

‘In military terms, we are just collateral damage’: School closures and symbolic violence

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Schools can be permanently closed for many reasons—economic rationalisation, post-disaster relocations, population decline or educational failure. Research on permanent school closures reports mostly negative and long-lasting consequences, not just for the school’s staff and students, but for the local community. After the 2010/2011 Canterbury earthquakes in New Zealand, the Ministry of Education produced a plan to permanently close or merge 38 schools. The author followed one school through its closure and the early stages of its merger with a neighbouring school. Although the two schools came together to create a new entity with a new name, the process was not without emotional harm to the school designated as the ‘closing’ school. The ‘continuing’ school, on the other, hand appeared to act beyond its brief and behave in ways that unintentionally contributed to that harm. In the interviews with the closing school, participants reported acts of careless disregard, humiliation and even vindictiveness by the continuing school community. While the emotional impact will have declined over time, there is merit in examining what happened in order to make better policy and implementation decisions for similar situations in the future. In this article, I use Bourdieu’s concepts *symbolic power* and *symbolic violence* to discuss what happened and *field*, *capital* and *habitus* to posit an explanation for why the continuing school acted in the way that it did and why the closing school capitulated.

Keywords: School closures, symbolic violence, Bourdieu, post-disaster

Introduction

After the 2010/2011 Canterbury earthquakes in New Zealand, I began to document the role that schools had played in the earthquake’s response and recovery phases (see, Author [removed for review purposes]). One school in my study subsequently became impacted by the Ministry of Education’s post-earthquake school reorganisation plan and asked if I would tell the story of their closure and merger with a neighbouring school. I have done this in more detail elsewhere (Author, 2017; 2018) but for several years, I

have puzzled over the attitude and actions of the neighbouring school—that is, the ‘continuing school’ towards the ‘closing school’. In this article, I have no wish to pit one school against another as ‘good school’ versus ‘bad school’ but rather I wish to explore, theoretically and conceptually, what led the continuing school to act in the way that it did and why the closing school capitulated. To do so, I am drawing on Bourdieu’s (1979, 1989) notions of symbolic power and symbolic violence and complementing these with the concepts of field, capital and habitus (Bourdieu, 1993a; Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977).

Bourdieu (1979, p. 80) states that *symbolic power* is recognised as the ‘power to constitute the given by stating it.’ I argue that rather than this being a merger of equals, labelling one school as ‘closing’ and the other as ‘continuing’, created a hierarchical system of symbolic power, which in turn, legitimated on-going symbolic violence. *Symbolic violence* is, ‘defined in and by a determinate relationship between those who exercise power and those who undergo it’ (Bourdieu (1979, p. 83) whereby the victims appear complicit in their treatment. The power of the continuing school over the closing school appeared taken-for-granted, even though the closing school had done nothing more than be subject to the random forces of nature, and the closing school appeared powerless to challenge their domination.

I begin this article by summarising the literature on school closures before setting the research in its post-earthquake context. I then synthesise relevant concepts from Bourdieu’s theories. Relevant data from my study are shared in two parts: the first part tells the story of the school’s closure; and the second part, the school’s experience of the merger. In the discussion section, I re-engage with Bourdieu’s concepts to provide an explanation of the way in which the Government, through the Minister of Education and her Ministry, used symbolic power to implement their post-earthquake school

reorganisation plan. This power was subsequently delegated to the continuing school, who unwittingly used symbolic violence to dominate the closing school throughout the merger process.

Literature review: school closures

There is limited research on school closures but a brief literature search reveals common themes across a number of countries. The findings from research on permanent closures show that the impacts on students, school staff and communities are mostly negative and long-lasting (Autti & Hyry-Beihammer, 2014; De Witte and Van Klaveren, 2014; Haynes, 2022; Kirshner, Gaertner & Pozzoboni, 2010; Lehtonen, 2021; Paino, et al., 2017; Witten, et al., 2003). What I wish to highlight in this article is the collateral damage that school closures can leave in their wake.

The most common reason for school closures is population loss, for example, due to the industrialisation of farming, globalisation of industry or drift to the cities. As the population in an area diminishes, it is inevitable that a school might no longer be viable. This is especially so in rural areas (Sagemann, 2022). In New Zealand, the closure of small rural schools has been linked to the closure of rural post offices, banks and hospitals from the late 1980s. Analysis revealed that many of the schools were in areas of high deprivation and that school closure and relocation of students only exacerbated the difficulties faced by these communities (Witten et al., 2003). Over the past two decades, two thirds of small rural schools in Finland closed. Decisions were made without consultation and enacted swiftly, leaving communities feeling powerless (Autti & Hyry-Beihammer, 2014). A study of school closures in Northern Europe between 2010 and 2018 found that school closures hastened population decline (Lehtonen, 2021). Another study of systematic closure of small rural schools in Denmark, however,

concluded that school closures do not necessarily cause social dislocation, rather they are the sign that the community is already in its final phase of decline (Egelund & Lautsen, 2006). Witten, McCreanor, Kearns, and Ramasubramanian (2001), on the other hand, argue that keeping schools open is important for population retention and intergenerational investment.

Research also reports on school closures for ideological reasons (stemming from the influence of neoliberalism on educational decision making), for example, closing poor performing schools (see, Han et al., 2017) or setting up public-private partnerships such as charter schools. Much of the literature on ideologically-motivated closures comes from the United States. Where schools have been closed because of poor educational achievement, those most affected are already marginalised, such as, African-American, Latina/Latino and low-socio-economic communities. Some closures are linked to urban decay and the consequential gentrification of neighbourhoods. When students are relocated or families are forced to move, they struggle to feel connected to the new schools and parents struggle to meet the increased costs associated with the move (Basu, 2007; Buras, 2011; Johnson, 2006; Lipman, 2011; Means, 2008; Paino et al., 2017).

School closures are emotionally volatile events. While some communities accept their fate as inevitable, others challenge the decision. Challenges might be through protests, legal interventions or via the media. In Canada, writers of letters-to-the-editor protesting school closures presented a range of arguments for non-closure, including personal experiences, the role of schools in communities and the importance of public education (Phipps, 2000). In terms of gaining media attention, a study in Germany

found that higher status grammar schools received more attention when they closed than other school types, highlighting the power imbalance between different socio-economic communities (Bartl & Sackmann, 2016). When one school in New Zealand was set to close, the community used a range of strategies, including engaging local and national media, street protests and community meetings. Someone even used weed killer to paint a protest message on the school's grass playground (Witten et al., 2003). Between 1994 and 2012, over 2000 schools were closed across Chile. In Santiago, parents of three public schools took over the running of the schools as an act of defiance against the proposed closures. They kept up this resistance for seven months and finally succeeded in having their schools officially re-opened (Pino-Yancovic, 2015).

Closures can have varying impacts – on individuals, schools and their communities. A review of school closures in Canada found that there were economic and social impacts for the communities, along with implications for students (Haynes, 2022). When schools in Amsterdam were closed because of poor performance, De Witte and Van Klaveren (2014) were interested in whether students' achievement improved when they were moved to higher achieving schools. They found that there was no evidence of improvement, yet nor was there dramatic evidence of decline. Engberg et al., (2012) in the US, however, found that while students could be adversely affected by school closures, this impact was lessened if they moved to higher achieving schools, but Brummet (2012) found that there were some negative spillover effects on the receiving schools. Also in the US, Kirshner, Gaertner & Pozzoboni (2010) examined a range of data relating to Latina/Latino and African American students, who transitioned to new schools after their schools closed, and found that their academic

performance did decline. Standardised test scores were lower, dropout rates increased and graduation rates decreased.

Two UK studies, (Kyriacou & Harriman, 1993; and Riseborough, 1994) discussed the impact on teachers when their schools closed. Teachers reported feeling disempowered and de-professionalised. Although teachers had tried to halt the closures through appeals or protests, they were powerless. They were made redundant and had to apply for new teaching positions. They faced high levels of stress and reported difficulty in adjusting to or being accepted in their new settings. A more recent study in Texas (Richards, Stroub & Guthrey, 2020) found that closures were associated with the likelihood of teachers leaving the profession, especially senior teachers, and worsened the under-representation of minority teachers.

Parents are also impacted. When schools closed in New Zealand in the 1990s-2000s, parents lost their social networks and connections. Researchers argued that schools are often the biggest, most-well-resourced spaces for communities to gather and, in closing them, communities are losing more than just an educational facility. Schools are sites of accumulated goodwill over many generations (Kearns et al., 2009; Witten et al., 2001).

In summary, the literature emphasises the central place that schools have in the fabric of their communities and the fierce emotions that arise when schools are forced to close. Closures appear to have most impact on already vulnerable communities, especially where these closures are ideologically motivated. School closures do not always improve student outcomes and can even decrease the performance of

disadvantaged and marginalised groups. Communities can draw on a range of strategies to overturn closure decisions but their efforts are not always effective in gaining a reprieve. Negative emotions remain long after closures have been implemented and communities often become dispirited. School closures might even signal the decline of some communities.

The research context

At 4.35am on September 5, 2010, a 7.2 magnitude earthquake struck 40 kilometres west of the city of Christchurch in the South Island of New Zealand. The city and surrounding districts of Canterbury faced major destruction of roads, rail, water supply and waste removal along with structural damage to homes, business and public buildings. For several weeks, the city came to a standstill as the streets were cleared of liquefaction (silt), rubble was taken away and essential services were restored. Schools were often temporary community shelters for those who had lost their homes. Once schools were assessed and repaired or alternative provision was arranged, they were reopened to provide a sense of normalcy to families and communities (Author, 2015a; Aydan, Ulusay, Hamada, & Beetham, 2012; Education Review Office, 2013).

Despite continuing aftershocks, there was a sense of hope as the city appeared to have survived all that nature could throw at it. In 2011, however, there were a further three major aftershocks (over 6 on the Richter scale) amid the thousands of smaller ones. The most damaging was in the middle of a school day on February 22, located much closer to the city centre. Over 1200 inner city buildings were damaged beyond repair, several hundred thousand homes and business sustained further damage, 185 people died with thousands more injured, and the city's infrastructure sustained billions of dollars of damage. School children were having lunch or playing in the playgrounds

at the time of the February quake. Principals and teachers became first responders as they rescued, calmed and cared for children until their parents came (Author, 2015b, c; Canterbury Earthquakes Commission, 2012; Education Review Office, 2013; Potter, Becker, Johnston & Rossiter, 2015).

Early in 2012, the Ministry of Education began consultation on their plan, *Education Renewal for Greater Christchurch* (Ministry of Education [MoE], 2012). The Minister of Education took the opportunity provided by the earthquakes to promote the idea of 21st century schools as part of the rebuild. At the time, schools felt that the Minister and Ministry were genuinely engaging ‘in blue skies thinking on how they would reform the current schooling system to something better’ (Principal, cited in Duncan, 2016, p. 31).

In September, 2012, armed with Government and Treasury backing, the Minister and leading Ministry officials invited Christchurch principals to meet them at the Lincoln Events Centre. Principals were given coloured name tags – green, yellow or red. Unbeknown to the principals, the colours indicated whether their schools would be ‘restored’, ‘consolidated’ or ‘rejuvenated’—words designed to soften the fact that they were about to be told whether their schools would continue, merge or close. The meeting caused considerable distress. One principal described it as ‘vile’: ‘[It] began a cycle of anxiety and helplessness for many. It was a time of winners and losers. Then the ludicrous coloured card system at the meeting added to the farce’ (Principal cited in Duncan, 2016, p.28).

The proposal was to close or merge 38 schools. Although the Ministry had criteria by which they insisted that closure decisions were made, reports have shown that the decisions were based on inaccurate data (Direen, 2016; Duncan, 2016). One school

shared its view of the Ministry's decision making:

The whole rationale for our closure given by the MoE, [was] based on three points: a non-viable roll (was 340); all 15 buildings earthquake damaged (had a report stating damage minor and superficial); and that our land was substantially damaged (we took away 2 car trailer loads of liquefaction). [It] was, at best, errors of fact, at worst, a political decision. (Principal cited in Duncan, 2016, p.16).

Direen (2016, p. 51) notes the stress caused by the 'speed of decision making, variation in quality of communication and information overload.' The Ministry was even accused of manipulating or withholding information. When such concerns reached the Ombudsman's Office in 2012, an investigation was conducted into claims that (a) the Ministry withheld information, (b) instructed the Christchurch City Council to withhold information, and (c) and instructed principals to cease seeking information. The Ombudsman confirmed the Ministry had acted wrongly on all three counts. He concluded:

Schools and parents should not have to ferret out information by making official information requests. They should be presented with the relevant information in a comprehensive and comprehensible form so that they can participate effectively in the consultation process. (Office of the Ombudsman, 2012, p. 15)

Consultation also appeared to be an *ad hoc* process. It often happened after the fact, was presented as *fait accompli* or did not take place at all. The Ombudsman commented in his report: 'School closures and mergers are decisions that have a major impact not just on the affected staff, pupils and parents, but on the whole communities in which the schools are based. Therefore, effective consultation is of utmost importance' (Office of the Ombudsman, 2012, p. 15).

Little consideration was given for the way in which these decisions came on top of many other issues facing Christchurch schools at that time. A review for the Human

Rights Commission stated, ‘Communities were already coping with the aftermath of the earthquakes. Schools provide a much-needed community focal point. It is almost beyond comprehension that this process was initiated at such a stressful and uncertain time.’ (Baird, 2014, p. 8)

The post-earthquake school reorganisation process came in for much criticism from a range of sources, including principals and their associations, teachers and their unions, and other organisations, such as the Human Rights Commission and the Child Poverty Action Group. The process was variously described as deceptive, poorly thought-out, based on limited consultation, using inaccurate data, rushed, unfair and insensitive (Author, 2017, 2018; Baird, 2013; Direen, 2016; Duncan, 2016; Post Primary Teachers Association, 2013; Shirlaw, 2014).

Vindication finally came for schools in 2017, when the Office of the Ombudsman released a further report into the handling of the school reorganisation process. The investigation found that the Ministry treated schools with mistrust and defensiveness. The report notes:

What followed was an exercise where schools were being consulted on preliminary conceptual issues at the same time that detailed proposals concerning individual schools were being developed in secret. It did not seem to occur to the Ministry that this would be perceived as a major breach of trust when full details were announced, seemingly out of nowhere, in September 2012. (Office of the Ombudsman, 2017, p. 21)

The report concluded that the school reorganisation process was mismanaged, lacked transparency and caused stress to already traumatised communities. The Ombudsman recommended that the Ministry make a public apology to all 38 schools involved. The apology duly appeared in an advertisement in Christchurch’s daily newspaper, *The*

Press, on June 22, 2017 but, by then, the damage was done.

The research process

My connection to these events began when I was living in Christchurch at the time of the earthquakes. In 2012, I gained funding for a study titled, 'Christchurch schools tell their earthquake stories.' I used a participatory research process to enable schools to document the journey that their school communities had been through as they responded to and recovered from the earthquakes. I followed five schools from different locations over several years and much of this has been written up elsewhere (see for example, Author, 2014, 2015a). In 2013, one of the schools slated for closure, which had been unsuccessful in gaining a reprieve, invited me to help them tell their story. At the end of 2013 the school closed and, in 2014, they were merged with a nearby school.

My research team assisted the school to tell their story in a way that would resonate with the school community (see, Author & colleagues, 2015). With the help of a teacher-researcher from the school, children interviewed their peers and made a video about what the school meant to them. As lead researcher, I also undertook open-ended, in-depth interviews with the acting principal, several staff members and parents. The research was approved by my university's ethics committee. We proceeded in a sensitive, flexible and gentle manner to ensure that any participants would not be re-traumatised by their engagement in the process. Participants were free to stop, take a break or withdraw at any time. We had support personnel available if participants became distressed.

Before reporting on the research findings, I introduce the relevant theoretical concepts that I will use to provide an insight into the post-earthquake behaviour of the Government, the Minister and Ministry of Education, and the two schools.

Bourdieu's notions of field, capital, habitus and power

French theorist, Pierre Bourdieu (1930-2002), was a prolific writer, thinker and public intellectual. He introduced, expanded upon or theorised many important sociological concepts such as field, capital, habitus and power and, more specifically, related to this article, symbolic power and symbolic violence.

A *field* is a social arena, network or context where social actors (or agents in Bourdieu's words) come together for a recognisable purpose. Actors hold various forms of *capital* – economic, cultural, social or symbolic – and bring a *habitus* or set of ingrained dispositions from their personal histories and backgrounds to the field. How well their dispositions and capital resonate with the field will determine their success (Author, 2013; Bourdieu, 1993a). Reay (2004) views habitus as a set of matrices that 'demarcate the extent of choices available' and that make 'some possibilities inconceivable, others improbable and a limited range acceptable' (p. 435).

The purpose of engagement in the field is to gain control of an important object, idea or asset that is at stake. Actors use their capital to advance their cause. While habitus is made up of the dispositions actors bring with them, it also adapts to create new sets of rules of behaviour and communication for the emerging field (Author, 2013a; Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977). Power is produced, reproduced, contested and legitimised through an interplay of agency and structure, determined by forms of capital that hold currency in a particular field (Author, 2013a; Bourdieu, 1979, 1993a; Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977).

Symbolic power is formed by symbolic instruments. Bourdieu (1979) outlines three types of symbolic instruments. First, are *structuring structures* (subjective

instruments) that construct a view of the world through symbolic forms. Second, are *structured structures* (objective instruments) that have become symbolic objects. Third, are *structures of domination* (ideological instruments) that construct power hierarchies. Symbolic power draws on other forms of power but it is less tangible, in that it is an unchallenged status or position that is used to confirm the holder's place in the social hierarchy and to reinforce domination over those of lesser status (Bourdieu, 1979, 1989; Moon, 2011). Bourdieu explains, 'It is as structured and structuring instruments of communication and knowledge that 'symbolic systems' fulfil their political functions of instruments of domination (or, more precisely, of legitimation of domination)' (1979, p. 80). Bourdieu also explains that while symbolic forms take on new social functions that transform the field of play, they also impose a social reality that is quite *arbitrary*: 'Symbolic power... is only exerted insofar as it is recognised (i.e., insofar as its arbitrariness is misrecognised)' (1979, p. 83).

When holders of symbolic power use their influence to create unconscious structures, meanings or actions that can cause harm to someone with less power or status, such as through discrimination, they are exercising *symbolic violence*. These unconscious structures become taken-for-granted truths that go unchallenged and are continually perpetuated. Moon (2011) describes symbolic violence as 'the practices of social exclusion and inferiorisation of the other' in the 'form of domination and oppression' (p. 195). It is a type of 'silent' violence that is less obvious than physical violence but no less real (Moon, 2011).

Symbolic violence depends on the complicity of both the perpetrator and the victim in a reciprocal relationship (Bourdieu, 1979, 1989; Kitalong, 1998). As Moon (2011, p. 195) explains, 'Far from resisting, oppressed groups are understood to legitimate their subordinate position and are found to become complicit to dominant

regulatory regimes by internalising the practices of the dominant group.’

Before discussing how these concepts help us understand the post-earthquake context, the next section presents two sets of interview data from the author’s study. The first part (‘the closure’) outlines how the closing school coped with the closure decision. The second part (‘the merger’) tells the story of the merger from the closing school’s perspective. Data are presented in an anonymised manner, where the schools are called the closing or continuing school and participants are called Teacher 1 or Student 2 and so on.

The closure: ‘In military terms, we are just collateral damage!’

Prior to the earthquakes, the closing school held a significant place in its community. During the earthquake, teachers and parents put their lives in danger to rescue, evacuate, calm and look after children. During the recovery period, teachers put their own concerns aside to focus on students and their families (see Author, 2017 for more detail). Their care and compassion did not go unnoticed. One parent commented:

All these teachers are quiet heroes. I know there are teachers here that have lost their homes and some of them are living in the same situation as we are and they come to work and they get on with it. They do their job as best they can and they never ever show their frustration to the kids. (Parent 2)

The closure announcement was badly handled. Once the school’s name was mentioned at the Lincoln meeting, the news travelled quickly. One parent recalled, ‘I heard it on the radio on the news as I was coming to pick up the kids from school’ (Parent 1). A teacher heard by text message:

Unfortunately, the media leaked it before [we were told]. People were texting me. They texted me at work. Friends said ‘Oh, the school is closing’. But we hadn’t heard that as a school, as staff. (Teacher 1)

The leaked information was premature. Little was clear as to when, where, how, and even if, the school would be closed or merged. The school was left feeling uncertain about its future. Another teacher, who also had a child at the school, recalls how she felt on hearing the news:

[I was] worried. I was just sick in my stomach thinking, okay, what is it saying about jobs? What is it saying my child’s school...? There wasn’t enough information given out at the time, for you not to think about what does this mean for you, for your future. I mean, we’re already living in house waiting to be repaired, and we’re going to lose my job now and my child’s going to lose their school. (Teacher 2)

Students were upset: ‘I was pretty sad, because I have been in that school for 5 years, and then as my last year at the school proceeds, the school would finish when I leave.’ (Student 19). One student decided to take matters into his own hands:

My younger son had even written a letter to the Queen. He was not going to go just to John Key [Prime Minister] who he blamed for the whole merger. He was going to the top. He thought, well the Queen is in charge of the countries of the Commonwealth, so he wrote to her to ask if she could help. And, of course, she wrote back and said that she couldn’t interfere. (Parent 1)

The school’s Board of Trustees prepared a submission against the school’s closure but was unsuccessful. At the end of 2013, the school would close. Staff and students would be merged with a nearby school. Closing a school with such a strong sense of community did not seem to make sense:

It’s like a village here; there’s so many people and it’s the history of the school. It goes back so far – to wipe that out, it’s just shocking – no account was taken of the

community. It was all just financial. It was short-sighted decision making because, surprisingly, our roll hasn't dropped as far as what they thought it would. (Support Staff 1)

Teachers had to support each other, their students and the wider community. It did not go unnoticed by parents:

They were so positive. I mean the teachers were going through more themselves about the whole merger and how it was going to work. They all had to apply for their jobs and all the rest of it. And yet they were so positive with the children. ... So, I take my hat off to the teachers because they were going through so much too... – the earthquake, the merger, the uncertainty (Parent 1)

The recently appointed acting principal was shocked by the lack of humanity and empathy in the process. He commented:

How does that affect the staff? The emotional ties and the relationships are torn apart; families that have been associated with the school for decades have gone. That kind of link and historical connection, and knowledge of the community and the school and its involvement goes as well. History goes; it travels with the people. (Acting Principal)

At the end of 2013, the school had a celebration to mark the end of its 140-year history. A visual and written history of the school was compiled, old pupils were invited back and fun activities were arranged for children and their families. Everyone could take a turn at ringing the school bell and reflect on what the school had meant to them: "We all got to ring this old bell that had been there since the school started about 140 years ago." (Student 7); "To clear the memories ... to get them all out and make new ones" (Student 5).

Despite the fact that many students had returned to the closing school and the roll had not dropped as far as the Ministry of Education had predicted; despite the fact that most classrooms were able to be used or repaired; despite the significant role the school played in the community's history and identity, especially during the earthquakes; despite submissions against the closure, the school closed. Reflecting on the process, the acting principal commented, 'In military terms, we are just collateral damage!'

The merger: 'Small fish going into the big pond.'

Although the reorganisation of these two schools was technically a 'merger', labelling one the 'closing school' and the other the 'continuing school' changed the nature of the relationship. The closing school was left feeling disenfranchised. The school community was concerned that the process was less like a merger and more like a takeover:

There was a lot of concern over the fact that we felt like the small fish going into the big pond, because [the continuing school] was the larger school with the bigger community and our concern was that we would feel swallowed up ... it's meant to be a merger, but in some ways, it does feel as if ... we, our children, now, are in [the continuing school].
(Parent 1)

Not only did the closing school need to come to terms with the final decision, teachers needed to reapply for positions in the merged school:

It was horrible. And it's like, you know, you were a teacher, you were an existing person. Now you have to suddenly establish who you are again. You have to convince them that you know how to teach. And I was quite shocked by that; we are qualified, we have been teaching; we've been having appraisal.... We are qualified! (Teacher 2)

The continuing school did not feel any more pleased about the merger decision and some parents from that school set up a Facebook page to share their frustration. The page was closed down when comments about the closing school became unprofessional and spiteful.

As the countdown to the merger took place, the closing school expected that there would be meetings to discuss how the two schools could come together:

I mean, it's a bit like marriage when you put two people together, you talk to each other, you find out what's really important to you and what things might not be important as much. ... And this is two schools together, and so you need to have not just one way. (Teacher 2)

Instead, the continuing school took charge of the process. One example was the continuing school arriving to do an inventory of resources while the closing school was still operating:

They had people from [the continuing school] coming in sorting out our resource room and actually throwing away all our social studies resources and what they didn't want. ... No consultation really. It was just laid down like that. This was what was going to happen. (Teacher 3)

While opportunities were put in place for the students to get to know each other before the merger, little was done by the continuing school to help the teachers get to know each other. The continuing principal was appointed as principal of the newly merged entity. The new Board of Trustees contained more continuing school than closing school members, tipping the balance of decision making in the continuing school's favour. Teacher 3 described it as a 'cultural clash' and said, 'they didn't ask how things operated on our side.' Teacher 2 suggested that teachers from both school should have

talked more:

I think that teachers should've got together, and they should have talked about the children and talked about ... the things they had in place to deal with things. Then from those two different ways, created one great way that worked for both sets of children.

Many of the concerns about the reorganisation process that were raised across the city were reflected in this merger process. The compressed timeframe was one. More time was required to absorb each other's culture and systems to produce the best way forward:

The time frame has to be a lot longer. I think there has to be a lot more integrating with the schools... longer time frames would have more discussion... I just think the whole thing is, if we were given more time by the government... It's important that both schools have teachers at the senior management level, so you can bring the two cultures and systems and procedures together. (Teacher 3)

More time and better planning was also needed to ensure that the continuing school had the facilities to take on a large number of new students. This was not the case, and late in 2013, the two schools were told by the Ministry that the newly merged school would be split across two sites – the current continuing school site and the disestablished closing school site. The idea of split sites took both schools by surprise. The decision had been made without the participation of the schools or parents and was rushed through. In 2014, the newly merged entity opened across the two sites. It was a strange feeling for some of the teachers and students from the closing school to find themselves back on their old site but with a new identity, as with this teacher who also had a child at the school:

I had to keep my job and my position separate from my child's school – this is his

school. And I had to make this really good for him, because he was staying on the [old] site, but it was not going to be the old school anymore. ... I was keeping back from him anything I might be feeling. And so, it was quite hard actually as dual role, very difficult. (Teacher 2)

The policies, procedures, curriculum resources and teaching approaches from the continuing school took precedence. The closing school teachers were struggling to preserve something of their old school's identity and uniqueness in the merged school environment but they were expected to adapt to the continuing school's ways of doing things:

... it would be more balanced if the other teachers had to learn a new process for teaching... especially for the [closing school] community, if something of [the closing school] had stayed. I feel strongly about that, because [the closing school] was achieving, it wasn't *not* achieving. (Teacher 1)

Students were similarly expected to adapt. Closing school teachers felt this was unfair:

Because I feel otherwise you get one group of children that know all the processes; they know all the testing... whereas you get another group of kids and everything is new to them. Every single thing, learning-wise... they have to learn the homework structure, everything is different. (Teacher 1)

Parents noticed, as well:

I mean it's little things like notices came out and instead of having [the new name of the merged school], [the continuing] school's on it. [Our] children come to school and they are wearing their plain navy polo shirts, and the [continuing school] children still have got their logos on theirs... It's not a merged identity.... (Parent 1)

This quote identifies the concern highlighted by most study participants. Until new

uniforms were designed, the closing school wanted to keep their original uniforms, which not only would remind them of their former identity but would save unnecessary expenditure. The Board of Trustees of the merged school would not allow the closing school students to wear their old uniforms but allowed the continuing school to do so. Closing school parents had to buy new plain uniforms:

Ours had to change. We had pale blue, so our parents had to all go and buy new [navy] polo shirts On the other hand, [continuing school children] were allowed to wear their original uniforms with the [continuing school] logo. Totally their uniform! (Teacher 3).

This new rule was also applied to sports uniforms but in a less conciliatory manner:

And the same thing has happened with sports team uniforms... They've got [our old name] on them We had to turn them inside out and put the number in vivid (permanent marker) on the shirt ... But they were allowed to go with [their old school name] written across their polo shirts! (Teacher 3)

These examples illustrate how the continuing school took their rights as 'given' and set up a new hierarchy in the merged environment. They assumed control of the transition process, leaving the closing school bewildered and frustrated. The following discussion section draws first on Bourdieu's notions of symbolic power and symbolic violence to explain what was happening, and then field, capital and habitus to provide insights into how this situation came about.

Discussion

When the earthquakes struck Canterbury in 2010 and 2011, the Government enacted legislation to set up a government department to manage the response and recovery process. The Canterbury Earthquake Recovery Authority (CERA) was created on 29

March 2011 and a Minister for Earthquake Recovery was established. CERA was not disestablished until five years later when the responsibility was returned to local authorities and agencies. Given the size of the damage, the length of time recovery would take and the enormity of the cost (it was put at \$40 billion dollars), this is not surprising. What it did, however, was to take away, not just power from those affected, but also a voice in decision making. The citizens of Canterbury were traumatised but they were not passive victims; they displayed many examples of creative problem-solving, active engagement and locally-based solutions (see, for example, Author, 2013b). By centralising decisions at the macro-level with the government and its agencies in Wellington, symbolic power was firmly established. It then became taken for granted by those who held and wielded it. This symbolic power, exemplified in CERA and legitimised in law, was difficult to challenge and led to much confusion between central government and local authorities. There is not space in this article to discuss the way in which the citizens of Christchurch had symbolic violence enacted upon them throughout the earthquake recovery process – what is important is that it modelled how decisions would be made on their behalf by those who deemed themselves to know best. When decisions were made about post-disaster schooling in the region, it also appeared as taken-for-granted that the Minister and Ministry in Wellington would also know best for the people of Christchurch. Thus, the mantle of symbolic power over earthquake recovery was passed to decision making in the schooling sector.

What the findings from this study and the other reports on the school reorganisation process show, in detail, is how the Minister and Ministry took this mantle of symbolic power as their right and acted without thought or compassion as they implemented their plan. The evidence is quite stark. The 2012 Ombudsman's report, for

example, confirmed that the Ministry withheld vital information from schools, instructed the Christchurch City Council to do the same, and forbade schools from using legal means to access information that was their right. Five years later, the 2017 Ombudsman's report stated that the Ministry acted with unnecessary secrecy, without transparency and treated the schools with distrust. And this was done without consideration for what schools had been through and the further trauma that the closures and mergers might cause. Symbolic violence, while not *physically* violent, compounded the psychological and emotional trauma schools were already facing and had the same effect.

When the Ministry put labels on the schools in the reorganisation process, they set up a hierarchical power structure between schools, with, in this case, the continuing school taking up the mantle of symbolic power. The continuing school accepted this power as given – as their unchallengeable right – and went on to act accordingly.

To further understand why the continuing school behaved in this way, it is necessary to return to Bourdieu's notions of field, capital and habitus. While a field is often discussed at the macro-level, I take my lead from Bourdieu (1993b, p. 271) who states, 'one cannot grasp the most profound logic of the social world unless one becomes immersed in the specificity of an empirical reality' and instead set it at the micro level.

The field is the merger process; the two key actors are the closing school and the continuing school. At stake is symbolic control of the newly merged school. As Bourdieu notes, social actors 'are engaged specifically in a struggle to impose the definition of the social world that is most consistent with their interests' (1979, p. 80). The winning actors, in this case, will imprint their school's identity and culture on the

new entity.

The forms of capital that the actors bring to this struggle are economic, social, political and symbolic. The closing school is deemed to have fewer economic assets. Its buildings are damaged, its land unstable and its student population decreasing. The continuing school has undamaged buildings and land, along with greater student and staff numbers. Socially, the closing school sits in a 'red zone', where houses are flagged for demolition, so its once stable and cohesive community is fragmented. The continuing school sits in a higher socio-economic neighbourhood with its school community intact. Politically, the closing school has been given a label of low value ('closing'). On the other hand, the continuing school has been given a prestigious label ('continuing'), which places it in a more powerful position. As Bourdieu (1989, p. 17) explains:

Thus agents are distributed in the overall space, in the first dimension, according to the overall volume of capital they possess, and, in the second dimension, according to the structure of their capital, that is, the relative weight of the different species of their capital ... in the total volume of their assets.

The continuing school's political power is strengthened when the principal selected to lead the new school comes from within their ranks. The Board of Trustees is also stacked in the continuing school's favour. While the closing school recognises the unfairness of the contest, the continuing school assumes the right to imprint their identity and culture on the new school. The closing school capitulates.

With their dominance established, the continuing school sets about establishing a new habitus—a new set of dispositions and new ways of operating. Through their actions and interactions, they reinforce their symbolic superiority – and they use a

symbolic form to do so. Like the conch held aloft in William Golding's *Lord of the Flies* (1954), the school logo becomes a symbolic form – a *structuring* and *structured* instrument of domination (Bourdieu, 1979). By capitulating, the closing school loses their right to use their old school logo. The continuing school's logo is retained on newsletters and school uniforms. The closing school's logo is removed from sight – even if this means subjecting the closing school to the indignity of turning their sports uniforms inside out. This is an act of pure symbolic violence. It does not hurt physically but it clearly hurts psychologically and emotionally—yet the closing school is powerless to stop it. Morgan and Björkert, (2006, p. 448) suggest:

The power of symbolic violence rests precisely in its lack of visibility—in the fact that for those exposed to it the doubts and fear engendered by it cause them to question themselves. The victims are therefore left uncertain and confused as to what, exactly, is happening and unable to articulate to themselves or others what they are going through.

The closing school has become subjugated to the continuing school's symbolic power. Such symbolic acts set the tone for future interactions. The continuing school's policies, procedures, curriculum and resources become the accepted and unchallenged habitus as 'both a system of schemes of production of practices and a system of perception and appreciation of practices' (Bourdieu, 1989, p. 19).

Yet, the systems at the continuing school were not necessarily any better than those of the closing school—in the findings section, one of the teachers exclaimed her puzzlement at being made to feel as if the closing school was failing when it was not. Had she known about symbolic power she might have seen what was happening around her. The selection of the continuing school's way of doing things was not based on any evaluative criteria, it was to all intents and purposes, arbitrary. The most significant

event that confirms the arbitrariness of the continuing school's symbolic power is when the Ministry splits the new school in two and half the students and staff return to the closing school's former site. Even on familiar ground, the closing school staff and students conform to the habitus of the continuing school without protest. As Samuel (2013, p .401) states, 'Symbolic power exists whenever the arbitrary nature of the field's structure and rules is forgotten, misrecognized as natural and therefore preconsciously accepted.'

What played out in the field of the merger was a microcosm of bigger forces at play. The symbolic power that had its beginnings at the macro-level with the Government's Canterbury Earthquake Recovery Authority was carried through to the meso-level of the Ministry's post-earthquake school reorganisation and, from there, to the micro-level field of the merger. In each case, the more powerful actor assumed symbolic control, imposing their order as natural and legitimate, while the more vulnerable actor acquiesced.

Conclusion

After researching schools in post-earthquake Christchurch, I was left puzzled by the actions of one school as they assumed control in what should have been a genuine merger between two schools. I left the question percolating in my mind for several years before finding a way of explaining these events. I found the answer by thinking conceptually and theoretically.

Conceptually, I had to move beyond the immediate field of action and see this in a broader context—from the macro-level to the meso-level and the micro-level. When the New Zealand Government assumed control of the earthquake recovery, they set in motion a power hierarchy that was played out at the macro-level by the Canterbury

Earthquake Recovery Authority (CERA). CERA stripped the people of Christchurch of their right to be involved in post-earthquake decision making. When decisions needed to be made at the meso-level about the future of schooling in Christchurch, the Ministry of Education, followed the Government's lead and acted in a similarly heavy-handed way. The Ministry set the tone for school mergers by delegating symbolic authority to the 'continuing' school, thus setting up the same power hierarchy at the micro-level.

Theoretically, notions of symbolic power and symbolic violence (Bourdieu, 1979, 1989, 1993a) provided an insight as to what was happening when the two schools behaved as they did, that is, the continuing school assuming control and treating the closing school thoughtlessly, and the closing school submitting to this treatment. Field, capital and habitus (Bourdieu, 1989, 1993a; Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977) helped explain how this situation came to be—the continuing school came to the field with more capital and stronger assets, used symbolic power to take control, and went on to develop a new habitus which stamped their identity on the merger.

In conclusion, this case study provides an in-depth examination the 'specificity of an empirical reality' (Bourdieu, 1993, p. 271) which illuminates the everyday struggles in the social and political world. In the context of post-earthquake Christchurch, the world was a constant power play between social actors at different levels. Bourdieu's theories enable us to step back and recognise the arbitrariness of symbolic power – but to change the situation is more difficult. As Bourdieu asserts, 'To change the world, one has to change the ways of world making, that is, the vision of the world' (Bourdieu, 1989, p. 23).

This case study also has policy implications for future permanent school closures. At the macro decision making level of politicians and agency officials, there is a responsibility, as the Ombudsman's Office pointed out—to be clear and transparent

about the policies they are considering, to engage in open and genuine consultation, and to be willing to listen to and consider alternative perspectives. At the meso level of policy implementation by local officials, there is a responsibility to consider the disruption and unforeseen consequences that might ensue and to work alongside those who are impacted by the decisions by gathering accurate information, setting realistic timeframes and providing appropriate support to facilitate the implementation in a reasonable manner. Finally, at the micro local level, it is about putting people at the centre, showing understanding and compassion for the emotional distress that such closures cause and ensuring that the process leaves everyone's dignity intact. In this case study, the closing school had a right to be fully engaged in the implementation process. While they had become resigned to their fate, they still deserved to be heard and to be allowed to engage in a process of negotiation about matters that would impact them on a daily basis in the newly merged environment. The disregard for their situation and the hurt that this caused remained for some time. I will leave the final comment to the acting principal of the closing school. When I published the first of the earlier articles (Author, 2017) and sent a copy to the participants, he replied, 'I have read the article and it made me cry. Simple as that. Can't say more on the impact.'

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