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# Winners and losers: School closures in post-earthquake Canterbury and the dissolution of community

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## Abstract

*In this article the author discusses the implementation of the Education Renewal in Greater Christchurch policy which affected nearly 40 schools in the aftermath of the 2010/2011 Canterbury earthquakes. It describes the accumulated social, psychological and emotional toll that closures and mergers took on the schools and their communities. It draws, in particular, on the experiences of one school, using data from qualitative interviews as part of a study that followed the school through its journey to closure. The case study school's experience is complemented by data from other post-earthquake research and reviews of the school closure process to highlight the Ministry's flawed process. Claims about the process are examined, including the lack of appropriate consultation, use of inaccurate data, inappropriate handling of communication and disregard for the rights of schools and their communities. The author argues that the government's adoption of neo-liberal and neo-conservative ideologies over the past three decades has negatively influenced education by disregarding the role of schools in sustaining community cohesion and resilience. School closures in post-earthquake Canterbury were an inevitable consequence of the commodification of education and resulted in further dissolution of community as a consequence.*

## Keywords

School closures; school mergers; post-disaster; New Zealand; Canterbury earthquakes

## Introduction

From the late 1980s to 2000s, communities in different parts of New Zealand lost their schools in Trevor Mallard's infamous 'network reviews' or as part of Education Development Initiatives (EDIs). Whether the schools were in Taranaki or Invercargill, researchers reported the negative emotional, social, financial and educational impacts of these policies (see, for example, Kearns, Lewis, McCreanor, & Witten, 2009; Witten, McCreanor, Kearns, & Ramasubramanian, 2001; Witten, Kearns, Lewis, Coster & McCreanor, 2003). From 2013, using the Canterbury earthquakes as justification, communities were again subject to wholesale school closures and mergers. History had told us that school closures have negative outcomes for communities, yet this policy was reapplied to

communities that were already deeply traumatised by natural disaster. The protracted process of post-earthquake decisions in relation to Phillipstown and Redcliffs in Christchurch kept school closures in the public eye for over four years. Redcliffs was successful in gaining a repreive; Phillipstown was not. To many observers outside Christchurch, closing schools because of unstable land, building damage or population movements probably seemed common sense. In this article, however, I would like to challenge these assumptions and argue that the post-earthquake closures and amalgamations were as much the result of particular political ideologies as post-earthquake necessity. One of the themes that runs through the research on school closures, in New Zealand and internationally, is a lack of understanding of, or even blatant disregard for, the place of schools in communities and the importance of communities in sustaining a stable and cohesive society. The results of such closures have long-lasting effects, particularly on already vulnerable communities.

I begin with a brief overview of the literature relating to communities and schools. This is followed by a closer examination of school closure research in New Zealand and overseas. To illustrate the place of schools in communities, especially in post-disaster contexts, a qualitative case study of one Christchurch school is presented. The case study of Forest Park School (not its real name) begins with the school's earthquake response and recovery story and is then followed by its subsequent closure story. The final section examines the link between political ideology and school closures in the implementation of the *Education Renewal in Greater Christchurch* plan (Ministry of Education, 2012a) and highlights the disregard for the impacts on school communities.

## Literature on the place of schools in communities

There is a long history of communities and the place of schools within them, in both ordinary and extraordinary times. Witten et al. (2003) note, "For many New Zealand localities, schools were among the first community buildings erected, and, for generations, voluntary labour and resources, as well as tax revenues, have contributed to the maintenance of schools as a central community resource" (p. 220). Similarly, in the Finnish context, Autti & Hyry-Beihammer (2014) describe schools as "common ground" where different generations can come together. They continue, "The school is more than just a place to educate children; it influences the community's well-being" (p. 12), which is especially important for community cohesion.

The field of community research is broad and crosses a range of disciplines, so I will only touch briefly on some of the literature that discusses concepts related to this article. Elsewhere, I have synthesised some of the literature on communities (Mutch, in press) and stated:

> The concept of community is complex, contested and fluid. It is variously described as a geographical, political, social, cultural or psychological notion. Some definitions focus on the commonalities that bind members of the community together, be they location, history, values, identity, experiences, needs, benefits or responsibilities. Whatever the aspects that make a community identifiable to insiders and outsiders, the sum is greater than the parts.

Most definitions in the literature focus on the bonds and networks that create and sustain communities in a positive manner (see, for example, the literature on social capital). The community as an important societal 'social glue' is a common theme (Gordon, 2004; Morrow, 2005; Van Vugt & Hart, 2004; Witten et al., 2001). Communities are made up of physical, structural and human resources, which along with social, cultural and built assets, create 'community capital' (Callaghan & Colton, 2008). Research following the Canterbury earthquakes found that the neighbourhoods with accumulated community capital, such as strong pre-existing networks and connectedness, were able to participate collectively in post-disaster decision-making and recover equilibrium more quickly (Thornley, Ball, Signal, Lawson-Te Aho, & Rawson, 2013).

Within communities, some organisational structures hold a more significant role in maintaining the bonds in a particular community than others. These are sometimes termed 'community anchors' (Community Alliance, 2009). A community anchor could be a place of worship, a community centre, a sports club or the local school. As schools are places of local history and identity with wide-reaching networks, they can become significant community anchors. Many community members will have attended the school, have children at the school, work at the school or might make use of school facilities, such as the hall, gymnasium or sports grounds. Local schools have civic functions such as polling booths or Civil Defence posts and offer a place to socialise through fairs, sports days, musical productions and other community events. Shirlaw (2014) notes that "in secular societies schools are frequently the heart or centre of a community, in the absence of a shared religion, they become an important place of gathering" (p. 10).

If disaster strikes, schools have both the facilities and personnel to assist in response and recovery. Schools are well placed to play a wide range of roles as immediate response and relief sites, communication centres, supply depots and support agency locations. Their role as a community hub through the response and recovery phases is a strong theme in the literature (Mutch, 2014a, 2016; Smawfield, 2013; Winkworth, 2007). As places of pastoral care, they can provide or access appropriate personnel to attend to social, emotional and psychological needs of students and families. Schools post-disaster often become a haven of normality and calm in a fraught recovery process (Harris, 2013; Johnson & Ronan, 2014; Lazarus, Jimerson, & Brock, 2003; O'Connor & Takahashi, 2013). As Lazarus et al., (2003) state:

> Schools can play an important role in this process by providing a stable, familiar environment. Through the support of caring adults, school personnel can help children return to normal activities and routines (to the extent possible), and provide an opportunity to transform a frightening event into a learning experience. (p. 10)

When the 2010 September earthquake damaged Canterbury's physical landscape, including infrastructure, homes, businesses and community facilities, schools were often overnight shelters, relief centres and information hubs (Direen, 2016; Mutch, 2014b, 2016). When the February 2011 aftershock hit in the middle of a school day, the damage was as much psychological as it was physical. Principals, teachers and other school staff became first responders as they rescued, calmed and cared for students until someone came to collect them. Over the coming months and years, schools continued to provide ongoing support to students, families and the wider communities as recovery and reconstruction got underway (Harris, 2013; Direen, 2016; Duncan, 2016; Education Review Office, 2013; McDonald, 2014; Mutch, 2014b; O'Connor & Takahashi, 2013). Years later schools are still bearing the brunt of on-going psychological distress, family and community dislocation, housing issues, increased family violence and young children unprepared for transition to school, while school staff try to hold their own lives together (Direen, 2016; Duncan, 2016; Mutch, 2015).

When the bonds and structures that hold a community together are destroyed in a catastrophic event, such as a natural disaster, communities cannot move forward until they have begun to re-bond (Gordon, 2004). Gordon recommends that they debrief, share common experiences, rebuild community systems and communication links, and encourage collective activities, such as memorial events. Again, in the context of the Canterbury earthquakes, schools fulfilled these expectations (Duncan, 2016; Education Review Office, 2013; Mutch, 2014b). Studies reiterate the strong bond that Christchurch schools had and maintained with their communities, despite temporary school closures, relocations, site-sharing and shift-sharing (Callaghan, 2013; Direen, 2016; Duncan, 2016; Education Review Office, 2013; Gawith, 2013; Ham, Gathro, Winter, & Winter, 2012; McDonald, 2014; Mutch, 2014b; O'Connor & Takahashi, 2013; Shirlaw, 2012).

Schools were indispensable to the region's response and recovery efforts and took a significant role in helping families and communities move forward. Thus, the decision to announce the closure or merger of over 30 schools in post-earthquake Christchurch appeared ill-timed and without full understanding

of the role that schools played, and could continue to play, in community cohesion and resilience (Callaghan, 2013; Direen, 2016; Duncan, 2016; Mutch, 2014b; Shirlaw, 2014).

## Research on school closures

While the literature on school closures is relatively limited, there is sufficient to distil common themes and parallels across a dozen different settings and, within those, a variety of experiences. There is, in particular, a growing body of literature on school closures and their effects on vulnerable, poor and ethnically diverse communities. An analysis of the literature found discussion of school closures could be categorised in different ways: type (e.g., temporary or permanent); reason for closure (e.g., demographic or ideological); location (e.g., urban or rural); responses of communities (e.g., compliance or resistance); and consequences (e.g., for individuals or school communities). In reality, these categories are permeable and often overlap, as is evident in this literature review.

### Types of closures

Temporary closures elicit mixed responses. When an emergency, such as a major weather event, disease epidemic or disaster occurs, schools are temporarily closed until various assessments can be made. New Zealand research (Stuart, Patterson, Johnston, & Pearce, 2013) on temporary closures due to weather and health-related events found that such events could create social cohesion as everyone pulled together. They also exacerbated existing social vulnerabilities, as those without resources struggled to cope with the extra demands of the closures. This finding is supported by research on Māori communities affected by the Canterbury earthquakes, which noted that while Māori communities banded together, housing and school relocations came at a cost to already vulnerable families (Lambert, 2013). In contrast, in China, Ng and Sim (2012) found that temporary closures and relocation of students after the Sichuan earthquake in 2008 were positive, as students were removed from the trauma of the aftermath and were able to continue their education in a safer place. The students appeared to suffer few problems as a result of their relocation.

The findings from the literature on permanent closures are not so positive. The effects on students, school staff and communities are mostly negative and long-lasting. Valencia (1984) researched school closures in California and found that little account was taken of the role of schools as the centres of their communities. Students' psychological adjustment and academic achievement were negatively affected. Parents lost their social connections and sense of belonging, and thus their involvement in school life decreased. Where United States schools have been closed because of poor educational achievement, the literature shows those most affected are African-American, Latino and low-socio-economic communities (Akers, 2012; Buras, 2011; Johnson, 2006; Lipman, 2011; Lipman & Hursh, 2007; Valencia, 1984). These are communities that are already marginalised, and students struggle to feel connected to the new schools when they have to travel out of their neighbourhoods to a new, often higher socio-economic location. Parents struggle to meet the increased costs associated with the relocation.

### Reasons for closure

The most common reason for school closures is population loss, but research also reports permanent closures for ideological reasons, such as closing poor performing schools.

The industrialisation of farming and globalisation of industry, leading to rural populations migrating to cities, has led to the systematic closure of small schools in Denmark (Egelund & Lautsen, 2006). The authors concluded that such school closures do not *cause* social dislocation; rather they are the sign that the community is in its final phase of decline. Kearns et al. (2009) take a different perspective.

From their study of proposed closures of South Taranaki schools in the early 2000s, they claim that keeping schools open is important for intergenerational investment and population retention. They also argue that in these communities, schools are often the biggest, most-well-resourced spaces for communities to gather—a key aspect of building and maintaining community cohesion.

Much of the literature on ideologically-motivated closures—either to close poor performing schools or turn public schools into charter schools—comes from the United States.

Lipman, for example, identifies neo-liberalism as the paradigm underpinning the radical transformation of Chicago's schools (2011, 2013; Lipman & Hursh, 2007). The closure of poor-performing schools and the relocation of students to higher achieving schools was to impact mostly on African-American and Latino communities. The gentrification of their neighbourhoods accompanied by school closures served to exacerbate their marginalisation and displacement. Similarly, when 106 school districts were reorganised in Arkansas in 2003–2004 (Johnson, 2006), resultant school closures were more likely to impact on the schools in districts with higher poverty levels that served higher percentages of African-American students. Johnson (2006) states, "If you were an African American student in an annexed district, the chances of your school being closed within two years was 69%" (p. 5).

## Type of location

Schools are more than educational institutions; they become part of the fabric of the community. Witten et al. (2003, p. 206) note, "Schools have histories and special characteristics born of place that in turn offer particular experiences to that community and facilitate the development and assertion of local knowledges and identity."

As the population in an area diminishes because of changing employment opportunities or other external factors, it is inevitable that a school might no longer be viable. This is especially so in rural areas. Autti and Hyry-Beihammer (2014), writing about Finland, said, "Schools in rural areas are centers of village social life and have a crucial role in constructing a local identity. For some people, the school is the only site for contact with other local people" (p.12). Over the past two decades, 65 percent of small rural schools in Finland have closed. Decisions were top-down and enacted swiftly, leaving communities feeling powerless. The authors concluded, "Closing a village school accelerates the withering of life in the surrounding countryside, reduces the 'immigration attraction' of the village, potentially increases emigration, and leads to a downward spiral in which the remaining services in the village are terminated" (p. 13).

In New Zealand, Witten et al. (2003) link the closure of small rural schools to the change to a market-led economy that prioritises cost-effectiveness over community cohesion. They claim the closure of rural post offices, banks and health facilities from the late 1980s onwards signalled this distinct change of direction (see also Keefe et al., 2003, on the closure of meat processing plants). School closures were to follow the closing of other facilities. Between 1989 and 2000, 186 schools closed as a result of network reviews or EDIs. Many of the districts affected were rural, for example, the West Coast and the Far North, but urban areas were not immune. The late 1990s also saw the closure or amalgamation of schools in centres of population such as Invercargill and Mosgiel. Closer analysis revealed that many of the schools closed over this time were in areas of high deprivation and that school closure and relocation of students only exacerbated the difficulties faced by these communities.

Urban school closures follow a similar pattern. In the United States, for example, closures are often ideologically-based and linked to urban decay. When the city of Chicago undertook a major restructure of its education system, the gaps between urban elites and the poor and dispossessed widened (Lipman, 2011, 2013; Lipman & Hursh, 2007; Means, 2008), and the closing of poor-performing schools exacerbated the dislocation of African-American and other marginalised populations.

## Response of communities

Schools are often taken for granted by their communities until they are threatened (Autti & Hyry-Beihammer, 2014). The announcement of school closures elicits strong emotions—anger, disbelief or sorrow. Affected people—teachers, parents, students and wider community members—band together to find ways to express their feelings. While some might accept their fate as inevitable, others want to challenge the decision.

Challenges might be through protests, legal interventions or via the media. A study of three schools in a marginal community in Santiago, Chile outlined the more extreme stance the community took to save their schools (Pino-Yancovic, 2015). Between 1994 and 2012, 2822 schools were closed across Chile. Parents of three public schools were not prepared to let this happen to their schools and took over the running of the schools as an act of defiance against the proposed closures. They kept this resistance up for seven months and finally succeeded in having their schools officially re-opened.

When Surrey Park School in Invercargill was set to close, the community used a range of strategies—engaging local and national media, street protests and community meetings (Witten et al., 2003). Someone even used weed killer to leave a protest message on the school's playground.

In 2012 Salisbury School in Nelson (for girls with complex needs) took the decision to court to get their closure overturned. In the end, they achieved what was supposed to be a four-year reprieve but the future of the school is still uncertain (more on this is discussed later).

In Canada, an analysis of letters-to-the-editor in relation to local school closures revealed the resources that stakeholders drew on to argue for non-closure. They used their knowledge of public education, discussed the strength of the schools in their communities, or related their personal experiences. The author (Phipps, 2000), however, could not conclusively link their efforts to the later reprieve of the schools from closure.

## Consequences

School closures can affect individuals, such as students, teachers or parents, or can have collective impacts on schools *as* communities and the school's wider community. When Surrey Park School in Invercargill closed, parents were afraid of losing their social networks and connections (Witten et al., 2001). The school was a site of accumulated goodwill over many generations. Parents had memories associated with the school, such as raising money and building the wharenui (meeting house). They were worried their children would be unwelcome or bullied at the new school. They faced transport issues, as they needed to send their children further away to school. As the schools were in higher decile (socio-economic) communities, this meant greater financial outlay in uniforms, transport and resources.

In order to find out how individual students might be affected by closure, De Witte and Van Klaveren (2014) focused on student achievement. They wanted to find out if students would benefit when poor performing schools in Amsterdam were closed and students were moved to higher achieving schools. Despite the claims that it would enhance their achievement, there was no evidence of improvement, yet nor was there dramatic evidence of decline. In contrast, in the United States, Kirshner, Gaertner & Pozzoboni (2010) examined a range of data relating to Latino and African American students, who transitioned to a new school after the closure of their schools, and found that their academic performance did decline. Standardised test scores were lower, dropout rates increased and graduation rates decreased. Students displayed a range of responses from anger and resentment through to indifference to resilience. Negative responses showed a strong relationship to negative outcomes.

In a United Kingdom study (Riseborough, 1994), teachers felt disempowered and deprofessionalised when their schools were closed. The lack of consultation, information and communication gave rise to anger and uncertainty. Although teachers tried to halt the closures through appeals or protests, they

were powerless. They were then made redundant. Their anxieties did not end there as they often reported difficulty in adjusting to or being accepted in their new settings. In another United Kingdom study, teachers facing a merger (Kyriacou & Harriman, 1993) became very stressed as they needed to be interviewed for positions in the new school. They worried what would happen if they did not get a job or did not interview well. Those who were successful continued to be stressed by the effort involved in setting up the new school and creating a positive school culture out of the forced decision to merge.

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 impact most negatively on already vulnerable communities, especially where these closures are ideologically motivated. School closures do not appear to necessarily improve student outcomes and can even decrease the performance of disadvantaged and marginalised groups. Communities 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 beginning of the end for some communities.

## The Forest Park story

After the release of the education renewal decisions for post-earthquake Christchurch, some schools undertook intensive high-profile campaigns to prevent their closures. In other communities, school Boards of Trustees did their very best but without the physical energy, mental endurance, financial capital or social networks to keep pushing, they quietly acquiesced. Acceptance did not mean they were any less traumatised; they just needed to put their focus on making it through as best they could. This is the story of one of those schools. It puts a human face on the place of that school in its community prior to the earthquakes, through the response and recovery journey, and as the school closed its doors on 140 years of history.

### Research design

The data used in this article were gathered as part of a wider study that set out to record the stories of how Christchurch schools coped with the earthquakes (see, for example, Mutch, 2014b, 2015, 2016). Forest Park asked to join the project so that their school closure story could be recorded for posterity. Interviews were conducted with the acting principal, teachers, support staff, students and parents. Ethical considerations were approved by the University of Auckland. All interviewees voluntarily participated and signed consent forms (or assent forms, in the case of children). Interviews were conducted in September 2013, several months before closure, and again post-closure, in April 2014. Interviews were semi-structured and conversational in tone. Care was taken to ensure that participants knew that they could bring a support person, terminate the interview without any reason, take a break at any time, decline to answer any question, or ask for any part of the interview to be deleted.

The interviews were transcribed, edited and have undergone several iterative analyses and contributed to other articles on the collective earthquake experiences of Christchurch schools (see Mutch, 2014b, 2015, 2016). In this article, however, the focus is on this particular school and its story. The findings are structured as a chronological narrative to culminate with the school's closure. Selections of original transcript are used to portray the participants' authentic voices and emotions.

### Forest Park's earthquake story

The September 4, 2010 earthquake struck at 4.35am on a Saturday morning. The area surrounding Forest Park School was awash with liquefaction and flooding but the school itself was not significantly damaged. Across the affected region, schools were closed until power, water and sewage were

restored. Schools were inspected for damage and, if declared safe, students and teachers returned to school within a week or two. One parent recalls her experience:

> We weren't very affected by the September earthquake. I did the whole reassuring thing but [the children] spent most of the morning under the kitchen table. They finally came out. After September we went and helped family and friends who'd been badly affected. We were just getting comfortable again with things when February hit. (Parent B)

The February 22, 2011 earthquake was centred much closer to the city and hit in the middle of a school day. A hundred of Forest Park's students and their teachers were at the QEII swimming complex learning water safety skills. One teacher remembers:

> We were so jolted that we stood up then we were jolted back down the force was so great. … We tried to stand and go forward but we were just knocked back … the lights went out and the children were screaming. All I remember is the siren noise and I went and grabbed a few of the Year 4 children out of the pool and I just huddled with them. (Teacher B)

It took over two hours to rescue, calm, account for, and ferry the children back to school in parents' cars:

> I came back in a parent's car and I just remember going down [the] road seeing the liquefaction, dogs loose, people walking along. This father had made a few trips – this was his 3rd or 4th trip. He warned me there might be sinkholes … I remember him saying, "I'm not going to tell the kids but there's damage at your school, damage on the roads…" (Teacher B)

The area was hit again by liquefaction and flooding. Buildings, roads and bridges were further damaged. One parent recalls:

> Our house—it's broken—liquefaction everywhere. We only stayed in Christchurch for two days because we had no power, sewerage or water. We cleaned up the liquefaction. The neighbours got together and cleaned up the front yards. (Parent B)

Again schools were closed and, on the eastern side of town where Forest Park was located, it took some weeks to assess all schools and undertake temporary repairs or organise alternative accommodation. Forest Park's school hall was badly damaged and fenced off. The nearby church offered its hall to the school for assemblies and classes. Before school recommenced, school staff met to debrief their personal experiences and to begin to think about what lay ahead. Staff needed to consider how they would introduce normality yet provide opportunities for children to make sense of the events:

> The earthquake had a massive impact on the children and there were also other trials in 2011. As teachers, we didn't really know how to deal with children after a natural disaster especially after they had had a month off school. So we were worried about how the children were going to be. Were they going to want to write about it? And how would they want to process it? (Teacher A)

Before school commenced, staff and parents came and tidied the school in preparation for the students' return. They were relieved to find that children were ready to come back to school: "We had a preparation day where kids could come in and see the school was still normal. The kids were amazing, we couldn't get over it, it was like security for them; it was really good" (Teacher B).

Unfortunately, February's earthquake was to be followed by two more major earthquakes (over 6 on the Richter scale) in June and December 2011. Ongoing aftershocks, repeated liquefaction, moving house, waiting for decisions on insurance, land zoning and rebuilding all took their toll on families throughout 2011. A staff member tells her story:

> September—our house was pretty much written off from the September quake. We had a huge amount of liquefaction and the house sank and tipped … Then we had the February shake and that turned us to toast really. We found out in that April that we were red-zoned and we would have to move—and that was ok, you dealt with it, you just dealt with it. And we had the June [earthquake]—all these produced huge amounts of liquefaction, the house tipped a bit more and sank a bit more. (Support staff A)

This quote typifies the situation in which many of the school staff were living, yet they put students first as they returned to their core function of teaching and learning. They continued providing emotional support to children and their families, despite the ongoing difficulties in their own lives. A parent noted:

> 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 D)

The long grind of physical, emotional and psychological recovery amid constant aftershocks and uncertainty began to affect people's health:

> If you looked at the stress-related illnesses since the earthquake—the number of parents that have had cancer, heart attacks, brain tumours—it's horrendous. And we're all dealing with that as well as everything else. There's been some very sad stories at school—we lost a staff member from a stress-related heart attack—it's just been one thing after another for this community. (Teacher C)

Amidst all this, discussion about the future of schooling in Christchurch began.

## Education renewal for greater Christchurch

Early in 2012 the Ministry of Education began consultation on the future direction of schooling in Christchurch. Initially, the rhetoric was around creating '21st century schools' as in this Ministry of Education advertisement: "Education renewal for greater Christchurch is about meeting the needs and aspirations of children and young people. It is not just about revitalising infrastructure but also enhancing education outcomes" (The Press, 2012). One principal remembers, "Initially, we thought the Government and MoE [Ministry of Education] were genuinely engaging in blue skies thinking on how they would reform the current schooling system to something better" (Duncan, 2016, p. 31).

Reading between the lines, it could be seen, however, that the Ministry was signalling that not all schools would be repaired or replaced:

> The extent of damage and on-going impact of people movement in the wake of the 2010 and 2011 earthquakes mean it cannot be restored to the way it was. We need to accept in areas that have been depopulated we will have to do things differently, which will inevitably mean some change to services. The viability of existing individual schools and increased demand for new schools are a key consideration going forward (Ministry of Education, 2012b, p. 2).

In September 2012 principals were called to a meeting at the Lincoln Events Centre. Here they received coloured name tags to indicate whether their schools would be 'restored', 'consolidated' or 'rejuvenated'. These words were designed to soften the fact that they were about to be told whether their schools were earmarked to continue, amalgamate or close. The meeting caused considerable distress:

> The meeting at Lincoln was vile, starting with some principals and BoTs [Boards of Trustees] getting a phone call 24-hours before the meeting to advise them to be there

and then having a meeting prior to the main meeting where one's fate was shared. This 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. It was an awful start to the process. (Duncan, 2016, p. 28)

## Reaction to the news of closure

One teacher at Forest Park already had a sense of foreboding:

> I can't remember when the announcement of the red zone was, but my feeling was not good. We had 400 [students] the day of the earthquake. A lot of them had gone with grandparents; a lot of them had gone to school in other parts of New Zealand. So I think once we got numbers, we had lost 80–100 children and I think then I knew. My thoughts were: 'How can the school survive with the red zone on three sides of it?' (Teacher B)

The news of Forest Park's closure travelled quickly:

> Unfortunately, the media leaked it before [we were told]. So 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. The principal hadn't even heard it. So she had to get on the phone to confirm it. (Teacher B)

Forest Park would be one of 38 affected schools. Another teacher 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; other children's schools? … 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 [a] house waiting to be repaired, and we're going to lose my job now and my child's going to lose their school. There was just not enough information to allay those fears at that time. (Teacher D)

There was an outcry of disbelief from teachers and the community:

> School is the *safe* place that they [schools] have tried to provide. Children were at school for the big February earthquake and it created a stronger bond in their communities, so it is very challenging when the Ministry wants to break that up … (Teacher A)

Forest Park's Board of Trustees prepared a submission against the school's closure and amalgamation with a nearby school but was unsuccessful. At the end of 2013, the school would close. Staff and students would be merged into the nearby school. The community was dismayed, reacting with 'anger and disbelief' saying it was 'unfair and cruel'. 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 shortsighted decision making because, surprisingly, our roll hasn't dropped as far as what they thought it would. (Support Staff A)

Some were a little more sanguine: "I thought it might happen but it was such a shock when I saw it in writing." Others thought that while it was inevitable, the timing could have been better:

> If there's one thing I could have said to Hekia Parata, it's that she has absolutely no idea what she has put in place. I understand that it has to happen. I fully understand, but the timing—if people had been more settled, if things had been better at home, kids would have coped a lot better with the changes that were going to happen. (Parent B)

For some Christchurch teachers and principals, confirmation of post-earthquake closure was more than they could take. Some needed to take sick leave, others retire early or resign. A deputy principal at a non-closing school volunteered to support Forest Park as their acting principal until the school finally closed. He was shocked by the lack of humanity and empathy in the process. He commented: "It could have been done better. It was mechanical and technical." He continued:

> 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)

## The countdown to closure

The school felt disenfranchised as they were labelled the 'closing school' while the school they would merge into was called the 'continuing school'. Staff told of the demoralising visit from the continuing school who arrived to do an inventory of what resources Forest Park had that the new school would keep and what they would throw out. Staff would also need to reapply for their positions:

> It was horrible … 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 D)

This added pressure to everything they were dealing with outside school: "My husband's not well. He was made redundant. He got another job working 11-hour days but he struggles. I've been in hospital once and … now my job has a huge question mark over it" (Support staff A).

School staff had to support students and families through what was termed 'another aftershock'. Children were upset: "I was quite upset and disappointed that the school was going and it wouldn't be [Forest Park] any more" (Student 18). Another noted:

> At first I was pretty sad, because I have been in that school for five years, and then as my last year at the school proceeds, the school would then finish when I leave. So I didn't feel too well. (Student 19)

Teachers noticed a change: "Some children showed anger that normally wouldn't show anger …. So, the counsellor would just go and pick them up, walk with them and talk to them about their anger" (Teacher D). 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 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 … He was sure his letter would stop the merger from going ahead. And it didn't. So for a little while he took it quite, quite hard. (Parent A)

Parents were distraught:

> [I was] very angry … I actually came to the school as well. So, it's a family history … it was part of *my* personal history as well as my children's … then all of a sudden they

said, 'Well, no, this is going as well'. So, yeah, it was like having the roots pulled out from underneath your feet. (Parent A)

The school tried to support its community through this period of distress:

They also had the library open for parents to go in and have coffee in the morning just to talk … There could only be four or five of them but they could all sit in there, if they wanted to cry, they could cry… (Teacher D)

Despite how they felt emotionally about the school closure, teachers put on a brave face for their students:

It was all about the children. We made sure that everything was really positive. We looked for positive things; we talked about it; we told them about the decision. We held discussions with our classes so that any fears could be brought up and they could be talked about and we could then relay these to parents if they want to talk about them further. (Teacher C)

Their bravery 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. They did their best to make sure that when the merger occurred, that the children had a positive view of the whole thing. So I take my hat off to the teachers because they were going through so much too … the earthquake, the merger, the uncertainty themselves about how everything was going to happen with the merger. And they were just so positive with the kids and they reinforced that it was going to be okay. (Parent A)

The teachers tried to get the children to talk about their feelings and to focus on the opportunities, such as making new friends or getting access to more resources and activities at a bigger school: "[My teacher] said to pair up with a buddy and then talk about our feelings. And then share them to the teachers … it was ok to feel like nervous and shy" (Student 10); "She talked about all the good things. She told us what would happen and stuff … like you can meet new people and bring in a lot of new ideas, and new teachers you can meet" (Student 8).

Students, in turn, took on a similarly caring role in relation to their classmates and younger siblings. As one student said: "I'm trying to help people and cheer them up and make them feel more happy" (Student 3).

## Forest Park closes

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 complied, old pupils were invited back and fun activities were arranged for children and their families:

They had all the [Forest Park] school history around and you could read it. There were lots of people who had been there who had gone to school 50 years ago. They came back … I think just to know that there are other people who went to [Forest Park] school too and that it's not just us who are feeling sad. But they also made it fun because it was the last school thing they did and it was more special. (Student 15)

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 Forest Park 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 community history, identity and cohesion, especially during the recovery from the earthquakes; despite submissions against the closure, the school closed and the students and staff were absorbed into the nearby school. The community was only left with memories—"… a memory, a very, very, good memory" (Student 9).

## Case study summary

A theme to run through the Forest Park case study is the significant place that Forest Park school held in the community, before, during and after the earthquakes. During the earthquake response period, teachers and parents put their lives in danger to rescue children. During the recovery period, teachers put their own concerns aside to focus on students and their families. This did not go unnoticed by the community. The closure announcement was badly handled. The implementation was technical and uncaring. The emotional and psychological distress caused was not taken into account in the closure process. Yet teachers kept positive for the students' sake right until the end. The school felt like a pawn in a wider agenda. Reflecting on the process, the acting principal commented, "In military terms, we are just collateral damage!"

## Theoretical context: Ideology and education

### The rise of New Right ideology

This section puts the Forest Park story, and the educational decision-making surrounding school closures, into the context of ideological decision-making. An ideology is a world-view with assumptions, practices and discourses that are portrayed authoritatively yet unquestioningly (Pinar, Reynolds, Slattery, & Taubman, 1996).

While much has been written about the rise of neo-liberalism as an economic ideology, my interest is in how such economic ideologies influence political ideologies and how these, in turn, permeate the view of society, community and education. In order to make sense of the contradictions within neo-liberalism, it is important not to divorce it from its ideological bedfellow, neo-conservatism. My introduction to these notions came through investigating the influence of the New Right on education, and curriculum development, in particular. I was trying to reconcile why *Tomorrow's Schools* led to such contradictory policies as centralised policy control over curriculum and assessment yet promoted competition between schools and parental choice (see Mutch, 2003).

New Right ideology was a way of describing the ideas behind education reforms in the United Kingdom in the 1980s. On reading Dale (1989) I came to understand that the New Right contained two strands—the neo-liberals and the neo-conservatives. Neo-liberal ideology has, as some of its key tenets, favouring individualism over collectivism, encouraging competition, deregulation and privatisation, and allowing market-forces to shape government decision-making. Neo-conservatism, on the other hand, favours traditional values, hierarchy, accountability and notions of excellence (Dale, 1989; Trowler, 1998).

The tensions between the two strands and the way they attempted to influence policy directions, yet give concessions to each other in order to keep a strong alliance, led to some of the contradictory directions education policy was to take. Worldwide, neo-liberal policies have led to charter schools, public-private partnerships and the financialisation of education. Neo-conservative policies have led to curriculum standards, high-stakes testing, performance pay and league tables.

In New Zealand, neoliberalism has seen the growing corporatisation of education, competition for students and the introduction of charter schools (known as partnerships schools or Kura Hourua) and

Teach First (an off-shoot of Teach for America). Neo-conservative policies have, on the other hand, ensured that curriculum and assessment policies (such as National Standards), accountability and school review, remain tightly in centralised government control.

## Political ideology and school closures

As highlighted in the literature review, much of the research on school closures discusses ideologically-motivated decision making. Some closures are motivated by neo-liberal thinking where the overriding concerns are efficiency and cost-effectiveness. This could be where the school population has declined in a rural area, or where education delivery is too expensive, as in a special education setting. Witten et al. (2003) explain the impact of neo-liberal ideology in the context of school closures:

> Competition and self-interest have replaced egalitarianism as normative ideals and also primary understandings of social regulation. A tighter concern with fiscal efficiency has also been introduced as an instrument of governance and also as a principle of administration. The competitive, acquisitive self has replaced the citizen as the subject of government. (p. 207)

The network reviews and EDIs of the 1990s and 2000s are examples of this ideological motivation. In order to promote parental choice, school zones were abolished and resources rationalised. Decisions to close schools were based on economic viability rather than social concerns. The needs of local communities were ignored and decisions influenced by "aspatial new managerialist reason" (Witten et al., 2003, p. 220).

A more recent example of cost-effectiveness overriding educational concern is the final closure of Salisbury School for girls. After the Ministry lost its case to close the school in 2012, it began instead referring girls to local Intensive Wraparound Services (IWS). Salisbury's roll dropped from 77 to ten and the Minister recommended consultation on closure in 2016. A girl at Salisbury was deemed to cost $214,909 whereas the cost of providing support through the IWS was $27,000. Opponents of the closure claimed that redirecting girls to other services was a deliberate ploy to get Salisbury to an unsustainable level so closure was the only possible outcome (Sivignon, 2016).

Other ideological closures discussed in the literature are implemented for neo-conservative reasons— such as educational accountability, where rather than put in measures to support struggling schools, they are labelled as failing and subsequently closed. Prior to Hurricane Katrina, schools in New Orleans were deemed to be of serious concern (Landrieu, 2012). When the disaster hit, all 7500 teachers and school support staff were fired. When students returned to school, they found a very different educational environment. Schools were frequently staffed with new Teach for America graduates, ill prepared for the post-disaster context. Over time, all public schools in New Orleans Parish were systematically transformed into charter schools. Students were left feeling dislocated, disoriented and disengaged (Akers, 2012; Buras, 2011, 2013; Gabor, 2013; Maxwell, 2007; Newton, 2013; Poon & Cohen, 2012).

Giroux (2006) claims that Hurricane Katrina revealed how the global ideological agenda had dismantled the safety net that supported society's most vulnerable. The state's role had changed from one with a civic conscience and a social contract to one that provided "financial rewards and privileges for only some members of society" (p. 47). Market forces replaced democratic decision-making and community consensus.

## School closures in post-earthquake Canterbury

In the post-earthquake Canterbury context, the main justification for closures was from a neo-liberal perspective. The *Greater Christchurch Education Renewal Programme's Business Case* (Ministry of

Education, 2013) document states:

> The Government has recognised the importance of re-establishing the education network as a response to the Canterbury earthquakes. The Government's objectives are wider than just rebuilding damaged school properties. It recognises that education renewal is fundamental to develop the skills to ensuring a *growing economy* [emphasis added]. (p. 16)

The criteria by which to select schools for closure were where the ground was prone to liquefaction, it would not be economic to repair or maintain buildings, the school rolls were already low and population projects showed limited growth (Ministry of Education, 2013). While these appear reasonable expectations, the data on which decisions were based proved to be often inaccurate and the decisions motivated by another agenda (see later discussion).

Neo-conservative justifications also appeared in the business and other documents, for example:

> Yet, prior to the earthquakes the educational situation across greater Christchurch was not perfect. Inequalities existed; a disproportionate number of Māori and Pasifika young people left school early with few qualifications, never to return to education or training. School leaver attainment in greater Christchurch lagged behind that of Auckland and Wellington. (Ministry of Education, 2013. p. 3)

This came as quite a surprise to educators in the city who were unaware that education in the city was in the dire situation that was claimed. They understood that the earthquake provided an opportunity to 'build back better' but when schools were closing that did not have much damage and who had strong student achievement or excellent ERO reports they began to suspect that not all was as it seemed. Klein (2007) calls this the 'shock doctrine' where crisis situations are used to advance neo-liberal or neo-conservative ideological causes while those affected are too distracted or exhausted to protest. One principal gives an example (cited in Duncan, 2016):

> My community were blind-sided when we received the news that we were to close. It simply didn't make sense. Initially, it was explained that the reasons were due to roll decline, building and land damage. When we contested this and engaged lawyers, the MoE agreed that closure was happening to allow a new concept of schooling to open. (p. 31)

The Ministry saw the opportunity that the earthquake damage had presented to attempt to implement innovations they had already been considering. The early discussion of opening up Christchurch to public-private partnerships, such as charter schools, was quickly shut down after widespread public disapproval. Other innovations such as Community Learning Clusters (the 'new concept' mentioned above) have since come to fruition as with the recently-opened Aranui Haeata Community Campus.

## The implementation of the education renewal plan

The insensitive implementation of the education renewal plan was clearly signalled in the Forest Park case study. The case study allowed us to gain a particular and more intimate picture within a more generalised experience. This section puts that school's story into a wider context, geographically and theoretically.

The education renewal process has come in for much critique, from both inside and outside Canterbury. The determination of the Ministry to use the opportunity the earthquakes presented to close small (urban and rural) or expensive (intermediate and special) schools and to merge local schools to create new cluster arrangements, meant that the process was poorly thought out, rushed, unfair and insensitive. The following section outlines ten claims made by those affected by the closures or mergers. The sources used to synthesise these concerns include the Canterbury Principals Association review (Duncan, 2016), the Post Primary Teachers Association (PPTA) annual report

(PPTA, 2013), a joint submission on the Canterbury earthquakes to the Human Rights Council (Baird, 2013), the Child Poverty Action Group report (Shirlaw, 2014), studies of Christchurch principals (Callaghan, 2013; Direen, 2016; Mutch, 2015); and the Ombudsman's investigation (The Office of the Ombudsman, 2013).

First, there is frequent claim that the Ministry used inaccurate data to make closure decisions. Many respondents in Duncan's study provide detailed evidence of this. Here is one school's experience:

> 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 trying to justify the desire to build a new Year 1–13 community campus in this low decile Labour-held area. (Duncan, 2016, p. 16)

Second, those on the ground, such as the principals in Direen's (2016) study, complained that "the goal posts kept changing" (p. 44). One example in the reports was the figure given for the size of a viable school; another was the changing timeframe:

> First, when the proposals were originally announced, the date for actual merger or closure for most schools was January 2015 or January 2016. However, most of the dates were brought forward to January 2014, meaning that many schools will close at the end of this year. (Baird, 2014, p. 8)

Third, schools were frustrated by receiving conflicting or inaccurate information. In Duncan's research, 68 percent of principals were unhappy with the level of communication. The PPTA (2013), noted:

> Moreover, some of the announcements were simply wrong; the proposed merger between Christchurch Boy's High School and Shirley Boys' High School and between Avonside Girls and Christchurch Girls turns out to have been an error. Confusion reigned. (p. 12)

Fourth, the Ministry was accused of manipulating or withholding information. One principal said, "We didn't know that the Minister and MoE had already decided on the strategy. There was no consultation and the whole thing seemed political and expedient". Another said:

> Where to start! MoE staff tried to hide information from us. Staff in Wellington would tell us one thing and then retract it later. Information was stated and then denied later. Dishonest and deceptive.

When such concerns reached the Ombudsman's Office, Dr David McGee conducted an investigation into claims the Ministry withheld information, instructed the Christchurch City Council to withhold information, and advised principals to cease seeking information through the Official Information Act. The Ombudsman confirmed the Ministry had acted wrongly on these 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, 2013, p. 15)

Fifth, consultation 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. I think that it is necessary to define what and when information should be released proactively to

ensure that a proper, informed and fair consultation is held. (Office of the Ombudsman, 2013, p. 15)

Sixth, there is the common theme across the reports of widespread frustration at the speed at which the closures were implemented. Direen (2016) notes the stress caused by "speed of decision making, variation in quality of communication and information overload" (p. 51). A principal in Duncan's study said, "Timing was rushed. Changing demographics not fully accounted for. Very poor initial communication, an apparent focus on school type rather than needs of students in area" (Direen, 2016, p. 15).

Seventh, there appeared to be inconsistency or unfairness in the decision making. Sixty-nine percent of respondents in Duncan's (2016) study felt the Ministry's proposed strategy was not fair. One principal commented, "Too many of the decisions seemed unfair because there was no clear explanation for why some schools stayed open, some schools were closed and others seemed to be forgotten." Another said, "Twenty-eight other primary schools smaller than mine remained open. A significant number of schools with structural damage far in excess of my school remained open. Schools requiring some land remediation remained open when we, with minimal damage, closed." Another principal became aware of the higher number of school closures in low decile areas: "… this follows a pattern within other urban area reviews. Small schools with close neighbours in higher socio-economic areas tended not to be considered" (Duncan, 2016, p. 15).

Eighth, many sources decry the Ministry's lack of sensitivity. The way in which schools received the first notification of which schools were to close at the Lincoln Events Centre meeting is perhaps the most memorable example: "The Lincoln meeting began a process of insensitivity" (Duncan, 2016, p. 29) and the PPTA agreed:

> On September the 14th, 2012 announcements were made about the re-organisation of Christchurch schools. Although this was expected, the presentation of the proposals as a "good news story" in a large public meeting without any regard for the distress school closures cause, was simply inept. (2013, p. 12)

Ninth, little consideration was given for the way in which these decisions came on top of many other issues facing Christchurch schools at that time. Some were related to the earthquakes, such as roll fluctuations or psychological distress. Some had nothing to do with the earthquakes, such as the introduction of Communities of Learning or the Novopay debacle. Direen (2016) notes,

> From September 2012, things got even more complex. Schools were faced with closures and mergers; the introduction of the one billion dollar Christchurch School Renewal Plan; the accelerated roll out of modern learning environments for schools: the introduction of enrolment zones; and change in decile ratings that affected some schools' funding, as well as other dynamics that required principals to lead decision making processes across an increasing range of issues. (p. 8)

Tenth, the school closure process took little account of the psycho-social needs of communities. One principal noted, "Little consideration of specific needs of community of interest around a school." (Duncan, 2016, p. 15). The Human Rights review 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. Additionally, there is still demographic uncertainty with many communities experiencing a return of residents or new arrivals to assist with the Rebuild. (Baird, 2014, p. 8)

These ten points echo the experience of Forest Park. They, too, felt their decision was based on inaccurate projections and that processes were unfair, inconsistent and rushed. Interestingly, this is borne out by the fact that the school they were to merge into did not have room for the students from Forest Park on their premises. Half the newly merged school's students needed to return to the old site

(despite it being declared unsuitable). Hu (2015) tells of the confusion and hurt children faced when they found themselves back at their old school but under a new name and regime. They told Hu they were instructed by a teacher from the continuing school to turn their T-shirts inside out so the logos on their old school uniforms would not be visible.

The incomprehensible and uncaring nature of such decision-making and implementation processes did not go unnoticed by those outside the education sector. In an open letter to the Government in 2012, three Christchurch MPs (from Labour and the Greens) stated:

> The recent schools proposals continue to confirm the top down approach from your Government toward Christchurch. Schools are going to be savaged with these proposals. It began with pretend consultation, falsely based claims and wildly inappropriate solutions to problems. The minister and Ministry of Education appear to be totally out of touch with what is happening in this city, with no consideration for communities and the real people they will affect in announcing these destructive proposals. (Cairns, 2013)

Nor did they go unnoticed by those outside Canterbury. Many high profile people, such as lawyer Mai Chen denounced the consultation and implementation process. An editorial in the Herald (http://www.nzherald.co.nz/nz/news/article.cfm?c_id=1&objectid=10855169) stated:

> Of all the mishaps in education this year, the Christchurch school plan was the most telling. To read the plan was to see a ministry utterly out of touch with the people its schools are supposed to serve. The earthquakes had left a number of schools damaged and some of their communities decimated. Some closures would be required. But not nearly as many as the ministry decided. When its officials sat down to make a recovery plan for the city, someone decided it was a heaven-sent opportunity to refashion schooling as we know it.

## Conclusion

While it was a Labour Government that introduced *Tomorrow's Schools* (Lange, 1988), the last three terms of a National Government have ensured that New Right thinking, in both its neoliberal and neoconservative forms, has become entrenched and unassailable. The closing of schools in post-earthquake Canterbury highlights how the loss of the belief in the collective responsibility of society and of the importance of schools in community cohesion has left an indelible mark on a generation.

The emotional and social damage to individuals, families and communities that the closure decisions caused continues to this day. The Forest Park case study gives an insight into the gamut of emotions in one school community—from anger and frustration, through to disappointment and sadness to resignation and acquiescence. Despite coming to accept their fate, the Forest Park community is still left feeling that they were merely pawns in a bigger game. Their story is only one of many in Christchurch and in other places where closures are political and expedient.

In conclusion, this study confirms that the rhetoric and influence of market forces on educational policy has achieved a global reach. A similar rhetoric worldwide is used to embed neo-liberal notions of choice and cost-effectiveness with neo-conservative notions of standards and accountability by drawing on a manufactured crisis in education (Peters, Paraskeva, & Besley, 2015), which must be addressed with haste. The successes of these market-driven policies are then publicly lauded with no account taken of the social, educational, cultural and emotional damage left in their wake. Such policies hurt vulnerable communities most and treat their inhabitants as collateral damage in a larger policy agenda. When the opportunity provided by a natural disaster arises, government officials and policy makers act with clinical precision as they continue the dislocation and disenfranchisement of communities begun by the disaster to complete the dismantling of the last vestiges of democratic decision making (Giroux, 2006; Klein, 2007).

In the story of Forest Park, we see glimmers of light, of teachers and parents who refuse to be crushed by their circumstances and of children who are resilient and hopeful about their future. Yet the acting principal of Forest Park was sceptical. He feared that the school closure agenda in New Zealand will continue well beyond its post-earthquake implementation:

> Bit of a cliché, but if you picture the Hindenburg crashing and the very famous commentary where the man on the radio cries out, 'Oh the humanity!' This is exactly another moment in history where I would exclaim, 'Oh the humanity!' because, in the bigger picture, there are more schools and more communities that are going to go through this… (Acting Principal, Forest Park School)

## Postscript

As this article was being prepared for publication, a report from The Office of the Ombudsman was tabled in Parliament. The report concluded that the school reconfiguration process was mismanaged, lacked transparency and caused stress to already traumatised communities. The investigation found that the Ministry treated schools with mistrust and defensiveness. The Ombudsman recommends that the Ministry make a public apology to all 38 schools involved.

## Acknowledgements

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