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The Education Review Office and South Auckland Schools: A Case of Ideology Over Analysis

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Abstract:

A recent Education Review Office (ERO) report Improving Schooling in Mangere and Otara *claims that many schools in South Auckland are performing poorly. This article challenges that argument by pointing to the likely impact of socio-political factors. The article provides some background to the report by discussing ERO's ideological stance and review methodology as well as the characteristics of local schools and the perspectives of those who work in them. The report and its recommendations are critically examined and its claims compared with the author's recent research in Wellington schools. It is argued that school processes have less independence from their social context than ERO allows. Policy implications are discussed.*

The December 1996 announcement of a review of the Education Review Office (ERO) as part of the National-New Zealand First coalition deal will have been welcomed by many educators. This is because, while the exposure of "substandard schools" has been championed by ERO and supporters ("Office defends exposing school faults", 1996; "A vital eye on schools", 1996), its aims and methods have also often been criticised. Codd (1993) contrasts ERO's managerialist emphasis on outcomes and contractual compliance unfavourably with approaches which give more weight to teacher professionalism. In a similar vein, McKenzie (1995) argues that ERO's approach represents an ironic return to a failed 19th century model of external evaluation – he considers a system incorporating peer review far superior. ERO's relationship with schools has also been seen as heavy-handed ("ERO likened to the inquisition", 1996), its school reviews unhelpful or

damaging ("Principals slam ERO reports", 1996) and its national evaluation reports one-sided ("ERO bias call", 1996).

This article will also question ERO's approach, in particular its perception and treatment of schools dominated by students from low socio-economic (SES) backgrounds (This attention should not imply that ERO does *not* cause problems for other schools, but rather that these particular schools are especially vulnerable). I shall argue that ERO unreasonably disregards the often overwhelming difficulties experienced by such schools. In order to illustrate this, I want to focus on South Auckland where, following a number of damning reports on individual schools, ERO released in September 1996 a report entitled *Improving Schooling in Mangere and Otara* (ERO, 1996a). This report asserted that many schools in the area are performing poorly, a claim which gained considerable media attention (e.g., "Office canes suburban schools", 1996). However, by critically examining the consultative process through which the Mangere and Otara report came about and the assumptions which underlie its analysis, I will argue that the claims of poor performance and the "low-trust" recommendations which stem from it are highly problematic. To further illuminate the point, I shall draw on my recently completed doctoral research in Wellington schools (Thrupp, 1996) to suggest a quite different scenario and set of policy implications for South Auckland schools. But first, a little background on ERO, Mangere and Otara schools, and their continuing standoff will be useful.

The Education Review Office

The last decade has witnessed a growing international preoccupation with school inspection or review (OECD, 1995). This emphasis is consistent with the New Public Management doctrine of external accountability to prevent "provider capture" and improve efficiency and effectiveness (Boston, Martin, Pilot & Walsh, 1991). It is seen as especially important at a time when schools are becoming increasingly responsible for their own policies and practices as "self-managing" schools. Publication of inspection reports is also seen by neo-liberals to signal the quality of schools, thereby facilitating processes of parental choice and competition within educational quasi-markets.[1] An increased emphasis on inspection may also reflect neo-conservative fears about both declining standards and the anti-capitalist agendas of "radical" teachers.

ERO today openly reflects many of these concerns (although neo-conservative elements have not featured as much in New Zealand as in the UK, say). For instance, an NZEI analysis found a "competitive market" ideology underpinning eight of ten ERO evalution reports (NZEI, 1995). As well, the present Chief Review Officer, Dr Judith Aitken, has talked frankly of ERO's use of "moral suasion and the creation of public pressure" to increase school performance (cited in Ellis, 1996, p. 11). Yet ERO has not always been so clearly New Right. Although McKenzie (1995) points out that the Picot taskforce vision of an independent but co-operative evaluation agency was deeply contradictory, ERO nevertheless set out in 1989 with a discourse that was "consistent with and supportive of both the professionalism of teachers and the education mission of learning institutions" (Codd, 1993 p. 12). But from 1992, after the "mainstreaming" interventions of the State Services Commission (Dale & Jesson, 1993) and the appointment of Dr Aitken, ERO documents became "strongly imbued" with the ideology of economic rationalism and public choice theory (Codd, 1993). ERO was then "strategically repositioned" through 1993 Amendments to the Education Act (KPMG Peat Marwick, 1994, p. 4). However the new approach has not been without resistance from some ERO staff, particularly at the district level. An internal audit noted a "conflict in ERO between those who consider their commitment is to education and those who are committed to functioning as an effective tool of government" (KPMG Peat Marwick, 1994, p. 28).

In carrying out its role today, ERO stresses competence, specific learning outcomes and contractual compliance and takes a technical, decontextualised view of what makes for an effective school. Although this approach is broadly similar to inspection agencies in many other countries, ERO's methodology has some distinctive emphases (OECD, 1995). For instance, when compared to England's Office for Standards in Education (OFSTED), ERO has a much more rigorous approach to monitoring compliance to regulations as exemplified in its "Assurance Audits" (OFSTED, 1995a). However, because Assurance Audits focus largely on the existence of adequate policies rather than how they are put into practice, good schools in Assurance Audit terms might easily be those which observe only the letter of the law. One disgruntled ERO reviewer recently wrote (anonymously):

> Adherence to [the] requirements can be achieved largely through producing the right pieces of paper. Schools and Boards now openly traffic in the right pieces of paper, some willingly share their work, others, more commercially aware, openly advertise that they have ERO-acceptable documents for sale ... [In] larger schools, many classrooms will not be visited at all, a good assurance audit is no guarantee that the child in the classroom is getting taught properly or that the school is even a safe environment (cited in *Developmental Network Newsletter 1996, 2*, pp. 43-44).

On the other hand, ERO's "Effectiveness Reviews" seem less rigorous than OFSTED inspections, even though the latter have recently been described as "an embarrassment to anyone who understands social sciences" (Fitz-Gibbon & Stephenson, 1996, p. 16). This is because OFSTED inspectors, for better or worse, spend about 70 percent of their time in classrooms, whereas ERO reviewers tend to rely on data provided by teachers and principals. As well, OFSTED inspections judge schools against national criteria, whereas Effectiveness Reviews require schools themselves to identify what counts as achievement for their students. These differences raise obvious questions about how accurately ERO can compare the relative quality of New Zealand schools. If anything, the ERO approach would seem likely to intensify the numerous sampling, reliability and validity problems which are associated with OFSTED judgements about school quality (Fitz-Gibbon & Stephenson, 1996). Moreover the OFSTED inspection framework is at least freely available to the public (OFSTED, 1995b) whereas ERO's procedural manuals for reviews are not, and have to be requested under the Official Information Act. At times ERO has attempted to cite commercial sensitivity as an excuse for not releasing details under the Act (Smythe, 1994).

Mangere and Otara Schools

Mangere and (especially) Otara are two of New Zealand's most entrenched areas of urban socio-economic disadvantage and white/middle class "flight" (Department of Statistics, 1992; Corbett, 1994). This is reflected in their schools. Of the 24 state or state integrated schools in Mangere, 18 are Decile 1 (the lowest SES category of ten), and none are above Decile 3. All of Otara's 17 state or integrated schools are Decile 1 schools. Mangere schools are made up predominantly of Maori or Pacific Islands students; in Otara they are almost entirely so (Ministry of Education, 1996). In common with the experience of "ghetto" schools elsewhere (e.g., Kozol, 1991), Mangere and Otara schools have faced a

multitude of problems for many years. More than two decades ago, Ramsay, Sneddon, grenfell and Ford (1981) found that while some schools in these suburbs appeared more effective than others, they invariably had low levels of student attainment and serious problems related to student turnover and truancy, student pastoral needs, and teacher recruitment and morale when compared to schools in less disadvantaged areas. They concluded: "The social and educational situation of most children in Mangere and Otara – despite the best efforts of school people and members of the community – can only be described as disadvantaged." (p. 258).

As is also the case elsewhere (Gerwitz, Ball, & Bowe, 1995; Walford, 1994; Waslander & Thrupp, 1995; Whitty, 1996), the policies of choice have recently led to intensified socio-economic flight from many schools in the area into others with generally higher SES intakes and better reputations, either within or beyond Mangere and Otara. Although primary schools have generally been cushioned by increasing birth rates, secondary schools have been harder hit. Tangaroa, Hillary, Nga Tapuwae and Mangere Colleges, all Decile 1 schools, had rolls which had declined by between 12 and 20 percent over 1992-1996. The situation has not been helped by past cases of fraud (Tangaroa College) and ethnic conflict (Nga Tapuwae College). Many of the students bypassing these schools have gone to Aorere College, a Decile 2 school in Mangere (which grew some 12 percent between 1992-1996), but they have also been found at 15 schools outside Mangere and Otara (ERO, 1996a). While two of these receiving schools outside Mangere and Otara are in Decile 1, the other 13 are all in Deciles 2-4. This suggests that while Mangere and Otara students are not attending solidly middle class schools, a large number are avoiding those Mangere and Otara schools with the poorest intakes to attend others which are relatively better off.[2]

The Continuing Standoff

ERO's Assurance Audits and Effectiveness Reviews do not consider the effects of these kinds of broader socio-political issues on schools (or indeed even record SES deciles) because, as noted earlier, school performance is typically seen by ERO as a technical matter. Taking this approach, ERO has released increasingly critical reports on various schools in Mangere and Otara since 1992, particularly three of the Decile 1 secondary schools mentioned above. In December 1994, ERO recommended Nga Tapuwae College be closed unless the Minister of

Education "could be assured that continued state investment was justified" (ERO, 1995, p. 2). This action led to the dismissal of this school's Board of Trustees and the appointment of a commissioner from one of the city's most elite schools.[3] More recently, in May 1996, ERO argued that despite five reports since 1992, there had been little improvement in the performance of Hillary College:

> Despite all the effort and goodwill, the latest attempts to change the work ethos of the institution have been unsuccessful. Years of ineffective management have resulted in an institution lacking in a professional culture. Curriculum delivery is inadequate and the quality of learning programmes is poor. A number of teachers are not performing adequately. (ERO, 1996c, p. 2)

At the same time the latest of four reports on Tangaroa College was released (ERO, 1996d). This argued that with the recent appointment of a new principal "the administrative risks to the Crown's investment at Tangaroa College have reduced significantly", nevertheless "serious levels of educational risk to students remain" (p. 2).

These two reports generated considerable media attention ("Two Otara schools told to shape up or else", 1996) and were followed by the announcement that ERO was planning a "wide-ranging review" of educational problems in the area for the Minister of Education ("Pay lure to get top teachers at poor schools", 1996). In response, the 17 Otara schools contributed to the costs of newspaper advertisements to counter what they claimed was "misinformation" from the ERO ("Otara schools go public to counter image", 1996). The advertisements stressed various successes of Otara students and the unfairness of ERO's public criticisms when private comments were often more positive. A similar theme was taken by the newly-appointed principal of Tangaroa College, Jim Peters:

> We've done as much as we can in the time we have had so far and they acknowledged that when they came here to talk to us. But they haven't acknowledged that in public.

Peters believes that the problems of Tangaroa College are mostly those of social inequality:

> We're blamed for being the cause of the problem and we're not the cause. The cause of this problem lies outside the school. What we have on our hands is a serious, growing social

problem, an ever increasing division betwen rich and poor. ("Head is sticking to his principles", 1996)

This view has also been consistently expressed by the "At-Risk" committee, a lobby group made up mainly of South Auckland secondary principals. While not denying that there have been difficulties related to the performance of some teachers and principals in the area, these are seen as the exception rather than the rule. Instead this group stresses that the problems of Mangere and Otara schools are symptomatic of the socio-political difficulties just noted: issues of poverty and prejudice, intensified by the impact of quasi-market policies. Consequently the At-Risk committee does not accept the ERO assumption that problems of schools in the area can be mostly addressed by improving management and staff performance: they instead argue that "...ERO's work must be documented within a social context and that data on deciles and additional funding are pieces of baseline information ... for the first page of (ERO) reports."(Dunphy, 1996, p. 4)

The 1996 Hillary and Tangaroa College reports therefore highlighted a continuing standoff between many local educators and ERO. In part this appears to reflect deep-seated ideological differences between, in Codd's (1993) terms, "technocratic-reductionist" and "professional-contextualist" views of education. However in the immediate circumstances the standoff revolved around sharper issues of blame, with local educators essentially arguing that they were (mostly) not to blame and ERO holding that they (mostly) were. In this situation, the Mangere and Otara Report (ERO, 1996a) was to become most important in terms of giving weight to a particular view of the problem, especially as ERO was viewing South Auckland as something of a test case for low SES areas throughout the country.[4] At the outset the report was clearly intended by ERO to provide a major statement on the future of South Auckland schools – the terms of reference listed almost 50 individuals or groups to be consulted (ERO, 1996e). But whose definition of the problem would prevail?

The Process of Consultation

As a member of an external reference group for the report (but one who eventually refused to be named on it) I was able to gain first hand experience of some of the consultation process for the Mangere and Otara report. We met in Wellington over two days to draft a set of

"strategic recommendations". The distinctly unreal feeling of viewing the plight of South Auckland schools from the comfort of the Plaza International was not helped by the fact that many in the ERO-chosen group were far removed from the situation (ERO, 1996a, Appendix 2). Discussion rapidly became dominated by a number of Wellington-based consultants and senior policymakers who chose to focus primarily on accountability mechanisms. Day One ended with a proposal to shut, restructure and reopen Hillary and Tangaroa Colleges, an action which I and others argued against (see Thrupp, 1995). On Day Two, with the arrival of new members, discussion broadened a little. However there was a tension throughout proceedings between providing additional support to schools and making them more accountable for performance. At the end of the meeting, the perspective the final report would take was still unclear.

There were further problems with the consultation process. The group was given almost 400 pages of information to read just three days before the meeting. This material consisted mostly of briefing papers and reports from ERO itself – critical perspectives from the At-Risk Committee and other commentators (e.g., Gordon, 1994) were buried towards the bottom of the pile, where few in the group seemed to have found them. Many members were only present for part of the meeting. ERO's project team drew up the report and its recommendations with less than a week available for members of the external reference group to comment on a draft. Overall, if the experiences of the external reference group were at all typical, consultation underlying the report was much more impressive on paper than in reality. In the event we shall see that ERO produced a report which conceded some points to the view that Mangere and Otara schools needed help, but largely confirmed its own definition of the situation.

The Mangere and Otara Report

Consistent with the external review group meeting, there is little analysis of "the problem" in the final draft of the Mangere and Otara report. There is only a two page introduction which attempts to move directly to the argument that the issue in Mangere and Otara schools is primarily one of poor performance. This is done in two ways.

First, the report provides the remarkable statistic that "42 percent (of Mangere and Otara schools) are performing very poorly or are underperforming" (p. 3). This bald figure is apparently derived from an

analysis of whether schools have had good or bad reviews and whether a follow up review has been deemed necessary. However, nowhere is there any discussion of review methodology to support or qualify the claim. This is not surprising because ERO does not carry out systematic value-added comparisons of student attainment which could fairly claim to indicate school performance. Indeed, there is nothing in ERO's methodology which would carry much weight with school effectiveness researchers – who even using the most sophisticated methods would typically make more careful claims (see, for instance, McPherson, 1992). Instead the report states: "Through external evaluation of all schools over the past seven years, ERO has gained an overview of relative school performance nationally" (p. 3). Yet this surely amounts to little more than a self-referential assertion that "we have looked at lots of schools so we know what we are doing."

The second way the report attempts to argue that the problem is one of poor performance is by dismissing the major competing claim, the effects of poverty. For instance, the work of Ramsay et al. (1981) is cited as showing longstanding "educational disadvantage" (p. 3) in Mangere and Otara. However as noted earlier, this is only half the story – the discussion in Ramsay et al. linked many educational problems in the area to socio-economic factors. The introduction also claims that compensatory funding and advisory support given to schools in the area over recent decades to address "ineffective schooling" (not the effects of poverty) did not succeed, yet there is no attempt to demonstrate or explain this. The report then attempts to directly dismiss SES as a cause of "the problem":

> It is commonly asserted that there is a strong link between school failure and the degree of disadvantage in a socio-economic setting. There are however, some 20 percent of the schools in these two districts that provide an effective education for their students. Their boards, principals and teachers have, with varying degrees of success, met the challenges of their students' backgrounds and concentrated on teaching and learning to the benefit of their students. (p. 4)

Yet the idea that there are some low SES schools in the area which show others up is also fraught with difficulties. To start with, we (again) cannot be sure that these 20 percent of schools really are more effective than the other 80 percent of schools in the area because of ERO's weak methodology. Moreover the conclusion is at odds with ERO's own

briefing papers on school performance in the area (ERO, 1996f), which acknowledge that class and ethnicity may be factors determining why some Mangere and Otara schools perform better than others:

> There is a strong correlation between high school performance and diminishing levels of disadvantage in the school's socio-economic setting. (p. 7)
>
> There appears to be a strong correlation between the very poor performance of a school and the degree of disadvantage of its socio-economic setting. (p. 6)
>
> Where there are significant numbers of Pakeha students in a school population, there is a strong correlation with the school being identified as an institution performing well. (p. 6)

Furthermore, while some schools might perform a little better than others, it is most unlikely that they will be performing much better. The notion that there are exemplary schools in low SES areas which perform considerably better than others was very popular in the first generation of effective schools research in the USA. However it was not long before researchers were pointing out that the performance of students in exemplary ghetto schools was still a far cry from that of students in schools in middle class suburbs (e.g., Purkey & Smith, 1983). This is hardly surprising – school effectiveness literature consistently points to schools having an independent effect of only 8-15 percent on student outcomes, with family background having a much more powerful influence (Reynolds & Packer, 1992; Harker & Nash, 1995). As Mortimore (1991, p. 225) observes: "The evidence about the power of schools to modify – at a group level – the influence of social class or race is hard to find."

Given the tenor of its introductory comments, the recommendations contained in the report, at first sight, show a surprising emphasis on the provision of additional resources. In particular, a Schools Strategic Development Centre (SDC) is proposed to supply a range of services to Mangere and Otara schools including the development of various management tasks, curriculum development, truancy and health services. Recruitment and retention incentives for teachers in the form of higher salaries along with teacher secondments from other areas are also proposed.

In some ways these recommendations appear similar to those proposed over twenty years ago by Ramsay et al. (1981). However there

are some important differences. The SDC is intended to have a more managerial focus than the Resource, Experimental and Development Centres (RED) they proposed, which were geared more towards the needs of classroom teachers. The SDC is also intended only to broker, rather than to actually provide, services and be only a short-term developmental intervention. The proposals of Ramsay et al. were intended to be both more organic to the area and more enduring. These differences point to problems with ERO's recommendations. The distinctive nature of educational problems in low SES, non-Pakeha areas make it questionable whether contracted service providers and temporarily seconded teachers from outside the region could be effective in the South Auckland context. Moreover, in view of the stubborn nature of the difficulties, it is doubtful that temporary interventions will suffice.

However the most immediate problem with the recommendations is that whereas the proposed interventions in Ramsay et al. were intended to be freely available to schools, the offerings in the Mangere and Otara report (ERO, 1996a) come with powerful strings attached. The key accountability "lever" is the proposed school supply agreements between Boards of Trustees which would "strengthen the obligations of financial supply" (p. 9) by making school finances subject to meeting "robust measures of service quality" (p. 5). Schools would purchase services from the SDC and those in most difficulty would only be given additional funding to do so on the basis of "costed 'business recovery plans' agreed with the Secretary of Education" (p. 16). This purchase model is expected to "provide tighter accountability for the provision of additional resources" (p. 16). It is also recommended that recruitment incentives only be made available "in direct proportion to the quality of the performance management system established and operating within the school" (p. 21). The question of what will happen if Boards do not or cannot meet specified performance targets is left unanswered. There is unspecified reference to sanctions (p. 9) – on the other hand, the report at least argues against shutting schools down (p. 10).

Overall there is an unresolved tension within the report, like that present at the external review group meeting, between the belief that Mangere and Otara schools are poor performers which need to be made more accountable and the view that they face overwhelming problems and need help. However given the nature of the report's introduction, its emphasis on accountability levers, numerous criticisms of the

performance of teachers, management and Boards, as well as other proposals to appoint "Ministerial Monitors" to Boards (p. 11) and to "facilitate the departure of staff" (p. 20), it is the former view which dominates. In sum it is as if ERO regards problems stemming from the social context as of minor importance; it is the performance issues which are "writ large".

An Alternative View: the Wellington Study

To further indicate why much more emphasis should be put on the problems facing Mangere and Otara schools and why ERO's low-trust approach will be unhelpful, I shall now outline my research in high- and low-SES Wellington schools (Thrupp, 1996). The Wellington study set out to explore the possible impact of school social class composition (school "mix") on various school processes including classroom instruction and school organisation and management. Its nested and comparative research design involved a year of intensive fieldwork across the schools, drawing on multiple data sources, including over 260 hours of classroom observation and 60 semi-structured interviews with students and staff. This approach resulted in a rich picture of the four schools and the problems and possibilities they variously faced as a result of the characteristics of their student intakes.

While unable to be conclusive, the Wellington study suggested that school mix does impact on school processes in a multitude of ways so as to cumulatively drag down the academic effectiveness of schools in low SES settings and boost it in middle class settings. The characteristics of its student intake made many school practices at "Tui College", the low SES school in the study, much more difficult to carry out than at any of the three high SES schools ("Victoria", "Wakefield" and "Plimmer" Colleges). An example, collecting external exam fees, will serve to illustrate the general pattern. At all the schools this task was of necessity "successful" because it was so critical to student achievement – the fees simply *had* to be collected and paid to NZQA in order for students to sit exams. But what is instructive is the amount of energy required of staff at Tui College to carry out the task comprehensively, when compared to that expended by staff at the middle class schools.

At Tui College, the task of collecting exam fees began by the sending of reminder notices home several months in advance to warn parents and students this cost would be coming up. About two weeks before the fees were due, the teacher in charge started his campaign. He began by imploring form teachers in staff meetings to get behind the effort to

get the money from students in their form classes: "The next two weeks will be horrendous ... point out to [the students] that it's not a school-based fee, it has to be paid if they are going to sit their exam ...."

He had prepared brightly-coloured posters which were pasted up throughout the school. He spoke to a full school assembly:

> *Teacher:* You have had about three months' notice that we are collecting fees. You have had lots of warning. That money must now be paid. We have given you as much warning as we can. You have had time to organise and plan to get that money in. The time has come now where we need some action.

Despite these efforts, only a quarter of fees had been collected by the week before the deadline. As an added incentive for staff to chase up the fees, the teacher started a "league table" on the staffroom noticeboard showing the number of students yet to pay in each form class. Some teachers had not collected any fees, most hardly any, and only one or two had collected most of the fees. The daily exhortations to staff continued. A special senior assembly was held. Two days before the final deadline the teacher wrote on the staff blackboard "When push comes to shove – Exam Fees!" On the day the fees were due, 56 percent of students had yet to pay. The teacher in charge announced to staff wryly: "Thanks, keep pushing, we might get it all in by a week after it is due. Today is the last day we have given the kids, we have until next [week] then we have to pull the plug."

The final deadline having passed, the campaign went into overdrive. Reminder notices were given to individuals. Form teachers were instructed to ring or visit the students' homes. Another special assembly was called. Two days before the fees were absolutely required, the teacher wrote "PANIC" above the staffroom fees progress chart. Individuals were counselled and special arrangements were made for time payment for 20 percent of students. Eventually however, all fees were accounted for and the cheque sent off on time. "100% FEES TAKE" exclaimed a notice on the staffroom noticeboard.

By comparison, the collection of exam fees was really not an issue at any of the three middle class schools: Victoria's Assistant Principal - "We try and fix one day because there is such a lot of money involved. We like to do it on one day and get it processed and out of the school as quickly as possible." At this school on the allocated day, 84 percent of students paid their exam fees at the school office. The next day, the total was up to 91 percent. At Wakefield College 66 percent of fees came in

on the two days allocated to collect them and 93 percent of fees were collected by the day the school had advertised as the last date for payment. Some 80 percent of Plimmer students had paid by the school deadline. In each school only a small number of students had not voluntarily paid by the due date. It was undoubtably time-consuming for staff to follow up these individual cases but there was no sense here of the campaign observed at Tui College.

This is just one example of the many advantages accruing to the middle class schools by virtue of their higher SES student intakes (see Thrupp, 1996). As well as many other more efficient and easily accomplished daily routines, they had less pressured guidance and discipline systems with higher levels of student compliance and fewer very difficult guidance/discipline cases. Their senior management teams had fewer student, staff, marketing and fundraising problems. They had more time to devote to planning and monitoring performance. The middle class schools also had Boards of Trustees with more useful qualifications and business contacts. They were able to support more academic school programmes and a wider range of extracurricular activities. Their teachers taught classes which were generally more compliant and more able to cope with difficult work. They also used more demanding texts and other teaching resources and their teachers were more qualified and more highly motivated. Teachers at the middle class schools had the advantage of teaching students with a wider range of curriculum-relevant experiences/social capital, higher levels of prior attainment, more previous experience of school success, more regular school attendance, higher academic goals, higher SES occupational aspirations and expectations and less involvement in "alienated" student subcultures than those at Tui College.

These findings can be explained by looking to the organic or inter-connected relationship between schools and middle class rather than working class families (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977). These middle class-organic, working class-inorganic relations between home and school need to be seen as played out at the school as well as at the individual level. Schools appear to develop processes which reflect their SES mix. Solidly middle class schools have strongly supportive student cultures which allow them to organise themselves as academic schools relatively smoothly. Working class schools will, in general, be quite the opposite. Critical mass may also be a key issue. In a predominantly middle class school, the struggles of working class families and students are marginalised and can have relatively little effect on school

organisation and management. As a school becomes more working class however, it can be predicted that the processes of the school will shift, despite resistance from middle class teachers and students, towards the culture of the increasingly sizeable working class group. Finally, the Wellington study suggests that it is because school policies and practices have to be negotiated with students that particular processes "fit" working class and middle class schools.

The importance of the Wellington study to the experience of South Auckland is that it points to school processes being much less independent of their social context than ERO allows. It suggests that while many factors identified as contributing to achievement may indeed be school *based*, they are nonetheless not school *caused*. They relate to the social class backgrounds of students in a way that cannot be easily modified by school management and teaching staff. The study implies that schools with differing SES intake compositions will not be able to carry out similarly effective school policies and practices, even with similar levels of resourcing and after taking account of individual student backgrounds. In short, the Wellington study lends weight to the At-Risk committee view that Mangere and Otara schools are primarily overwhelmed rather than ineffective. It highlights enduring constraints for teachers and school leaders in low SES schools which should lead us to be cautious about claims of their poor performance.

If the scenario painted here is correct, what kind of policy solutions would work in Mangere and Otara? Clearly many long-term answers lie outside schools in terms of addressing poverty. Reducing fundamental tensions between working class students and the academic curriculum must also be a key goal (Connell, 1994). But more immediately, the provision of extra resources to Mangere and Otara schools would be useful. Although it is commonly argued by neo-liberals that giving more resources to low SES schools is a waste of time, it is difficult to see how considerably lower student-teacher ratios along with more guidance and management staff and funding could not make some difference. In line with the view that low SES schools are overwhelmed rather than poor performers *per se*, there is no reason why access to additional resources should require higher than usual levels of accountability.

Providing more resources to low-SES schools will be at best a partial measure, however. This is because the negotiated nature of school processes makes it likely that, regardless of resourcing, some of the advantageous processes of the middle class schools would be impossible

to replicate in working class schools without actually changing the mix of the school intake. These include reference group processes and the richer environment of classroom questioning and discussion generated within middle class schools.

Policy interventions are therefore also needed to prevent class flight, reduce SES segregation and increase the stability of school rolls (Thrupp, 1996). These would have the effect of both sharing the problems of poverty more evenly around schools and moving middle class cultural and economic resources into (presently) low SES schools. However the question of how best to intervene in school markets to reduce inequality is complex (Adler, 1993; Lauder et al., 1995; Walford, 1994). Policies which could overcome middle class resistance would require strong government intervention in education on the grounds of equity. The problem is that such commitment is unlikely from neo-liberal governments. As Evetts (1995, p. 235) notes, "(t)hose who are supporting and promoting choice polices to augment choice are simply not interested in equity as a goal or benchmark in education". Yet this does not mean that reducing SES segregation is not a goal worth pursuing: rather it points to the "solution" for South Auckland having important socio-political as well as technical dimensions.

Conclusion: A Case of Ideology Over Analysis?

Considering the extent of socio-economic disadvantage in South Auckland, the most obvious question posed by the Mangere and Otara report is why there is not a more cautious consideration of the likely relationship between the social context and school performance in the area. The continuing failure to take this issue seriously points to ERO being blinkered by the ideologies of the New Right. The cost of this has probably already been considerable in terms of weakened school reputations, increased segregation, wasted efforts at compliance and forgone policies which could have made a difference. Moreover, many of the recommendations of the Mangere and Otara report, if implemented, are unlikely to help. There is, after all, little point in holding schools more accountable for aspects of their performance over which they may have little control. For as Metz (1990, p. 100) points out:

> To the degree that the educational reform movement sets aside class differences as unimportant, it brackets and overlooks one of the major influences on schools. It consequently relies for all of its impact on attempting to change patterns that exert much

weaker influence. To ignore the most forceful influences in a situation is rarely a prescription for effective reform.

Good school evaluation policy would not only stress that schools can be more or less effective, but would also be realistic about the ways in which school intake characteristics create important constraints and possibilities for teachers and school leaders. Further research is required to better ascertain what is possible for New Zealand schools within the bounds set by particular school mixes. Eventually this could allow teachers, school leaders and policy makers to come to a more common understanding of what the goals should be and where school performance might be usefully lifted.

Notes

1. As McKenzie (1995) points out, they will have some diffidence about this, however, because of the belief that inspection would be unnecessary in unfettered school markets.
2. Similar movement within a limited segment of the market has also been noted elsewhere. See for instance the case studies of Kauri and Totara Colleges in Waslander and Thrupp, 1995.
3. John Graham found Nga Tapuwae's problems more difficult to address than expected (See Graham, 1995).
4 See *The New Zealand Education Review*, August 2, 1996, p. 3.

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