention to the immense time pressures that teachers face. What is also evident is that teachers make conscious trade-offs regarding their practices that make sense or conform to a personal ethical framework which might be inscrutable to other practitioners.
A key affected area has been that of assessment practices. The case was made for an understanding that the Veupoint assessment system in many ways is incompatible with a market-oriented rolling intake operating principle. The ability to accurately track learner progress and expect a steady stream of rotating temporary staff members to be able to comprehensively assess their classes is suggested to be perhaps a nearly impossible task within the organisational system as it exists.

Within the classroom itself, the claim was made for teaching itself to be recognized as a subversive act, which for the better part of a practitioner’s employment period would be immune from surveillance and observation of lessons. Teacher’s practices were recognized as highly individualized with elements from both their personal and professional lives being woven into the events transpiring between the four walls of the instructional locale. In terms of student-teacher relationships, extra-curricular social interaction with learners was seen to possibly lead to positive or negative outcomes. The role of the teacher as a sensitive counsellor or “social worker” (Farrell, 2011) was shown to be a primary role that compelled teachers to engage with their learners beyond the classroom and also outside of the school to be more specific.

Returning again to the main emerging theme of time poverty in the workplace, a brief examination of a few key ways in which individuals were coping within the system highlighted the variety of responses that practitioners had to the dilemmas posed by rolling intake and the structure of daily lessons.

Hidden practices are an important cog in the wheel of an organizational system. Within the private language school it would be difficult to imagine how the system could work without
the creative energies of people in both administration and teaching putting into practice an “unnoticed professional competence” (Ahrenkiel, Schmidt, Nielsen, Sommer, & Warring, 2013, p. 1).

The time has come to earnestly ask what it means to be a language teaching professional. The accounts of my participants and the examination of their working realities seem to suggest a professional identity that is shaped by contextual forces, collegial relations, learner relationships, and a host of other variables. What also needs to be done is make a case for an appreciation of the ways in which practitioners still seem to be able to connect with learners despite the systemic challenges and obstacles they face.
We are still, however, left with the question: how do educators and educational leaders – as professors and practitioners – liberate themselves from the one-dimensional realities of science and quantitative analyses and coherent school improvement models? What powers of transformation lie within ourselves as educators to create time and spaces for considering alternative ideas and behaviors?

- Ira Bogotch, *International Humanistic Challenges to Educational Leadership*

8

The English Language Teaching Professional: A Contradiction in Terms?

8.1 Introduction

Conventionally, the concluding chapter of a thesis is expected to represent to some extent a ‘wrapping-up’ of the research journey and a tidy summation of the key points arrived at through analysis of the data collected. However, a traditional (some would assert objectivist) conclusion such as this would seem ill-fitted and ultimately intellectually unsatisfying in comparison with the way in which preceding chapters have been written, and I feel strongly that it would be detrimental to the authorial voice I have attempted to cultivate up to this point.

My primary ethnographic objective to represent as thoroughly as is possible the social worlds of my participants, along with their own very differentiated perspectives about their work environment; and then to present interpretations of these that would ring true and appear highly plausible to the academic readership – has inevitably uncovered a complex
‘mess’. This is not an original situation by any means – to some extent it defines the key challenge faced by ethnographers in general. As Van Maanen (2010) eloquently states, “…convincing ethnography will always be something of a mess, a mystery, and a miracle” (p. 251).

This mess I am happy to accept – it reflects a stance I have made clear since the beginning of the thesis, which is that my participants and their lifeworlds are not fixed and stable entities, suggesting early on that ambiguity and contradiction would be constant companions along the research journey. In Chapter 2 I echoed the ideas of Blommaert & Jie (2010) in asserting that my researching aims were not to reduce complexity, but to describe and explain it in as much detail as possible – while simultaneously acceding that such an attempt will necessarily be only partial and incomplete.

It also follows that a conclusion to such a study might have to be more open-ended than is expected – seeing it as merely a means of tying up loose ends would bring into question its fit with the rest of the research study – in which I have repeatedly laid bare the multitude of subjectivities and uncertainties that influence its structure and tone. A key example of this would be my adoption of the vocabulary of spectrality and haunting (see Gordon, 2008), which was indicative of my attempts at articulating a social reality in which the individuals within its orbit had been rendered invisible by systemic ‘innovations’.

Therefore, the conclusion, to some degree, reflects the ‘messy’ social reality it has described up to this point – but it also endeavours to go beyond. This is done by initially posing a fundamental question, and later on, suggesting that localized, contextualized concerns at Veupoint might be symptomatic or at the very least, indications of macro-contextual forces
at play – this necessitates opening (if only a little bit) the Pandora’s box that is political economy, and more specifically, taking a peek at issues of class and matters pertaining to neoliberal education agendas. This is followed by an activist call to action. But first, the serious question.

Is the language teacher working in the private sector a professional? Upon reflection of my research journey and the substantial contributions in terms of time and candour on the part of my participants, the answer can only be confidently ambiguous: yes and no. Therefore, the answer is dependent on the stance adopted by the observer and the particular dimension of teachers’ lived realities chosen as a focus.

Answering in the positive is possible when considering how teachers inhabit and enact their occupational roles – delivering a committed, quality-driven pedagogy coupled with a moral duty of care that extends far beyond their job descriptions and the requirements of market-driven service provision. The extent to which this pedagogic endeavour is pursued is at times uncomfortably invisible to the system and its managers, as noted in Chapter 7. Not so for the learners however; asking them the question above would usually elicit an affirmative answer too.

Answering in the negative is inevitable when our gaze switches to the contextual factors and operational principles that constrain the pedagogic possibilities for teachers, as well as the systemic ‘innovations’ that reduce their autonomy and decision-making powers. Coupled with considerations of career development opportunities and financial remuneration, the
idea of the teacher as a professional becomes suspect. In other words, private language
school teachers are professionals, but they work in a system that treats and rewards them
otherwise.

The split fork that is the answer to the question posed above exemplifies the extent to which
our ever-shifting conceptions of words like ‘professional’ and ‘culture’ bedevil our ability to
provide the reader with clear-cut answers. However, it does serve one primary purpose – to
emphasize how context shapes perception and how fluid our ideas when it comes to identity
and organizational culture need to be to gain a richer understanding of what these could
mean in contemporary society.

Before we travel too far down the road of abstraction, it is necessary to outline the structure
of the concluding chapter. First, I will revisit the research questions posed at the beginning
of the thesis and expand upon these by making links back to the organizational culture
literature discussed in the first chapter. This is followed by an attempt to bridge the micro-
and macro-divide by first tying the notions of class and social positioning in with issues of
professional identity and organizational culture. Secondly, a similar attempt is made to
illustrate how ‘rolling intake’ as an organizational principle also pertains to class.

Attention then briefly turns to ‘hidden practices’ – and how practitioners individually
attempt to humanise and/or resist the system they are a part of through these – a facet of
teachers’ working lives that needs to be celebrated. A call is made for an activist
professional community of practitioners as outlined through Judyth Sachs’ (2003) notion of
generative politics. The scope of the macro-contextual forces impinging on practitioner
autonomy is broadened by the discussion of neoliberalism as an overarching ideology with
far-reaching impact on contemporary education. Finally the case is made for language teaching and learning research that resists neoliberal agendas and promotes liberating pedagogic practices.

8.2 Revisiting the research questions: what has been uncovered?

In light of the introductory statements, what could I confidently state has been illuminated by this research project? In order to move forward with this discussion, perhaps it would be useful to once again restate the research questions which guided the study:

1.) In what ways, and to what extent, are the professional identities of teachers and academic managers shaped by the working conditions and systemic changes they experience within the particular private training establishment (PTE)?

2.) Conversely, what influence, if any, do teachers’ and academic managers’ professional practices have on the organizational culture(s)? What does this reveal about the social positioning of teachers and academic managers within the PTE?

In terms of the first question, it is clear that the institutional events and processes as well as systemic ‘innovations’ referred to in chapters 3-7 have had a marked and significant impact on the developing self-concepts of participants in the study, and this influence has shown itself in a myriad of ways. By way of example, we can look at the frequently recurring notion of ‘flexibility’ as a positive component of an idealized professional identity within the Veupoint context. It is clear that participants’ notions of ‘flexibility’ are products and co-constructions borne of the dynamic interaction between context, the professional community and the individual – and that these also change significantly over time,
highlighting a historical dimension often overlooked in an environment obsessed with immediacy. The temporal dimension of professional identities is a vital component of this project, and it is an element that has received little attention in applied linguistics studies. It is felt that it makes up a significant part of the overall contribution of this thesis to language teaching research in particular.

Looming large has been the seemingly inescapable tension between commercial and pedagogic prerogatives for teaching practitioners, which, when at their most uncomfortably divergent, forces an individual to make a choice between either conforming to the system or resisting its dictums. And yet this dichotomy is misleading, because, as chapter 7 demonstrates, both conformity and resistance can assume a variety of forms – some expressions of alignment or divergence being explicit, and others ‘bubbling’ underneath the surface in the black box of the classroom (i.e. the phenomenon of ‘hidden practices’).

With regards to the second research question, it is clear that an organizational culture is continually moulded by the actions of and interactions between individuals and groups in the social setting being studied. It should also be apparent from the preceding chapters that large segments of this cultural production process are to be found in informal exchanges around formalized procedures – ad-hoc interactions that defy easy categorization and elude systematic observation.

The major finding with regards to organizational issues within the research context has been the predominance of a culture of perpetual crisis management that shapes the lived realities of both teaching practitioners and academic managers. The volatility and unpredictability that characterize this culture is to a large extent attributable to the organizing principle of
‘rolling intake’, which guarantees daily occurrences of exigencies that need to be dealt with expeditiously – but often without being able to consider their long-term consequences.

Although the idea of a culture of perpetual crisis management is an emergent phenomenon arising out of my grounded theory analysis, it is useful to also add a brief discussion of the connections between my research findings and the organizational culture literature outlined in Chapter 1, as it helps to illustrate that culture cannot be viewed as a monolithic construct, and that it is futile to expect the institution to be viewed in a similar way by any two of its stakeholders. Therefore, my idea of an organizational culture centred on perpetual crisis management is only one of a number of possible interpretations of the social configurations I observed and participated in as a member of the researched community of practice.

Martin’s (1999, 2002) call for using multiple perspectives in organizational culture research has to some extent, I believe, been answered by this research project. My choice not to adopt a single perspective has allowed for a rich, unfolding, and emergent understanding of Veupoint’s organizational culture(s) as containing contradictory, ambiguous, clear-cut and simplistic, complex, inviting, as well as exclusionary elements – all in a constant state of flux, at the same time.

Including an integrationist perspective as exemplified by the work of Trice & Beyer (1984) and McDonald (1991) allowed me to become more sensitive to the persistent mythologies that guided certain managerial decision-making processes – the core understanding underpinning these being that organizational culture was a discrete component of institutional life, and that it could be manipulated to enhance productivity and staff morale, as well as be used to present a unified, cohesive image to external stakeholders. This
The instrumentalist perspective was frequently present in the policies and words of Penny and Daniel. A good example could be found in the way that Penny described the importance of Friday farewell meetings as being to present the student body with the appearance of staff unity – with an accompanying implied suggestion that frequent expressions of unity could somehow result in actual stronger social bonds among staff. Daniel’s use of the notion of ‘family’ in meetings and when teachers were being asked to accept company decisions that impacted negatively on them, also is reminiscent of the fairly outmoded perception that organizational culture was a tool to be exploited by the insightful manager and leader – to get employees ‘on board’ with uncomfortable realities. To sum up, the integrationist perspective was at its most useful in recognizing certain managerial views that no longer reflected the social reality, but were still influential in shaping decisions made by these thought leaders.

The organizational culture research that can be loosely assembled under the differentiation category (see Martin, 1999, 2002; and Martin & Frost, 1996) was useful in attuning my researcher ears and eyes to examples of discordance. This approach, entailing an acceptance of ambiguity and contradiction, helped me to draw out and articulate the tangible tension between commercial prerogatives and pedagogic aims playing out in the daily practices of teachers as well as academic managers (albeit it to a lesser degree). In the same field, the work of Kunda (1992) resonated very strongly with my own findings, particularly his depiction of how members of a community of practice are differentiated and ‘sorted’ into subcultural groups in terms of their perceived position in relationship to the predominant organizational ideology. This understanding formed the basis of my descriptions and interpretations of the role played by full-time and part-time practitioners in
the research context – and to what extent they accepted a minimal role or pushed to enhance their organizational stature.

Last but not least, it is the fragmentation view of culture (see Martin, 1999, 2002) that in principle allowed me to remain open to new insights throughout the data analysis and writing up stages of the ethnographic project. Simply put, it is a logical extension of the differentiation view, but which puts contradiction at the front and centre of organizational culture analysis. This is accompanied by the understanding that perpetual change, i.e. a constant state of flux, is assumed as a given when contemplating the nature of any type of social reality. It is by adopting this perspective that I eventually came to the conclusion that the rolling intake system was more deeply implicated in the culture of perpetual crisis management at Veupoint than I had previously understood. Upon reflection, it is also this view of culture that first provided the impetus to actually do an at-home ethnography (Alvesson, 2009) – seeing as it reflected a belief that even a very familiar context contained the potential to surprise the researcher and to force a reconsideration of cultural elements that were initially taken for granted.

Parker’s (2000) conceptualisation of organizational culture as being typified by the perpetual production of “claims of difference within and between groups of people who are formally constituted as members of a defined group” (p. 233) characterizes with surprising accuracy what I perceive to be the fundamental, underlying purpose of my research participants’ constant attempts at articulating their understandings of their work environment. The fact that these aforementioned claims can be founded on conceptions inherent to the context or from sources outside it, serves to broaden our understanding of organizational culture as also shaped by macro-contextual forces. In other words, as
explained in the Chapter 1, Parker’s definition suggests that particular organizational
culture(s) can contain localized forms of more general or widespread cultural aspects
derived from the society within which the institution operates. This means that
organizational culture cannot be fully understood in a vacuum, it requires a consideration of
other issues that are embedded in external sources of cultural reproduction. We therefore
turn to considering one such macro-contextual force, namely that of class and social
positioning.

8.3 Class and social positioning

Uncovering how class plays a role in shaping the social positioning of both ESL
practitioners and their academic managers a far from straightforward enterprise. To do so
entails trying to identify the ghosts in the system. We are dealing with spectral entities
because class is glaringly conspicuous by its absence from view. This certainly does not
mean that class is absent, it is meant to signify that class is hidden, ignored, avoided and not
talked about. By now it is hopefully clear that my introduction of the ghost as conceptual
metaphor in the third chapter was a means of giving form to the shadowy existence
 accorded teachers within specific dimensions of their working lives. What I would like to
suggest is that this is also to some degree a way of understanding practitioners’ social
positioning and class status within the system.

To start with, we need to look at language itself. Class as a term has to a large extent
become a “phantom word” (Williams, 1991). When a word is excised from our social
vocabulary however, the consequences are far-reaching, and extends beyond language to the
way we view our lived realities. Perhaps then, the disappearance of class as a means of
articulating a social reality has been by design. As Avery Gordon suggests, it is not a
coincidence, but rather an intentional “commitment to blindness” (2008). Within the context of a private language school, we need to ask what the possible reasons could be for this myopia, and whether there are material reasons behind it.

What follows is an understanding that the removal from our vernacular of words such as class, which can be efficiently used to describe the way a system discriminates against a certain group of people, allows for those with power to redefine the social reality, and to some degree inoculate the system against critical inspection and potential transformative change. This ‘disappearing’ ideological trick amounts to what Irvine and Gal (2000) (as cited in Block, 2014) term erasure.

In my participant accounts, class is only mentioned once by name. Sam, in describing his background, uses it:

**Andre:** Is there anything else you would like to tell me?

**Sam:** Ah, I don't know... let me think here... Well, we could do like the socio-economic explanation, like I am from a fairly affluent family... not rich, but like solidly upper middle class. My mother was a teacher, so the value of education has been instilled from a young age... I don't really know what else I could tell you...

**Andre:** I think it's an interesting start.

**Sam:** Well yeah... I think, as sad as it is, socio-economics has got a huge role to play in who people are, and how they turn out to be. Obviously it's not a 100%... I'm not even going into a moral stance here... it's just the types of things they tend to go into. I’m from the socio-economic status that a lot of teachers get plucked from... like I’m not rich enough to be a CEO but I’m not poor enough to work at McDonalds. So hey, teaching's right in that (laughs) wheelhouse right there... that sort of midrange, midlevel career that's kind of... it's almost expected to come out of that class I’m a part of.

What is revealing in Sam’s response is the recognition that an economic base underlies the notion of class. In addition, he identifies a specific class inscription (middle-class) has having
a large representation among teachers in his developed country (Canada). More importantly, he also makes the connection of an original class position often having the power to dictate where you end up.

In many respects, the removal of class as a consideration allows policymakers and managers to homogenise a group of teachers, in the sense that it allows them to implement policies that treat the individual practitioner as an interchangeable part of the system. Whether this conceptualisation is patently false or not does not matter, the ideological war is won in this fashion – the decision-makers outside the classroom have appropriated the right to define and ascribe their terms to the pedagogic practices of teachers.

Perhaps the first step is to reclaim class. Reintroducing the word paves the way towards something bigger than just a description. Once class becomes more frequently employed, it can again develop into a more widespread way of thinking about social relations that contests the way in which contemporary discourses have atomised individuals and fragmented social groups that need to stick together for purposes of solidarity.

Researching issues of identity and organizational culture within private language schools makes it difficult to ignore the socio-economic and socio-political underpinnings of professional working lives and how these in turn serve to position us relative to others - in a group and in the wider societal context. This is particularly true if we subscribe to a rich conception of class and social positioning that extends beyond only considering income, occupation and educational level, such as the notion proposed by Bourdieu (1984):

[C]lass or class fraction is defined not only by its position in the relations of production, as identified through indices such as occupation, income, or even educational level, but also by a certain sex-ratio, a certain distribution in geographical
space (which is never socially neutral) and by a whole set of subsidiary characteristics which may function, in the form of tacit requirements, as real principles of selection or exclusion without ever being formally stated (this is the case with ethnic origin and sex). A number of official criteria: for example, the requiring of a given diploma can be a way of demanding a particular social origin (p. 102).

The silence within the field of applied linguistics with regards to class and social positioning is deafening, despite an early call for its inclusion by Halliday (1990), who sought to confront this peculiar absence in a position paper. More recently, Block (2014) can be credited with a more detailed critique of this phenomenon in his book-length treatment, *Social Class in Applied Linguistics*.

The fact that class is only explicitly mentioned once in the interview data belies to what extent class distinctions are present in the context and the situations faced by practitioners. There are numerous situations and examples that could be understood in terms of class. Market-oriented agendas and managerialism have gained ascendancy in many respects and jettisoned class as a consideration, but it has not been possible to remove the indelible traces left behind by the daily injustices non-human systems mete out to practitioners and also their academic managers. It also does not completely remove the evidence of how humans find ways to discriminate against each other either.

Class is present in my experiences as a cleaner at Veupoint. Every time a student chose to deny me a teaching identity because of the fact that they also saw me clean, they were responding to what for them were irreconcilable class differences. Class is present when teachers are verbally encouraged to stay away from controversial topics in the classroom such as religion, sex, human rights, or gender equality – as a response to the presence of certain nationality groups in the classroom for whom these subjects are taboo. This situation then
becomes further infused with class concerns when certain male students from such a nationality then exhibit unacceptable chauvinistic behaviour towards female teachers in the context.

Class is present when Emma decides to only teach the first afternoon lesson and uses the last hour of class time every day to prepare for her next day’s classes instead. The fact that she is able to afford not teaching for an hour a day becomes a situation of class interest. Class is present during annual general meetings where administrative staff and teaching staff are separated once future plans for the school are discussed – exposing a class divide between management and practitioners.

Class is present when temporary teachers are treated as inferior to, and less capable than longer-term teachers, and we witness first-hand the fragmentation of teacher class identification along lines of experience and ‘perceived’ expertise. Class is present when the teacher-student relationship is slanted towards the student customer in terms of management of student feedback systems – the lack of parity leading to classroom environments affected by mistrust and fear. Class is yet again present when teachers are locked out of curriculum and syllabus design initiatives within the working environment – excluded on dubious grounds from a potentially very accessible arena for meaningful professional development. Class is everywhere once we start really looking.

8.4 Class is everywhere: rolling intake

With the application of a constructivist grounded theory approach (Charmaz, 2006), it was possible to engage in a bottom-up approach that allowed for the emergence of themes with thick strands of connection to various bodies of data collected, instead of imposing a
theoretical framework on a rich, diverse teaching context. The most striking feature of this process of analysis was the repeated prominence of the rolling intake system as a primal force in Veupoint’s organizational environment. As has been demonstrated throughout, the imprint this operating principle leaves on the institutional landscape is immense. Firstly, it dictates which teachers have jobs by the end of the week, and which ones do not. This is a class matter too.

Rolling intake also allows for short periods of student enrolment that introduces an additional instability to the whole pedagogic system, and also contributes to a continual flow of paperwork and documentation which teachers have to complete to manage the persistent entering and exiting of learners into and out of the system. Another key feature of the rolling intake system which emerged was its incompatibility with the assessment procedures in operation – a mismatch that consistently threw up small crises that teachers needed to ‘paper over’.

The rolling intake system embodies a business technology that supersedes pedagogic considerations and instead bends the educational objectives of practitioners to its will. It is pedagogically suspect and needs to be further investigated as to its suitability to be an operating principle in educational contexts. At the best of times, business and education is an uncomfortable fit.

Flexibility emerged as a valued personal quality in the context as it was necessary to deal with the daily exigencies created by the continuous intake system. In terms of professional development programs run by the institution, they tended to reflect either a ‘back to basics’ approach related to formal observations, or a means of preparation for future accountability
procedures, and lastly, a response to situational classroom problems – the last feature again strongly connected to rolling intake.

In terms of pedagogic practices, the rolling intake system seemed to encourage a habit of teachers thinking in terms of discrete lessons. In other words, teaching from one lesson to another – as opposed to weekly or longer lesson sequences. In combination with systems ‘innovations’ that added paperwork to their working realities, teachers were consistently experiencing time-poverty. For some this meant that the line between the personal and the professional had become very blurred, as they were constantly trying to ‘catch up’ by doing planning during their breaks, or on the weekends.

An organizational culture of perpetual crisis management emerged, which can be understood as a collective mode of activity governed by the expectation of constant change and unpredictability. To a large extent, many managerial initiatives, especially by Penny, the director of studies, represented systemic changes to deal more efficiently with the daily exigencies thrown up by the system. For practitioners, the demands of teaching itself, in combination with administrative duties, meant that there were continual trade-offs in terms of which actions and duties were prioritised, and which ones would be done to a minimally acceptable level.

Without a change in the business practices of private language schools, it is difficult to envision any meaningful transformative change in the working conditions of practitioners and by extension, their pedagogic practices. It is my assertion that the rolling intake system has been weighed, and found pedagogically wanting.
8.5 Celebrating hidden practices as acceptable expressions of teacher autonomy

In contrast with the ability of the academic managers to shape the institutional environment, teachers were more the recipients of the initiatives or policies enacted elsewhere. This did not mean that they just accepted changes blindly and that resistance was not to be found, it just means that there were very few examples of collective mobilisation to publicly contest any managerial initiatives – instead activity went underground.

During this investigation a system of hidden practices were uncovered with regards to key processes that involved teaching practitioners. These represented individual practitioner expressions of resistance against specific aspects of routinized organisational life.

Particularly noteworthy areas of teacher activity where these hidden practices were prevalent were: assessment, extra-curricular teacher-student interaction, and the classroom. In addition, a few more idiosyncratic individual coping mechanisms were also identified as they related to particular individuals within the system. The primary way in which these hidden practices were understood is that their ‘bucking of the system’ actually enabled the whole enterprise to keep on functioning as normal. In other words, teachers’ subversive actions informed by their creative capacities were responsible for ‘propping up’ a dysfunctional, anti-social system.

In terms of the classroom, the key finding was to what extent it represented a comfort zone for the teacher away from all the paperwork and administrative duties. It was also in the classroom where teachers were, for most of the time, able to avoid constant surveillance – and therefore teaching itself was observed as an act of resistance against the other elements of the system that seemed to play a dehumanizing influence on their personal well-being and stress levels.
These personal acts of intransigence should be celebrated as small but significant expressions of teacher agency that counteracted, albeit at a micro-political level, the forces of standardization and marginalisation as represented by efficiency-obsessed systemic initiatives and context-ignorant accountability regimes imposed from outside.

At the same time, there is a realization that these isolated and separate acts of transgression did not and do not collectively succeed in any meaningful transformative change – which would be needed if more humane systems that respected and valued the contributions of teachers were to be installed in the organizational context. For that, collective mobilization is needed.

8.6 Professional community as antidote

For true transformation of the private language teaching sector, a collective effort by teachers is needed to resist market-directed encroachments on their practices, and to fight for recognition of the excessive emotional and intellectual investments they make in their working lives. Although atomistic and personal expressions of resistance are heartening, these seem to have little effect on long-term institutional or cultural change.

Just as the case has been made to reclaim class as a means of fully understanding the social dimensions of working life, we also need to present an argument for connecting the idea of activism to a teaching professionalism that has a moral core. It is perhaps here that it is necessary to reiterate Judyth Sachs’ notion of an activist teacher professionalism (2003), which constitutes three key ingredients, namely: trust, obligation and generative politics.
For teachers to perform their jobs they need to be trusted – I would agree with Sachs that accountability measures reflect the opposite of trust in teachers (2003, p. 139). In other words, external bodies (industry and governmental) would need to accede that their audit regimes do little more than ensure minimum standards of performance. When it comes to already performing schools, their criteria often impinge and interfere with practitioners’ opportunities to progress beyond minimum standards.

In relation to obligation, Sachs envisions it as being based on “active trust” and if that is the case, “obligation implies reciprocity” (2003, p. 141). In the context of Veupoint, there are many features of the system that suggests a lack of active trust in teachers. One prime example is the fact that teachers are only paid for their contact time in the classroom. In a culture of pedagogic practice in which the majority of teachers subscribe to an ethos of ‘going the extra mile’, it seems that mutual reciprocity does not exist, if management do not want to remunerate at least a set amount of payment for planning time. It is as if the assumption is that if money was paid for planning, teachers would immediately plan less, just so that they could ‘profit’ from the company’s largesse.

Generative politics is about empowerment. As Sachs puts it: “A fundamental feature of generative politics is that it allows and encourages individuals and groups to make things happen rather than to let things happen to them in the context of social concerns and goals” (2003, p. 144). In my view, this is the key pillar of the enterprise. If teachers really want to see change occurring, they need to become politically active. An enduring feature of the private language teaching sector is a widely expressed anathema to any form of political expression.
With a generative politics, the onus is on teachers to collectively express themselves politically and take the initiative. One of the reasons why this project has repeatedly interrogated the rolling intake system is borne from a subscription to generative politics. I am convinced that I have identified a fundamental issue with the way private language education is provided in the form of the operating principle of rolling intake. I have also attempted to make a case for why I believe it should be questioned in terms of its pedagogic value.

Certainly there are a number of key concerns affecting teaching practitioners within the private language teaching sector that deserve attention. It just so happens that within the scope of this research project, the primary contextual feature that emerged was rolling intake, especially after it was implicated in processes and actions relating to professional development, and identified as the catalyst for an organizational culture founded on perpetual crisis management. It is also true however, that continuous enrolment is but one feature of a larger neoliberal project, which is actively dismantling progressive pedagogic initiatives in public and private spheres of education. Neoliberalism has been the elephant in the room up to now.

8.7 Neoliberalism: the elephant in the room

The term neoliberalism is so diffuse, and to some scholars it has become too ephemeral to even attempt to define. Mirowski (2013) claims that this situation is partly a result of how deeply ingrained its ideologies has become in our everyday lives, such that it is almost “an ideology of no ideology”. For the purposes of this study, a good entry point is Harvey’s (2005) frequently-cited definition, which describes neoliberalism as:
…a theory of political economic practices that proposes that human well-being can best be advanced by liberating individual entrepreneurial freedoms and skills within an institutional framework characterized by strong private property rights, free markets and free trade (p. 2).

Neoliberal ideas and practices have spread quite rapidly over the globe – two key examples being the Reagan administration in the United States, and the Thatcher administration in the United Kingdom – which were in turn followed by implementation of neoliberal policies in other countries, including New Zealand. As noted by Bernstein, Katzenelson, Vinall, Hellmich, and Shin (2015), “neoliberal policies have interacted with other processes including globalization, colonialism, and imperialism over the past three decades” (p. 5). Our primary interest however, lies in connecting neoliberalism to the everyday - to issues of identity on one hand, and to language teaching and professional development on the other.

Foucault was one of the first social science scholars to anticipate how neoliberal ideology would recast the individual. Based on a close reading of some of the key proponents of neoliberal theory, he foresaw in the notion of “human capital”, as developed by Becker (1976, 1993), an indication of a new form of social control to come. In his series of lectures entitled The Birth of Biopolitics (2008), Foucault outlined a new conception of neoliberal personhood, the “entrepreneurial self”, explained thus:

The individual’s life must be lodged, not within a framework of a big enterprise like the firm or, if it comes to it, the state, but within the framework of a multiplicity of diverse enterprises connected up to and entangled with each other, enterprises which are in some way ready to hand for the individual, sufficiently limited in their scale for the individual’s actions, decisions, and choices to have meaningful and perceptible effects, and numerous enough for him not to be dependent on one alone. And finally, the individual’s life itself – with his relationships to his private property, for example, with his family, household, insurance, and retirement – must make him into a sort of permanent and multiple enterprise” (p. 241)
If neoliberal capitalism positions the individual as a loose set of ‘bunched’ enterprises, one can begin to see how a pervasive economic rationality could start to infiltrate other aspects of a person’s life – including the social dimensions. At one level, the psychological demands of perpetually managing oneself as an enterprise, turns the individual inward – as a result neutering, or at the least, diminishing, collective action or resistance. This narcissistic gaze is also multiplied by channelling our energies into a number of simultaneous personal projects, or enterprises – leaving precious little time for others in our social orbit. In other words, this underlying economic conception of selfhood can also be seen to have an atomising and alienating effect on the person. As Mirowski (2013) notes, the plurality of enterprises that constitute selfhood in neoliberal thought is synonymous with a *fragmentation of identity*:

> The fragmentation of the neoliberal self begins when the agent is brought face to face with the realization that she is not just an employee or student, but also simultaneously a product to be sold, a walking advertisement, a manager of her resume, a biographer of her rationales, and an entrepreneur of her possibilities. She has to somehow manage to be simultaneously subject, object, and spectator” (Mirowski, 2013, p. 108).

What one also begins to wonder is how demarcated these enterprises of identity work are - as the word fragmentation does not suggest a ‘neat’ breaking up of priorities and personal ‘projects’. To what extent does the ‘entrepreneurial self” invest in activities that asymmetrically straddle traditional divides such as work and leisure or public and private? And how does neoliberal capitalism harness and control all this enterprising individual human effort and position it within a community or a group of employees?

In terms of general and tertiary education, both public spheres of schooling and higher education have become increasingly shaped by market-driven initiatives (Giroux, 2008) - symptomatic of the neoliberal impulse to encircle and appropriate for private ownership and
the employment market what remains of the social commons – examples of this drive including standardized testing, charter schools, and audit regimes based on quantitatively-assessed performance.

The scholars affiliated with critical pedagogy (CP) have long been prominent voices of resistance to this trend (see McLaren, 2005; Apple, 2006; Giroux, 2009, 2014). Journals such as *Critical Studies in Education* and the *International Journal of Qualitative Studies in Education* have been at the forefront of accepting scholarly work that focuses on the pedagogical ramifications of neoliberal policies (see Power & Whitty, 1996; Nairn & Higgins, 2007; Saltmarsh, 2007; Watkins, 2007; Down, 2009; Clarke 2012; Connell, 2013; Vander Kloet & Aspenlieder, 2013). One of the primary reasons why neoliberalism is viewed as a threat to pedagogy is that it is seen as the main catalyst for a process of *deprofessionalisation* of teachers’ work:

In this view, teaching is reduced to a set of strategies and skills and becomes synonymous with a method or technique. Instead of learning to raise questions about the principles underlying different classroom methods, research techniques and theories of education, teachers are often preoccupied with learning “the how to”, with what works, or with mastering the best way to teach a given body of knowledge (Giroux, 2013, p. 461).

A principal argument I would like to make is that the above-mentioned deprofessionalisation ‘virus’ becomes even more virulent in an educational setting where market-oriented forces have for a very long time been taken for granted, and where teachers’ working lives are characterised by a persistent time poverty, exacerbated by fast-paced cycles of student intake (i.e. a ‘rolling intake’ system), and the accompanying high rate of teacher turnover. In addition, I believe there to be a strong cultural dimension to this phenomenon, in that it also shapes the practices of long-term teachers who, although they do not exit the organizational
system as quickly, still adapt their practices to suit its climate and internal logics of perpetual change – where one of the highest accolades is to be seen as being “flexible”.

Teachers are certainly not the only salaried professionals who are experiencing a degradation in their working conditions – a great many fields of work have been irrevocably changed by neoliberal initiatives, bent on ever-greater economic ‘efficiency’ and accompanied by a managerialism that incrementally removes opportunities for the individual in which to exercise their agency. In his book about the professional class, Schmidt (2000) articulates the situation thus:

A system that turns potentially independent thinkers into politically subordinate clones is as bad for society as it is for the stunted individuals… At the same time, a system in which individuals do not make a significant difference at their point of deepest involvement in society – that is, at work – undermines efforts to build a culture of real democracy. And in a subordinating system, organizations are more likely to shortchange or even abuse clients, because employees who know their place are not effective at challenging their employer’s policies, even when those policies adversely affect the quality of their own work on behalf of clients” (p. 4).

Within the field of applied linguistics, there is a discernible lack of scholarly work focusing on interrogating neoliberalism within language education, as pointed out by Block, Gray & Holborow (2012). Although they acknowledge an overall increase in interdisciplinarianism, as called for by scholars such as Rampton (1997), they find a distinct absence of research that foregrounds political economy. Reasons the authors proffer for this situation range from the fact that interdisciplinarity has contributed to a more fragmented field, with fields like the ELT (English Language Teaching) industry ‘splintering off’ and away from the applied linguistics label, as well as the stance taken by various scholars such as Sowden (2008), who believe that language teaching should not be politicised.
I firmly align myself with the view expressed by Block, Gray & Holborow (2012) that “the ELT industry is an area of applied linguistics activity in which language and political economy come together in ways that would be unwise for the field to ignore” (p. 9). The neoliberal agenda has engaged in a form of social re-engineering where every dimension of social expression is narrowly channelled into a pre-made economic rationality to serve the free market more efficiently, and this is nowhere more evident than in the richly contested minefield that is education. I also believe that all social activity has a political dimension, and for that reason, I cannot imagine it being possible to excise political or economic issues from language instruction – that would seem to be ignoring major aspects of the historical narrative of how English became a global *lingua franca* in the first place (see Phillipson, 1992; Pennycook, 1998). As Simone de Beauvoir put it, “…to abstain from politics is in itself a political attitude” (1965, p. 359).

There is evidence however, that the research climate is changing of late. Within general education and qualitative research circles, special issues of journals like *Policy Futures in Education* (Vol. 10, No. 2, 2012), *Education Policy Analysis Archives* (Vol. 23, No. 88, 2015) and *Alternate Routes: A Journal of Critical Social Research* (Vol. 26, 2015), attest to this renewed interest in political economy. Within the field of applied linguistics, especially as related to language teaching and learning, recent special issues of the *Journal of Multilingual and Multicultural Development* (August 2015, published online), and the *L2 Journal* (Volume 7, Issue 3, 2015) also reflect a growing interest in the intersection between L2 instruction and neoliberal policy.

Using Weber’s (1930) notion of an iron cage to describe the neoliberal management model, English (2016) characterises it thus: “The type of managerial control in the ‘iron cage’ is
heavily top-down, authoritarian and dominated by a penchant for unilateral control of all facets of organizational life” (p. 75). If one looks back at the ‘systems’ and micro-managing actions taken within the context at Veupoint, there is a case to be made for these three characteristics being a feature of the managerialism exhibited here. Education cannot happen in an iron cage.

Teaching within an environment that is authoritarian and prescriptive, or in other words, ‘managerialist’, implies a negation of the very basic ingredients needed for teachers to feel empowered. As the research has shown, autonomy in the classroom is not sufficient on its own and does not guarantee meaningful opportunities for professional development if the support structures outside of the classroom do not complement the freedoms accorded the teacher inside.

To some extent, this thesis represents the efforts of a long-serving teacher within the private sector to cross the research-practice divide. The very organizational forces outlined in this research are the same factors that prevent a great many teachers from attempting to also branch out into post-graduate research. In general, their efforts in this regard would not be financially supported by their institutions, and the time-poverty they experience already as a daily feature of their practices prevent many instructors from envisioning the possibility of engaging in such research activity. And yet, if the only forms of professional development are limited to local concerns and exigencies as well as ad-hoc informal interactions with colleagues – the ability to imagine alternatives to a system that seems to present more obstacles than opportunities becomes blunted.
Academics need to branch out, in terms of research, into the private sector to demystify the organisational realities found here in the classroom and the larger work environments of educational enterprises. Teachers trapped in the anti-social, dehumanising systems of service-oriented instruction need supporters from the outside looking in, who have more than an accountability agenda in mind.

8.8 Conclusion: further research as a means of resistance and protection

An attempt has been made to foreground the contextual features within which the professional identities of private language teachers and their academic managers are situated. At Veupoint it appears that the opportunities for academic managers to professionally grow are more plentiful. Teachers on the other hand, have to carve out slivers of autonomous space in which to breathe, hemmed in by the systemic demands of the work environment and managerial initiatives that rob them of time to interact and to engage in personally-directed professional development.

Veupoint is a good school. I would not have invested more than a decade of my life in it if I had been in doubt of this fact. However my commitment to a cultural ethos that appears to have been eroded by new managerialist regimes have prompted a critical examination of an organizational system that demands everything from its teachers, and gives very little back in return. Having pointed the finger at rolling intake as a pedagogically suspect operational principle, a call is made for more research that focuses on the private language teaching sector – research that interrogates the economic foundations of a system that continually subverts the pedagogic practices of its practitioners.
On a larger scale, this study also represents an effort to understand how neoliberalism operates within a localised context. The emergence of the rolling intake system, as a business strategy that defines to a large extent the pedagogic practices around it, is a good example of how neoliberal agendas enact themselves locally.

More longitudinal research is needed to investigate how everyday neoliberalism insinuates itself into the lived realities of people – in order to clearly identify the nature of the threat it poses to education, and to find ways of arresting the process of educational devolution into mere training. This is in the hope that collectively and incrementally, the tools with which to counteract its imperialistic notions can be found and utilised. It is my firm conviction that the neoliberal subscription to an unsustainable economics of infinite growth is an irresponsible death wish on a planet with finite resources. It is deeply antagonistic to democratic ideals and represents a threat to human agency and free expression – all vital ingredients in liberating pedagogic practices.
Bibliography


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Appendix 1  Interview Guide (for Teacher Participants)

Interview 1 (Teaching + Learning Experience)

Initial questions

1. Tell me about how you came to be a teacher.

2. Who, if anyone, influenced your decision to become a teacher? Tell me about how he / she influenced you.

3. What was going on in your life before you came to [institution’s name]?

4. How would you describe the person you were when you started teaching?

Intermediate questions

1. Tell me about your memories of school.

2. Which teachers can you remember well? Why do you remember them?

3. As you look back on your experiences as a learner, are there any other events that stand out in your mind?

4. How would you describe yourself as a student [in primary school, in high school, at university]?

Ending questions

1. What does being a teacher mean to you?

2. Tell me about how your views about teaching and learning have changed.

3. As you think about your learning and teaching experiences, what advice would you give a teacher just starting out?

4. Is there anything else you think I should know to understand your learning and teaching experiences better?

5. Is there anything you would like to ask me?
Interview 2 (Teacher Roles + Institutional Processes)

Initial questions

1. Talk me through a typical working day for you.
2. How would you describe a good day at work? What would a bad day be like?
3. What do you enjoy about teaching here?
4. What are some of the challenges you face?

Intermediate questions

1. What are your expectations for yourself regarding teaching?
2. What is expected of you as a teacher?
3. Tell me about any experiences you’ve had where what you had to do in your teaching was in conflict with what you wanted to do.

Ending questions

1. Tell me how you would describe the person you are now. What has most contributed to your personal growth?
2. What has been most helpful to you as a teacher in your time here?
3. Is there anything you might not have thought about before that occurred to you during this interview?
4. Is there anything else you think I should know to understand your learning and teaching experiences better?
5. Is there anything you would like to ask me?
Appendix 2  Mitchell’s (2001) questions for initiating observational fieldwork

- What is the setting of action? When and how does action take place?
- What is going on? What is the overall activity being studied, the relatively long-term behaviour about which participants organize themselves? What specific acts comprise this activity?
- What is the distribution of participants over space and time in these locales?
- How are actors [research participants] organized? What organizations effect, oversee, regulate or promote this activity?
- How are members stratified? Who is ostensibly in charge? Does being in charge vary by activity? How is membership achieved and maintained?
- What do actors pay attention to? What is important, preoccupying, critical?
- What do they pointedly ignore that other persons might pay attention to?
- What symbols do actors invoke to understand their worlds, the participants and processes within them, and the objects and events they encounter? What names do they attach to objects, events, persons, roles, settings, equipment?
- What practices, skills, strategems, methods of operation do actors employ?
- Which theories, motives, excuses, justifications or other explanations do actors use in accounting for their participation? How do they explain to each other, not to outside investigators, what they do and why they do it?
- What goals do actors seek? When, from their perspective, is an act well or poorly done? How do they judge action – by what standards, developed and applied by whom?
- What rewards to various actors gain from their participation?

(as cited in Charmaz & Mitchell, 2001, p. 163)
Appendix 3  General Job Responsibilities of Veupoint Teachers

- to prepare lesson plans and assessment programmes

- to teach for the designated contact hours - 25 contact hours per week for full-time employees; 12.5 contact hours per week for part-time employees

- to attend one staff meeting per week (normally held on a Wednesday at the start of the lunch break)

- to attend moderation and NZQA meetings (for audit purposes) as required

- to attend student farewell meetings, and be available when rostered to run these

- to set and mark homework when necessary; as well as when requested

- to provide assistance to learners during self-access study periods; when necessary and when requested

- to write accurate and true records of all assessment results for students in the form of progress reports

- to conduct regular tests for all students:
  - 2 times during General English course cycles (i.e. once every 5 weeks, one cycle’s duration being 10 weeks)
  - 3 times for FCE, CAE and CPE Cambridge preparation courses (first-day diagnostic testing, mid-mock exams halfway through the course, and final mock exams shortly before students take the external examination)
  - 4 times for EAP courses (once every two weeks over the 8 weeks of the course)
  - 2 times for IELTS preparation courses (mid-mocks and final mocks)
  - 1 time for TESOL / TECSOL courses (in the last week of the 4-week intensive course)

- to accept when asked, peer observations, trial students and trainee teachers into their classes

- to accurately record student attendance, absences and late arrivals

- to provide accurate records of lesson content provided on a daily basis

- to liaise with and take direction from DOS / ADOS with regards to curriculum

- to arrange excursions off the school premises when required and to do so following the guidelines set out in the teacher’s manual
Appendix 4    Teacher Development Session, “Rocket” discussion

Normal script: descriptions

*Italics:* interpretive notes

4:00

…One teacher (Lisa’s partner) tells Ava (HOTD) that they don’t know what the difference between a rocket and a space shuttle is. Lisa replies that she does and proceeds to help the teacher by explaining what she understands the difference to be. Lisa’s partner doesn’t seem to understand her explanation – in response the Ava starts drawing a picture of a rocket and a space shuttle on the whiteboard and then writes down key core concepts underneath each picture. Lisa is still animatedly trying to explain the difference to her partner. At the same time, Sam and his partner are having a rather interactive discussion on what the meaning is that on the surface appears to be a little more democratic…

4:05

…Ava gets everyone’s attention – it appears as if there’s a fair amount of dissension with regards to what a ‘rocket’ actually is. She seems to be getting annoyed – it probably feels a bit like this discussion is detracting from the overall purpose of the session…

Ava says: “OK, so let’s go back. Rocket – what’s the core concept?” Sam voices his disagreement with the core concepts on the board by saying: “Well, rockets don’t always go up in space.” Ava acknowledges this, but still persists with her line of questioning, “OK, let’s go back, what part is not relevant. It’s outside of the core concept of what a rocket is.” To me, it appears that she’s alluding to the one use/several times used distinction between rockets and space shuttles. Sam replies: “Aren’t you contradicting yourself a little?” This unleashes a bout of animated discussion and a number of other teachers contribute their ideas. Ava tries to bring the discussion back by saying that people are getting hung up on details – they need to focus on the core concepts. Sam reiterates that he disagrees with the core concepts as they are presented, but seems to make a decision not to pursue the matter.

*Although Sam fundamentally disagrees with the meaning statements presented, he’s voiced his disagreement and it seems that he’s consciously decided to step back and let things proceed. This seems a good example of his ‘going along, getting along’ philosophy. There’s also a level of awareness that perhaps his logical unpicking of the concepts, if pursued further, will make Ava feel that he’s derailing her attempts at helping teachers formulate core concepts and CCQs. For me his actions now have a double meaning – he’s not willing to expend any more effort to defend his ideas – he sees it as wasted energy. However at the same time I think it’s a moral decision – in terms of understanding what Ava wants to achieve in this session and wanting to maintain good relations with her.*

(excerpts from Teacher Development Session – 21/11/2012)
Appendix 5  Teacher Development Sessions for 2013 & 2014

Schedule for 2013

13 February  Express planning!
   Presented by Ava and Penny

20 March  Speaking moderation (in preparation for the speaking test on 12th of April)
   Presented by Penny

1 May  Pronunciation
   Presented by Ava and Penny

29 May  Different cultures in 1 classroom (Strategies for dealing with a culturally diverse classroom)
   Presented by Ava, Penny and June

26 June  Controlled vs. Freer Practice
   Presented by Ava and Penny

21 August  A language aspect: TBC
   Presented by Penny and Ava

18 September  Humanising the Classroom: Classroom management to reduce stress
   Presented by Penny, June and Ava

16 October  Mini-research topic discovery
   Presented by Ava

20 November  Error Correction (rationale and techniques)
   Presented by Penny and Ava

11 December  Based on demand: TBC
   Presented by Penny and Ava

Schedule for 2014

19 February  Controlled vs. Freer Practice
   Presented by Ava

26 March  Coping with mixed levels 1 (lesson materials, lesson staging, techniques)
   Presented by Ava

10 April  Coping with mixed levels 2 (differentiation in the 4 Skills)
   Presented by June

7 May  Pronunciation – Drilling techniques
   Presented by June and Ava

11 June  Speaking moderation (in preparation for speaking test 23rd of June)
   Presented by Ava and June

10 September  Mini research topic discovery (in association with formal observations and peer observations)
   Presented by Ava

October  Teacher Training Day (External Inter-schools workshop)

22 October  Teaching grammar to low levels
   Presented by June and Ava

19 November  Techniques for teaching low levels
   Presented by June

10 December  Functional language dialogue build
   Presented by June
Appendix 6  
Classroom Observation 3 (Sam) – extract from descriptive field notes

12:50

Sam continues with, “Anything new, fun, exciting going on?” The general student response is “no”. One of the Arabic students pipes up, “I read an article – if you want to eat chocolate, if you eat too much – you have less magnesium in your blood – which is bad.” Sam uses this as a springboard for some class discussion, with other students asking the student more questions about the article, with Sam interjecting here and there. As this is happening, one of the late students comes in and takes their seat.

The discussion then changes as the same student who talked about the findings of the chocolate article introduces a new topic – he recounts reading about a condition that very few people have (only 20 people in the world have it), and what happens is that these people remember everything – they can’t forget. This pricks the interest of most students in class.

12:55

Sam decides to use this article’s mention as a springboard for group discussion and divides students into groups of 5 or 6. Sam asks them to discuss a few questions related to the topic (hyperthymesia). “Would you want to remember everything?” and “What are the benefits/drawbacks to being able to remember everything?” Just before students start on the task, Sam reiterates, “So to recap, would you want to remember everything in detail? What are the positives and negatives of this?”

As a joke, one of the Swiss students then asks Sam, “Sorry Sam, I didn’t get that – what’s the topic?” Sam collapses in mock exasperation and then starts to explain the topic to him again, until he realises that the student was just making a joke as he [the student] collapses in laughter.

Students start discussing the issue with each other – Sam is sitting between the two big groups then moves towards the board and writes “Benefits” and “Drawbacks” on the WB – in the centre of the WB he writes “Other”.

There is a lot of banter and joking among students during the discussion, and Sam joins in this periodically while monitoring.

1:00

Sam responds to one student’s comment as he’s back in the centre between the two groups, listening to the developing discussions and possibly waiting for a suitable moment with which to end the initial discussion stage. The level of talking/discussion becomes audibly lower in volume in one group, and Sam approaches them and asks, “Done?”

(field notes – Classroom Observation 3 [Sam] – IELTS preparation class, 28/11/2012)
Appendix 7  Staff Meeting 4 - 14/11/2012

Description – normal script  Theoretical notes – italics

11:45
General banter between staff members as we’re waiting for latecomers to arrive. DOS and ADOS are discussing issues amongst themselves. As the stragglers arrive, the meeting commences with the DOS saying “Good morning everybody, how are you? Let’s get started.” The first announcement is regarding the start of test week with the speaking test being conducted on Friday. Again teachers are reminded to use the speaking test assessment sheets and the DOS answers a number of queries regarding the assessment of those who are absent on the day of test.

The DOS tells staff about what the Head of Teacher Development will be doing regarding random ‘rogue’ files saved on the computers’ desktops – she will regularly put all the items in a ‘Star’ folder. Teachers need to check this folder regularly to claim any files of theirs and transfer them to their own personal folders. The ‘Star’ folder itself will be deleted on a monthly basis to keep things “neat and tidy”.

11:50
In response to teacher interest in teaching IELTS exam courses, the DOS alerts staff members to the IELTS course she teaches on Friday afternoons. She invites any interested teachers to schedule an observation of the IELTS class with her – if they feel it would be useful for their professional development. She emphasises that this is completely voluntary and not required for anybody wanting to teach IELTS themselves.

A general request is made with regards to photocopying – teachers are asked to be mindful of the amount of copying they’re doing – the DOS and ADOS are finding a lot of unnecessary wastage with regards to paper found in the recycling box.

This focus on cost-cutting seems to occur with renewed energy every year just before an Annual General Meeting. It kind of seems like the cleaning up after a house party before the parents come home. In this case the parent is the owner of the school.

The key issue for today’s meeting is the upcoming AGM (Annual General Meeting) as well as contract renegotiations. Thursday the 29th of November is mentioned as a tentative date as it is convenient for the owner of the school to also be in attendance at this time. The DOS acknowledges the fact that staff members (especially the teachers) were “not happy with the way it was run last year”.

The DOS proposes a solution to make this year’s AGM more efficient: an anonymous MS Word template will be created which teachers can then fill in with their proposals/ideas/suggestions/solutions for discussion and hand in to the DOS. The DOS will then collate all the issues in a general document which will then serve as the agenda for the AGM. During the AGM itself, staff members will form pre-arranged focus groups – each led by a management team member (e.g. DOS, ADOS, HOTD). Minutes will be taken of these focus group discussions and again collated after the meeting – with management generating action points for the following year addressing the most pertinent issues that arose.
One teacher asks whether a slightly more informal discussion might not be a better option to talk about matters. This idea is acknowledged, but then the DOS cites time constraints and the need to make sure as many issues are discussed as possible for the choice of focus groups.

The DOS seems to have spent a considerable amount of time thinking about how to make the AGM more productive than last year. However, she also seems quite married to her idea – in the sense that regardless of teacher input in this meeting – the way things are going to run has already been decided.

11:55
The DOS announces a change in the timeframe for cycles and testing starting next year – ‘terms’ or ‘course cycles’ will be shortened from 12/13 weeks to 10 weeks. Instead of 3 monthly progress tests during the old system, one round of testing will disappear in the new system – a progress test will only be conducted once every 5 weeks – i.e. 2 per cycle instead of 3. The rationales provided by the DOS for the decision are: customer feedback, more learning time in the classroom, a better fit with the calendar year as well as less ‘paperwork’ for teachers.

An announcement is made regarding a teacher who is leaving on holiday next week and wishing her a great break. The DOS concludes the meeting by asking, “Anything else?” The ADOS makes a general announcement from admin, specifically from the Accounting Manager – that due to financial constraints, costs in various areas are being made. One of these cost-cutting measures is that teachers will not be able to use coloured paper for class anymore. In addition, students’ leaving forms will now be printed on white paper and not the special ‘marble’ paper they used to be printed on. The meeting finishes with the ADOS handing out wages sheets for casual teachers.

The overall mood is quite sombre today. The talk of cost-cutting always seems to generate this – is it because for many of the teachers, especially those on short-term contracts, added focus on cost-cutting serves as a subtle suggestion that job security is again at stake.