Excellent Me!
Investigating Scholastic Identities and Learning within Discourses of Excellence

Kim Brown

A thesis submitted for the degree of
Master of Arts (Education)
At the University of Otago, Dunedin,
New Zealand

29th July 2013
Abstract

Many schools define their educational vision in terms of excellence in achievement for all. This research presents a picture of how one school engages with the discourse of ‘excellence for all’ to produce localised interpretations and discursive constructs of successful learners and successful learning. Embedded in the New Zealand Curriculum (2007), excellence operates as an explicit value to be taught and learnt, a value contingent upon practices of recognition deployed in schools to incentivise and reward students.

This thesis demonstrates how the discourses of excellence for all impacted upon the scholastic identities of a group of high-achieving children in one New Zealand intermediate school. I apply a poststructural lens to understand the identity work that the students engage in as they strive for excellence at school. Recognising the potential influence of structural factors in crafting a sense of self, I also employ Bourdieu’s (2010) concept of cultural capital to analyse factors contributing to the valorisation of particular scholastic identities and accomplishments.

I employ a qualitative methodology in this thesis, maintaining ethical reflexivity to enable greater ethical symmetry between researcher and participant. For this study, three research activities constituted the inquiry process. The first activity involved a visual presentation created by each of the four participants to illustrate how they saw themselves and their learning. These presentations served as elicitation tools for the second research activity, individual semi-structured interviews. The third research activity asked the students to collaborate on a guide to achieving excellence at their school. Combining a general inductive approach with discourse analysis, I report my findings in two chapters. The first focuses on the role of the school as a ‘producer’ and ‘effect’ of discourses of excellence, and how that shapes students’ identity work. The second considers the emotional labour of students’ engagement with excellence.

The students in this study were selected by their school as best placed to demonstrate excellence, yet engaging with discourses of excellence still presented complex negotiations of identity. The students’ perceptions reveal that diverse and contradictory
constructs of excellence inform what counts as achievement and who can achieve. When recognition of academic worth is unevenly distributed however, the rhetorical certainty of excellence for all begins to untangle.
Acknowledgements

The route to excellence is unquestionably demanding, whether or not one actually arrives! I would like to acknowledge my sincere thanks and appreciation to the following people who have given so freely of their time, energy, and support.

Karen Nairn and Susan Sandretto acted as my supervisors for this research project, and have contributed an extraordinary amount to my growth as a researcher, a writer, and a ‘stayer’ when the going got tough.

My own children, Tallulah and Leon, and the children with whom I work have provided constant inspiration for this thesis. Your learning and experiences of school reiterate for me the necessity for those of us involved in education to value each child as an individual, and to seek opportunities to recognise excellence differentially. Thank you, Jon, for giving what you could during an extremely difficult time.

My friends on the post-grad floor have helped to keep the thesis journey in perspective, offering moral support, advice, and much more. Thank-you Lara, for your care and warmth; Leigh, for proof-reading the (almost) final document and all the interesting asides; Shire, for your humour and observations on life; Megan, for your pragmatism and encouragement; and Keely, for asking me how I’m doing, a small question that meant so much.

I am greatly indebted to Kanuka Intermediate School and the four students who contributed to this research: Athena, Hoffman, Josh, and Qwerty. I was always greeted at your school with warmth and welcome, and you have given me a great deal.

My last thanks go to the University of Otago, for without a scholarship to study for this Masters Thesis, my research would not have happened.
# Table of Contents

Abstract ................................................................................................................................. ii
Acknowledgements ............................................................................................................... iv
Table of Contents .............................................................................................................. v
List of Figures .................................................................................................................... ix
List of tables ....................................................................................................................... x

Chapter 1: Excellence, Identities, and Learning ................................................................. 1
  Why excellence? .................................................................................................................. 1
  The intermediate school context .................................................................................... 4
  The research field ............................................................................................................ 5
  Turning to excellence as an educational strategy ......................................................... 6
  The route to excellence - a thesis outline .................................................................... 7

Chapter 2: The Critical Frame .......................................................................................... 8
  The thinking behind poststructuralism .......................................................................... 9
  Poststructural inertia and the (im)possibilities for transformation ............................. 10
  The subject .................................................................................................................... 11
    The humanist subject .................................................................................................. 12
    Doing the subject differently ..................................................................................... 14
  Interrelational identities ............................................................................................... 16
  Adding some structure – cultural capital and education ............................................. 19
    Considering what counts as knowledge .................................................................... 20
  Discourse, wording the world ....................................................................................... 22
  Summary ....................................................................................................................... 25

Chapter 3: Locating Excellence ....................................................................................... 28
  Defining excellence ........................................................................................................ 29
    Elite excellence .......................................................................................................... 29
    Excellence in educational provision ........................................................................... 29
    Individual excellence .................................................................................................. 29
    Differential excellence ............................................................................................... 30
    Cultural understandings of excellence ..................................................................... 31
EXCELLENT ME! INVESTIGATING IDENTITIES, LEARNING, AND DISCOURSE

An educational lineage of excellence ................................................................. 32

**Considering attainment within neoliberal and globalised networks** ............. 33
Where excellence meets equity? ....................................................................... 36
The Finnish model .......................................................................................... 38
Rhetorical excellence .................................................................................... 40

**Conceptualising the scholastic subject** ....................................................... 42
Multi-accomplishment and doing it all ............................................................ 43
Introducing the 'renaissance child' ................................................................ 45
Complicating multi-talented and multi-accomplished identities .................... 46
The relevance of 'project girl' and having it all .............................................. 47
Anxiety and excellence .................................................................................. 48

**Using goals to understand success and failure** .......................................... 51
Summary .......................................................................................................... 52

**Chapter 4: Methodology and Inquiry** ......................................................... 54
The research question .................................................................................... 55

**Ethical reflexivity and research** ................................................................. 57
Participants .................................................................................................... 59
The research field - Kanuka Intermediate School ......................................... 60
Recruiting the student participants ............................................................... 61
Assent and informed consent ...................................................................... 61
The challenges of delays .............................................................................. 63
The four student participants ...................................................................... 64
Teachers and leadership team participants .................................................... 64

**The plan of inquiry** .................................................................................... 65
The ethics of researching with children .......................................................... 65
The visual ........................................................................................................ 66
The research activities .................................................................................... 66
Individual portfolios ....................................................................................... 67
Mapping the journey to excellence ............................................................... 69
Semi-structured interviews and focus groups ................................................. 71

**Data analysis** .............................................................................................. 72
Preparation of data ........................................................................................ 72
Close reading of text and creating themes ..................................................... 73
Overlapping themes and unrelated data ....................................................... 73
Chapter 6: Scholastic Identities and the Idealised Student

The ‘can-do’ student

Establishing individuality and finding a place at school

Challenges to individuality

Motivation and responsibility

Multi-accomplishment and increasing educational capital

When idealised subject positions fail

Family values and culture

The emotional labour of excellence

Summary

Chapter 7: The Discourses of Excellence and Student Identity

The research question reviewed

Making sense of excellence

Excellence recognised and rewarded

Discursive resources and excellence

Chapter 5: Excellence in School

Constructing an understanding of excellence

Personal excellence

Talent

Taking and making the most of opportunities

Getting involved

Strategic thinking

Pursuing your passions

Quantifying and recognising excellence

School award systems

Inclusive/exclusive excellence

Exceptional excellence and competition

Summary

Continuing revision of the thematic system

Rhetoric, the persuasive move

Constructing my findings

Trustworthiness

Summary

Chapter 5: Excellence in School

Constructing an understanding of excellence

Personal excellence

Talent

Taking and making the most of opportunities

Getting involved

Strategic thinking

Pursuing your passions

Quantifying and recognising excellence

School award systems

Inclusive/exclusive excellence

Exceptional excellence and competition

Summary

Chapter 6: Scholastic Identities and the Idealised Student

The ‘can-do’ student

Establishing individuality and finding a place at school

Challenges to individuality

Motivation and responsibility

Multi-accomplishment and increasing educational capital

When idealised subject positions fail

Family values and culture

The emotional labour of excellence

Summary

Chapter 7: The Discourses of Excellence and Student Identity

The research question reviewed

Making sense of excellence

Excellence recognised and rewarded

Discursive resources and excellence
Excellence within the broader field of study .......................................................... 135
Implications .................................................................................................................. 136
High quality teaching ................................................................................................. 136
Redefining excellence in achievement ........................................................................ 137
Ethical reflexivity and investigating excellence .......................................................... 139
Further research possibilities ....................................................................................... 143
Conclusion .................................................................................................................. 144

References .................................................................................................................. 146

Appendix A: Letter to Schools .................................................................................... 159
Appendix B: Information Sheets and Consent Forms .................................................. 162
Appendix C: Activity Brief .......................................................................................... 167
Appendix D: Interview Questions ................................................................................ 169
Appendix E: Contact Summary Form .......................................................................... 170
List of Figures

Figure 1: The front cover of 'The Idiots [sic] Guide to Excellence' (student 2) .......... 70

Figure 2: Extract from The Idiots Guide to Excellence (student 4) ......................... 93

Figure 3: Extract from the Idiots Guide to Excellence (student 1). .......................... 93

Figure 4: How others see me; slide from All About Me! (student 2). ...................... 105

Figure 5: How I see myself; slide from All About Me! (student 3) ......................... 107

Figure 6: Things i [sic] usually keep to myself; slide from All About Me! (student 3). ........................................................................................................................................ 110

Figure 7: "Sport v science and maths"; slide from All About Me! (student 3). ....... 114
List of tables

Table 1 ........................................................................................................................................... 56
Chapter 1: Excellence, Identities, and Learning

Excellence represents a value that, according to the *New Zealand Curriculum* (2007), should be encouraged amongst all school students in order to participate and thrive in society. In this thesis I aim to explore how excellence finds expression within the identity work and understanding of learning for a group of students at one New Zealand intermediate school. I seek multiple understandings of how difference, achievement and a sense of self can be accommodated within a discursive frame of excellence for all.

While the *New Zealand Curriculum* (2007) might define values for the nation’s learners and future citizens, students will arrive at school with values and dispositions of their own that reflect their home and community cultures. The diverse identities that students bring to school contribute to how individuals subsequently engage with the processes of learning and make sense of themselves as scholastic subjects. The crafting of learner identities therefore requires individual students to make sense of both their unique and their collective place within school, including their individuality and their membership within a community of learners that constitutes any education setting.

The New Zealand school as a site of identity work is subject to a myriad of discursive interventions. Driven by national studies into school effectiveness and international comparisons of student attainment, Van Avermaet, Van Houtte and Van den Branden (2011) suggest educational policy in many countries endeavours to combine a concern for providing high quality learning for students of diverse backgrounds with performative excellence. With the discourse of excellence appearing to operate simultaneously as a global, national and individual pursuit, it creates a complex and multi-layered phenomenon to research.

**Why excellence?**

The research question guiding this thesis emerged as the result of a change in area of inquiry. My initial thinking focused on the notion of *learning communities*. A search of primary and intermediate school websites within a specified area of New
Zealand, however, quickly determined that most schools appeared not to present themselves as learning communities (www.educationcounts.govt.nz, 2012). The search was not completely fruitless, because in the course of investigating websites I noticed a number of schools subscribed to the goal of excellence in education.

The revised *New Zealand Curriculum* (2007) introduced excellence as an explicit value to be taught and learnt. The New Zealand school context of self-governing schools enables each school and its local community to decide on the educational philosophies and directions the school will take. It appears some schools have expressly opted to include excellence as an educational goal over other values in the *New Zealand Curriculum*, although there are many that do not chose this emphasis. When excellence is stated as a goal for all students, the question arises as to whether this universal goal can be fulfilled?

I have some personal experience of performing within a discursive climate of educational excellence having previously worked in schools’ advisory services, and as a teacher in inner-city locations in the United Kingdom (UK). Indeed, I make reference to various international government initiatives relevant to excellence in Chapter 3. I have also taught in an intermediate school, and am aware of the distinct educational philosophy of such sites of learning. This combination of personal interest and experience led me to the decision to research the concept of ‘excellence for all’.

This study builds on previous research carried out in New Zealand and draws upon an equally well-established field of literature from Australia and Europe. I seek to extend the lens of identity study to consider the experiences of students in one intermediate school. Specifically, I will focus on how discourses of excellence impact upon students’ identities as learners and their understandings of learning.

This thesis explores the implications for students when discourses of excellence intersect with learning. The research presents a picture of how one school engages with the value of excellence to produce localised interpretations and discursive constructs of successful learners and successful learning. For the most part, the understandings of

---

1 *Education Counts* is a Ministry of Education website.
excellence illustrated in this thesis derive from the students’ representations of their learning experiences and school. I supplement students’ perceptions with school data sourced in the public domain, including school publicity materials, and documents available through the Ministry of Education. Research questions guiding this project include:

*How do individual students in one New Zealand school construct a subject position for themselves as learners within the potentially oxymoronic discourse of excellence in achievement for all?*

Sub-questions:

How do students make sense of excellence?

How do students identify affirmation at school?

Which discourses do students apply to themselves in school?

By focusing on an abstract conceptualisation of excellence in the research questions, I hope to explore how students measure or value excellence, and how these perspectives reflect the broader educational context. Government initiatives and educational strategies are often evaluated in quantitative terms, where each student’s achievement is measured as performative outcomes, especially qualifications. While these measures serve a purpose, lost in the statistics are individuals’ experiences, affective dimensions and the emotional labour of school life. In privileging students’ voices I hope to contribute insights into the impact of the educational goals one school sets itself in its endeavours to: raise achievement for all, provide a high quality education responsive to the national curriculum, and support the personal development of each student.

Engaging with discourses of excellence presents complex negotiations of identity and learning for students, and, as will be illustrated by my research, this complexity applies also to students who self-identify as high achieving. Drawing on the perspectives of high achieving students, I aim to show how school practices and systems, peer group interactions, family influences, and idealised constructs of a
successful scholastic subject collide to complicate excellence. The intermediate school as a research space also requires particular considerations contingent on the educational philosophy of middle years education. For this reason, I will provide a brief overview of intermediate schools.

The intermediate school context

Intermediate schools represent one form of middle schooling. The middle years are generally considered to bridge the period between upper-primary and junior-secondary education. Intermediate schools are unique to New Zealand in that the schools educate only two year-groups. Internationally, in those countries where middle years education is also well-established, middle years schooling tends to educate a wider age range of students, often four year-groups (Dinham & Rowe, 2008).

In their critical review of literature on teaching and learning in middle schools for the Ministry of Education, Dinham and Rowe (2007) outline how the concept of middle schooling arose in response to perceived concerns regarding the academic, personal and social problems of emerging adolescents. In particular, this period of adolescent development was thought to mark changes in students’ engagement, attitudes and behaviours towards schooling, which would benefit from a distinct transitional environment between primary and secondary schooling.

While the remit of this thesis is not to discuss the advantages or otherwise of middle years education or intermediate schools, it will become clear in the findings of this research that the students involved do draw on some of the principles of middle years education. Proponents of middle schooling argue middle schools can provide a pedagogical approach that better accommodates the educational, personal and social development needs of emerging adolescent students (Dinham & Rowe, 2007). Building resilience, encouraging engagement and constructing relevant curricula are among the key pedagogic responses to facilitating enhanced student achievement in middle years education (Dinham & Rowe, 2007). Research on the development of emerging adolescents reflects how resilience operates as a positive paradigm through which to build individual competency and capacity, constructs that have particular relevance to this thesis (Fechner, 2009). Principles, such as resilience, engagement and achievement
are also located within broader social, cultural, and political contexts. Discourses of risk constitute certain adolescent behaviours as anti-social or maladaptive, teen pregnancy or non-attendance at school for example (Fechner, 2009). In response, interventions focused on developing individual wellness often draw on building resilience and social engagement (Fechner, 2009). During the middle schooling period, this responsibility falls on intermediate schools.

The intermediate school as a site for crafting identity, therefore, requires specific attention in terms of the role schools play in reproducing policy and practices of striving for excellence for all. The construct of emerging adolescence, embedded within the philosophical principles of intermediate schooling suggests interesting intersections with discourses of excellence. In the following section I will locate this thesis with the broader research field.

**The research field**

In recent years, there have been a number of New Zealand and international studies that have recognised the considerable performative effort required of children and young people in crafting their identities (see for example: Bishop, 2005; Harris, 2004; Nairn, Higgins & Sligo, 2012; Reay, 2010; Youdell, 2006). Within the field of identity studies, scholars widely accept that the crafting of identity is a dynamic process, and subject to multiple influences. The process of communicating one’s identity is judged in relation to specific contexts and is contingent upon particular audiences (Youdell, 2006). Thus, the work of identity is complex for children who encounter a range of social groups at school, where relationships with adults and peers demand negotiations of differential power and recognition.

Learners of primary and intermediate age appear to feature less frequently in studies concerned with identity in New Zealand. In their critical review of literature pertaining to middle years education, Dinham and Rowe (2007; 2008) report that the age-group is relatively neglected in comparison to other education settings. Within the New Zealand context, I have therefore drawn on literature that focuses on identity work with students in secondary schools to support my theorising and reflections on the
socio-cultural context of intermediate schools. In the following section I locate researching excellence in achievement for all in the current political context.

**Turning to excellence as an educational strategy**

Achievement, or more specifically, under-achievement, receives significant attention from the New Zealand Ministry of Education. Initiatives introduced to address disparities in achievement, such as National Standards, also respond to international education measures. The Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA), produced by the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), is often cited as evidence for improving system-wide performance and New Zealand’s ranking in measures of performative achievement outcomes (Ministry of Education, n.d). Indeed, throughout the OECD initiatives focused on educational excellence have held particular currency in recent times (Van Avermaet et al., 2011), examples of which will be discussed in Chapter 3. The imperative for change in New Zealand has seen an ongoing raft of initiatives.

The implementation of a revised curriculum and statutory reporting of national standards have exercised considerable demands on schools and Boards of Trustees (Thrupp & Easter, 2012). In 2012, the Minister for Education, Hekia Parata, attempted to introduce an increase in class sizes by proposing to alter the teacher/child ratio (Hartevelt, 2012). The implication for many schools, particularly primary and intermediate schools, was the potential for a considerable reduction in teacher numbers. The matter of increasing class sizes remains unresolved. These and other demands and changes on teaching and assessment are likely to have filtered through to how students make sense of their learning.

I believe research that privileges students’ voices has an important contribution to make to our understanding of achievement. I do not claim to compare whether or how students perceive potential changes in their educational experience, rather to view their identity work as contingent on turbulent educational times. The dominance of comparative educational discourses of achievement, like those generated by PISA studies, operate on global, national and local levels appearing to do little to empower most students in their daily experiences. Disparities in achievement remain widespread
The route to excellence - a thesis outline

This thesis is organised in seven chapters. **Chapter 2** establishes the critical frame applied throughout the thesis. Principally, I will adopt a poststructural position, although where pertinent, I will also consider Bourdieu’s (2010) theory of the social transmission of culture and values. Underpinning my thesis are conceptualisations of the *subject*. Contrasting liberal and poststructural constructs of the subject, I aim to establish a lens through which to examine identities.

**Chapter 3** presents a literature review of the field of excellence in education and has two key foci. The first part of the chapter outlines the lineage of excellence in global education policy, and the relevance of discourses of excellence to the cultural and political particularities of education in New Zealand. The second part focuses on scholastic excellence and identity work. I review literature that examines how students engage with expectations to do well, and the emotional labour involved in achievement. The affective implications of excellence inform my research approach.

I unpack the methodology used in this research project in **Chapter 4**. Since my participants are children, I argue for ethical reflexivity throughout the research process to maintain respect for the voices of my participants, their confidentiality, and their anonymity. Thomas’s (2006) general inductive approach combined with discourse analysis forms the methodology for analysis of data constructed from semi-structured individual interviews, a focus group activity and school materials in the public domain. Thematic headings provide the organisation for my findings, presented in the following two chapters.

Three themes inform the findings in **Chapter 5**, where I discuss understanding excellence, embracing opportunities, and rewarding excellence predominantly from the perspectives of students. The role of the school, both as a producer and effect of
discourse, is outlined and is appraised in terms of how schools operate as significant sources of meaning for students’ understanding of excellence. I begin to consider how the nuances of student’s situated lives intersect with their scholastic identities, setting the tone for the next findings chapter.

I develop the concept of an idealised scholastic subject in Chapter 6, in order to understand how the students in this study make sense of their learning and their place in school as learners. In four main sections, I explore the relevance of can-do identities to excellence; multi-accomplishment and the differential valuing of achievement; the influence of family and family values on achievement; and the emotional labour of excellence.

In Chapter 7, my reflections on the ethical decisions taken throughout this study are developed, and I assess how these decisions have shaped my own construction of excellence from the views and opinions my participants presented. Reflecting on the potential for action from my findings, I address teaching and learning, and school incentive and rewards systems. The implications for future research include broadening the scope of the participant group to incorporate teachers’ and school community perspectives in the investigation of excellence for all. I conclude this thesis by adopting the position that excellence for all, rather than reducing educational disparities contributes to the maintenance of educational inequalities and diminishes equity.
Chapter 2: The Critical Frame

Excellence in achievement for all represents a value-laden aspiration for many schools. Given that education is the primary institutional experience of most young people (Ball, 1990), learning within a culture of excellence creates significant demands on a student’s sense of self. Research into the identities of young people is comprehensive, although Reay (2010) advocates for an increased focus on the sorts of students schooling is producing. Applying a poststructural lens, this chapter explores the complex interrelations of students’ identities, their learning, and the discourse of excellence for all.

Within the poststructural repertoire, certain conceptual tools seem best suited to investigate how individual students in a New Zealand school construct a subject position for themselves as learners. The first tool examined in this chapter is the subject, preparing the foundations for inquiring how students locate affirmation or recognition of their sense of self in schools. I will examine two conceptualisations of the subject; the humanist and poststructural subjects. A comparison of these subjects supports exploration into the production of a scholastic subject.

The second conceptual tool, interrelational identities, reflects the interaction between identities and the process of subjectivation. Youdell (2006) reflects that poststructural theory calls into question identity categories. Debates about the nature of the subject often challenge the supposed stability of categorical identities. Consistent with the poststructural position, Segal (2008) advises that identities are best accepted as unstable, requiring constant reaffirmation through performative work. Subjectivation offers a poststructural reading of these performances, recognising the significance of provisionality and contingency in identity work (Youdell, 2006). In accordance with Youdell, I propose that interrelationships between identities and performances help to facilitate an understanding of how children make sense of their subject positions as students and as learners. Accordingly, I will maintain use of the term ‘identities’, as this language lends itself to conversations with the research participants and how each might
describe a sense of self. Acknowledging identities as plural or multiple reiterates the provisional and unstable nature of identity constructs.

While school provides the context for this research, I contend that accepting the situated life of a child requires recognising the potential influence of structural factors in identity work. As a third supplementary tool, I will employ Bourdieu’s (2010) concept of cultural capital to analyse the factors contributing to the valorisation of particular identities and knowledge. In this section, I will discuss my view that an understanding of cultural capital can complement the poststructuralism position.

The fourth and final conceptual tool is discourse, the function of which is twofold. A poststructural position enables consideration of how the subject is an effect of discourse, and also supports an investigation of the discursive resources students draw on to describe themselves. The final section of the chapter considers how Bishop, Berryman, Cavanagh, and Teddy (2009) use discursive positioning alongside a kaupapa Māori approach to consider social change in education for Indigenous students. This example challenges the assertion of Cole (2003) that a lack of political applicability or action subsequently aligns poststructuralism with hegemonic ideology. Bishop et al. (2009) demonstrate how poststructuralism provides a conceptual frame within which to trouble hegemonic structures and acknowledge difference.

The thinking behind poststructuralism

The challenge of adopting a poststructuralist approach in research is the absence of a uniform system of deduction or analysis (Foucault, 2002; Peters & Burbules, 2004). Instead, poststructuralism acts as a conceptual tool engaging with socially situated practices with an intent to trouble taken-for-granted practices. Widely disputed as theory, Peters and Burbules (2004) settle on describing poststructuralism as a ‘critical frame’. Addressing modes of thinking, speaking and writing, the critical frame serves to politicise and decentre hegemonic structures within a process of deconstruction (Foucault, 2002). Commonly held values, deeply embedded within discourse and perceived as truth, pose core concerns for poststructuralism (Foucault, 2002). Such an understanding is useful for examining the common sense status of excellence in achievement for all.
For my own part, the appeal of poststructuralism lies within the very conditions that constitute a frame without uniformity. Flexibility renders the thinker as ‘an experimenter’, and furnishes possibilities to construct an experience of the social world that transforms understanding (Foucault, 2002). Yet an emphasis on multiplicity and fluidity in analysis also provides the basis for critique directed at the poststructural position, and the implication that poststructuralist thought might constitute a vehicle for change.

**Poststructural inertia and the (im)possibilities for transformation**

A palpable sense of frustration peppers the Marxist critique of poststructuralism penned by Cole (2003). Acknowledging that a poststructural position may be of liberatory value to individuals or localised groups, Cole’s principle objection to poststructuralism is its perceived inability to promote social justice or social change. Indeed, Cole goes as far as suggesting a failure to initiate social change on the part of poststructuralism is, by default, an act of ideological support for capitalism. What is missing here to support Cole’s claim is reference to the differing conceptualisations of the workings of power, a key consideration to social justice. Instead, Cole concerns himself with the analytic tool of deconstruction as applied by three different writers.

The main body of critique raises questions about the limitations of an analysis that appears to espouse emancipatory politics, yet according to Cole (2003), does not deliver. The picture portrayed by Cole is that of an approach mired by the abstractions of analysis, an intellectual diversion. Whilst Cole may be correct in thinking that poststructuralists are unlikely to literally amass behind a revolutionary banner, his critique of the analytic process seems built on a particular notion of ‘ politicising’. For example, Cole appears to misinterpret the relevance of historicity in poststructural critical analysis. Rather, Cole (2003) seems to consistently privilege praxis over process, stating, “interpreting the world for [Marx] was less important than changing it. Whereas postmodernists [read also poststructuralists] engage in an endless and ahistorical process of deconstruction” (p. 491). Cole’s claim ignores the role of contingency in poststructural analysis. Whilst deconstruction does not seek a definitive moment of discursive origin, the significance of contingency is key to an appraisal of social and historical processes (Foucault, 2008). It may also be argued that in some
respects the deconstruction of social and historical processes by default includes structures.

The assertion that poststructuralism does little more than deconstruct somewhat misses the potential to reconstruct differently, and seems to me a little like suggesting Marxism has a preoccupation with social class. The poststructural process may generate as many questions as it seeks answers, which in the end is the point, for the aim is to reveal the conditions for new possibilities. The essentialised interpretation of poststructuralism offered by Cole (2003) is perhaps contingent on the dialogue within which it was engaged at the time. Had Cole chosen to reflect on poststructuralism with greater attention to power in education, he may not have disagreed with the assertion that it is with the student that the effects of power are most subjugating (Foucault, 2002).

In the same way that the subject is an effect of discourse, the subject is an effect of power, where power functions as an intricate and multi-dimensional network (Foucault, 2002). As suggested earlier, the fragmentation and fluidity of the social world lends itself to investigative processes inclined towards adaptability. This thesis, in line with a number of contemporary writers who adopt a poststructural frame, recognises the relevance of material conditions to the lived social world (see for example, Bishop, 2005; Nairn et al., 2012; Youdell, 2006). At a later point in this chapter, I will discuss the potential offered by cultural capital to the critical analysis of the subject and identities. Having established the case for a range of critical tools, the chapter proceeds to examine the conceptual tools of the subject, interrelational identities, cultural capital, and discourse.

The subject

To examine the discourses students apply to themselves, and to locate how students seek affirmation within the classroom, it is necessary to consider dominant conceptualisations of the subject. The notion of the subject in this thesis relates to the exploration of a student subject, but is also constitutive of an embodiment of identities. Manifest in current discourses around the subject, two ideas lend themselves as conceptual frames within which to address students and excellence. Whilst the
overarching position of this thesis is poststructural, the autonomous humanist subject appears to have long occupied a dominant position in consideration of the student, irrespective of the political orientation of educational discourses (Peters & Burbules, 2004). Davies (2010) frames this conceptualisation of the subject as reductive individualism. She argues instead for a poststructural subject, who offers qualitative research the flexibility to rethink subjectivity (or for my purposes, identities) and subjectivation. Given the claimed pervasiveness of the humanist subject, I discuss how this conceptualisation acts as a discursive resource for learner identities and making sense of learning.

**The humanist subject**

The understanding of who we are as a consequence of our actions and choices acts as a central tenet to the humanist ideal of the subject, rendering our sense of self the product of individual will (Davies, 2010). The driving force behind individual will is a belief in an autonomous self, inherently rationalistic in orientation (Levinson, Gross & Hanks, 2011). This manifestation of the humanist discourse likely enables the rationality of excellence in achievement for all, rendering excellence as an inevitable aspiration, and therefore, morally incontestable. It would be simplistic, however, to assume that the autonomous rational individual has remained unaltered over time from its classical liberal origins. One contemporary debate in liberal political theory focuses instead on an assumption that humans are in possession of a range of basic capabilities.

The capabilities approach advocates an emphasis on democratic freedom, and “forming reflexive human beings able to choose and have complete lives” (Walker, 2008, p. 149). The approach offers a human development paradigm concerned with a person’s agentic capacity to take up opportunities, or engage with activities aimed at enhancing personal wellbeing and societal good. Amongst the theoretical proponents of the capabilities approach, I have elected to focus on the work of Nussbaum. This choice is two-fold; Nussbaum (2001) has strongly vocalised her opposition to the idea of subjectivity, particularly the gender work of Butler, yet Nussbaum’s theorising on the subject is perceived to offer a framework for considering social justice in education (Levinson et al., 2011; Walker, 2008). In an effort to achieve social justice, Nussbaum
(2006; 2011) argues for the application of a critical frame to liberal political theory to encompass a situated human life.

In common with traditional liberalism, the capabilities approach advocated by Nussbaum (2011) holds human life as an accomplishment, and answers the question, “what is this person able to do and be?” (2011, p. 20). Capabilities constitute certain functions considered to be particularly central to human life, and provide the basis for core motivations intrinsic to upholding or changing life in its lived setting (Nussbaum, 2001). Rather than promoting the abstractions of an autonomous subject, however, Nussbaum’s (2011) theorising assumes an individual’s capabilities function in a society entrenched in discrimination, injustice, and inequality. The idea of doing and becoming, implicit in the capabilities approach, has significant purchase within educational contexts (Davies, 2006; Nairn et al., 2012; Reay, 2010), and resonates strongly with vision statements schools employ to consider students’ individual potential. Whilst not explicitly linked to Nussbaum’s capabilities approach, the liberal discursive trail illustrated by Nussbaum’s work can be traced within the New Zealand Curriculum (2007).

In setting out a vision for the young people of New Zealand, and by definition its future citizens, the New Zealand Curriculum (2007) outlines a set of key competencies described as, “capabilities for living and lifelong learning” (p. 12). Constituted within the notion of key competencies is an emergent subject/student/citizen, an embodiment of the capabilities that represent lifelong goals, and the means by which other aims are achieved. The categorising of a distinct set of competencies, or capabilities, simultaneously constructs conflicting discourses. On the one hand, a moral discourse outlining capabilities produces a sense of social entitlement and responsibility; a subject who engages reciprocally with the education system in order to both benefit from, and contribute to society (Codd, 1993). On the other hand, a normative discourse defines the measures within which an individual’s achievements and contributions acquire recognition and legitimation (Ball, 1999; Youdell, 2006). Thus with particular capabilities instituted within the New Zealand Curriculum (2007), the liberal discourse of the subject rolls out to a receptive audience in schools, engaged and committed to enhancing the life trajectories of students.
Education offers the possibilities to create a system that embeds the ties of social inclusion, binding people by altruism and mutual advantage (Nussbaum, 2006). It is compelling to hope that individuals concerned with co-operation and inclusivity populate society, however, this hope presupposes an essentialised human condition. Implicit in this belief is the existence of mutuality or reciprocity. In a departure from more traditional liberal perspectives, Nussbaum contends there is no natural state of autonomy, rather the subject intuitively rationalises her interdependence. Indeed, Nussbaum posits the autonomous self as “fictive” (2006, p. 158). Despite Nussbaum’s (2001; 2006; 2011) conception of the subject and capabilities depending on a normative understanding of human ‘nature’, the theory carries some discursive resonances with the poststructural construct of the subject.

**Doing the subject differently**

Reflecting on conceptualisations of the subject in qualitative research, Davies (2010) points to the appropriation of the humanist subject by phenomenology. She argues, where phenomenology assumes the individual to be a singular and self-contained ‘subject-of-will’, poststructuralism problematises the subject within a network of co-implied others, which includes situated practices and discourses. Whilst attempting to differentiate the poststructural subject from liberal discourses through the process of subjectivation, Davies (2006) may have drawn parallels with the liberal subject discourses she seeks to antagonise. Clearly, Nussbaum’s (2001; 2006; 2011) liberal humanist subject transgresses aspects of the narrow critique offered by Davies (2010). This contemporary liberal subject possesses some sense of ethical interdependence, and is determined by interactions with the structural and social environment. Indeed, Davies (2006) has also advocated for an ethical recognition of the differentials of power within relations. A call for ethical interactions in the production of possible subjects links these two conceptual approaches.

Articulating the possibilities or impossibilities of subjecthood, the process of subjectivation describes how the subject achieves recognisability (Davies, 2006). The practices involve a simultaneous mastering of viable subjectivities, whilst submitting oneself to those subjectivities made viable by others (Butler, 1995). In this way the subject is both subject of and subject to subjectivation. Those processes that classify,
normalise, and locate the subject within a hierarchical arrangement then produce subjects that are simultaneously individualised and categorised (Foucault, 2002). This idea offers great relevance to research in schools, acknowledging as it does that the classroom, whilst a microcosm of schooling per se, is not a unitary site devoid of external relations of power. The poststructural position, in this instance, demonstrates how a focus on the local advocated by Foucault (2008) need not disengage from wider structural implications, as assumed by Cole (2003). A further consideration is how subjects become complicit in their own subjugation.

As this thesis will illustrate, self-surveillance both facilitates and polices how a student might choose to be read by peers, teachers, and others. Drawing on discursive resources enables students to self-reference their identities and maintain a sense of self (Foucault, 2002). These discursive resources, however, might also be constrained by the ways in which their peers or teachers permit recognisable identities.

The school as an institution operates regulatory practices to privilege particular scholastic subjects as intelligible and desirable. Strategies at schools’ disposal include organisational, spatial and assessment arrangements, for example, timetables, class and streaming groups, and norm-referenced examinations (Foucault, 2008). Youdell (2006) contends that school discourses construct learner subjects who are “restrained, malleable, asexual” (p. 45). Having classified an acceptable norm, the possibilities for a learner subject are bound within particular discursive practices. The differential nature of discourses implies an unacceptable or excluded ‘other’, whose subject position renders an idealised scholastic subject intelligible. Despite apparent mundane practices such as ability grouping, allocation of resources and teacher interactions constraining or producing possible scholastic subjects, Foucault (2002) suggests students have possibilities to exercise “practices of liberation” (p. 51), and destabilise subject positions made available to them.

Resistance to or disassociation from particular forms of subjectivation may manifest within relationships, requiring negotiation of differential power. Foucault (2002) posits that opposition involves the subject asserting the right to be different, and rejecting assimilation to a dominant subject position. With regard to the idealised scholastic subject proposed by Youdell (2006), Foucault’s (2002) argument presents
possibilities for scholastic subjects who reject idealised constructs, preferring to seek affirmation on terms that differ from the hegemonic. Resistance, or the creation of alternative subject positions may be reflected in some part by statistics illustrating school exclusions (Youdell, 2006). Alternatively, appeals to exaggerated normative masculinities and femininities performed in schools are linked to disengagement with learning (Hey, 1997; Jackson, 2006).

Returning to the production of a scholastic subject representative of educational excellence requires an acceptance that no subject is a unitary construct. Multiple identity markers appear to give coherence to the discourse of excellence, further reinforcing the construct and effect (Youdell, 2006). For example, the excellent student may be categorised as gifted, talented, or high achieving, official labels that are now deeply embedded in educational discourses. On a more individualised level, scholastic subjects demonstrating excellence may be motivated and industrious, at the same time as conformist and malleable (Jackson, 2006; Youdell, 2006). Conversely, illustrating how social practices can transcend dominant values, sub-cultural resistance in classrooms to the discourse of excellence sees the application of colloquial terms such as ‘geek’, ‘boffin’, ‘nerd’, or ‘swot’ that position excellent students as abject ‘others’ in relation to their peers (Francis, 2009; Skelton, Francis & Read, 2010).

Having positioned the scholastic subject at the fore of my research, the next step is to consider the conceptual tool of interrelational identities. The next section demonstrates how these concepts locate and personalise the individuals concerned, and support processes within which students find affirmation of a sense of self.

**Interrelational identities**

The study of identity and subjectivity appears marked by a tussle afforded to perceived dichotomies between the two. Wetherell (2008), for example, considers how conventional terminology defines identity as relational to social and cultural categories, whereas subjectivity attends to the interiority of a subject, or the affective and cognitive aspects of being. In effect, the dichotomy is set as public/private; identity discusses an individual’s affiliations, while subjectivity considers the process within which the self is constituted. Other scholars give less attention to such dualisms and apply the notions of
identity and subjectivity as interchangeable or inter-relating. Reay (2010) describes such an approach as ‘hybrid’. Noting a post-Foucauldian turn in contemporary emphasis, and pertinent to this thesis, Reay suggests identity studies in educational research have since focused on understandings that privilege the fluid and shifting processes of identity making. Provisionality and contingency underpin a sense of dynamic change and adaptation (Reay, 2010).

The implication of such conceptual debates between identity and subjectivity for this thesis, and for the use of appropriate terminology, rest in the position adopted by Youdell (2006). Acknowledging that identity categories circulate in mainstream and hegemonic discourses as “the occasion and vehicle of our subjection” (p. 29), Youdell (2006) also proffers that identity categories present opportunities for action. Preferable to the notion of identity categories as fixed and permanent, is the conceptualisation of interrelational identities as dynamic and subject to multiple intersections. Also useful to supporting a poststructural understanding of students’ identities as being in flux or becoming is Foucault’s (2002) notion of transformation. This potential for change, as alluded to by Youdell (2006), is where the opportunity for action and self-determination in the production of identities lies.

In terms of my research, the notion of transforming achievement, or scholastic identities to accomplish excellence for all, lends itself to question whether excellence is a final destination or an on-going journey? As discussed in the previous section entitled The subject, I perceive aspects of the poststructural conceptualisation of the subject to be shared by humanist conceptualisations of the subject. The self as a process of transforming or becoming resonates with liberal ideas discussed previously in this chapter, where the subject is considered the product of individual will, and capable of taking up opportunities to change their life (Nussbaum, 2011). The implication of a scholastic subject becoming excellent should also consider how many students will achieve excellence, and how many will encounter a learning trajectory marked by continually seeking excellence.

In a recent New Zealand study, Nairn et al. (2012) apply a conceptual framework to identity as a “project of the self” (p. 27). The notion of project implies an on-going process and provisionality of self, where ‘self’ may reflect that who we are
and what we do are constitutive of more than identity markers, and should include less tangible cognitive and affective identities. During their study of how several diverse groups of school leavers crafted their identities, Nairn et al. found the term ‘identity’ to be problematic. Of greater relevance to the young people involved in the study was an understanding of identity as a process of choice and decision-making. Contingency, in this process, became apparent within the relational and differing structural contexts of the young people’s lives (Nairn et al., 2012).

The complexity of the school site involves negotiation of both formal and informal repertoires of institutional, cultural, and symbolic systems (Reay, 2010). To manage the process of identities and identifying, students may require a certain amount of fluency in what counts as acceptable markers or performances, and an understanding that the recognisability of identity markers can change according to context. For students in the classroom, for example, the relational work of identity making draws upon notions of who we are not, as much as conceptualisations of who we are (Reay, 2010). Within the production, performance, and maintenance of identities, markers may provide affirmation or constraint, depending on the context and audience (an idea that will be more fully developed in the next chapter). Engaging in this interpretive work, students draw upon identities reflective of their student self and the intersections that individualise the nuances of any particular subject, considerations of gender, race, sexuality, disability, class, and cultural affiliations (Reay, 2010).

Accepting the classroom as a site imbued with social and cultural meaning, the challenge facing this research may be to manage the possibility of identities becoming disconnected from learning. The role of peer opinion in developing an understanding of learner identities occupies a critical place in identity construction (Jackson, 2006; Reay, 2010; Youdell, 2006). Important to note, however, is that the degree to which students invest in a ‘public image’ amongst their peers is likely to differ. Nevertheless, learner identities conflate with multiple social identities. An understanding of identities informed by context situates the classroom site as one particular contingent factor instrumental in how students might balance individual and collective identities.

The role of structural forces in shaping a collective scholastic identity can be considered by examining managerialist discourses in education, focused on increased
autonomy in school leadership and improving school performance through frameworks of accountability (Codd, 2005; Gillies, 2007). School performance consequently becomes subject to processes of evaluation, accountable to both the government and wider public. The power of dominant government discourses in forming pedagogic identities, of both students and teachers, should not be underestimated (Reay, 2010). The assertion that excellence in achievement is a rhetorical construct of managerial and evaluative discourses of school performance (Gillies, 2007), introduces the role of teachers to a discourse of excellence and students’ identity work.

The ways in which teachers engage with discourses of excellence will likely contribute significantly to a broader understanding of students’ identity work. My initial research design located teachers as influential to how students make sense of their learner identities, their learning and achievement (discussed in detail in Chapters 4 and 7). Reflecting on the earlier discussion of the *New Zealand Curriculum* (2007), the curriculum document ascribes value to certain scholastic subjects and capabilities, not simply for the period of schooling, but for life-long learning. Teachers have a responsibility for transforming the values entrenched in the Curriculum into meaningful learning experiences and achievements for students. Whilst the argument for the role of schools in the social reproduction of cultural capital is well established (Bourdieu, 2010), defining who is valued as future citizens locates education at the heart of collective identity production (Reay, 2010). The following section takes a detour from poststructuralism to discuss the applicability of cultural capital to students making sense of their identities and learning in schools.

**Adding some structure – cultural capital and education**

Cultural capital offers a structural component to the conceptual tool kit of this thesis. Whilst identities may be formed and reformed in the classroom as a process of apparent flux and fluidity, the conditions within which students engage with the work of identity are unlikely to be of their own making (Butler, 2004; Reay 2010; Segal, 2008). Structural constraints set boundaries that are further complicated by material inequalities and the intersectionality of social identities. The conceptual tool of cultural capital, whilst not in direct opposition to fluidity, engages an examination of identity in relation to structure.
Cultural capital describes the distinctive forms of cultural knowledge and ability a subject acquires and has at their disposal (Bourdieu, 2010). The weighting of cultural capital varies from field to field. In the main, one individual school constitutes the field for analysis in this thesis, which is bounded within its relations to the community it serves. The field of one school is not simply a spatial site, but a network of what counts as knowledge, culture, and social recognition (Reay, 2004). In the case of a scholastic subject, cultural capital may be applied to critically analyse the social dynamics framing a learner in the school context. Cultural capital provides a tool to establish the significance of what counts as valued social practices in the process of schooling, and within the field of a school.

In terms of excellence in achievement, the discourse feeds directly into the validation of what counts as educational capital, currently measurable, norm-referenced, and standardised qualifications. Schools transmit legitimised culture and knowledge within adherence to, and delivery of the curriculum. The New Zealand Curriculum (2007), as previously discussed, not only specifies knowledge expectations, but also personal competencies judged valuable for the individual and society. A curriculum provides schools with a direct route to the inculcation of legitimised cultural capitals. Indirectly, the pervasiveness of certain school practices, sometimes termed the ‘hidden curriculum’, can either stigmatise or ameliorate particular knowledge or abilities (Bourdieu, 2010). The hierarchical ordering of students relative to recognisable cultural capitals forms the basis of deficit thinking, which can pathologise certain scholastic subjects or create discriminatory practices (Bishop et al., 2009). School as a vehicle for legitimised cultural ‘competencies’, however, has the potential to become a site of cultural transmission and acquisition that transcends dominant social and cultural markers. I will commence the next section with examples from the New Zealand context where Indigenous culture has informed educational reforms, values, and practices.

**Considering what counts as knowledge**

The objectification of the working class/ethnic minority/Indigenous learner hails from a long and significant history in the development of public education in New Zealand (Bishop, 2005; Jones, 1989; Morris Matthews, 2008). The visibility of Māori
students judged to be failing within the education system indicates relations of power, which sustain dominant post-colonial discourses of race (Bishop, 2005). The pervasive structure of an education system that privileges the cultural capital of a majority population subjugates Indigenous knowledge and locates ethnic minority students in a position of disadvantage (Mills, 2008).

The particular cultural understanding of the student or the child learning within a Māori medium challenges the dominant interpretation of the learner subject. The establishment of Te Kōhanga Reo (a language immersion programme) and Kura Kaupapa Māori (Māori language immersions schools), as examples of Māori responses to concerns for the loss of Te Reo, knowledge and culture, have provided a platform for Māori to take leadership in determining sites and practices of learning (Rewi, 2006). Significant in terms of resisting the constraints of hegemonic education values, Māori-medium learning environments facilitate possibilities framed within particular Māori ideologies, and with distinctive pedagogies (Rewi, 2006). Within the context of New Zealand and the public-funded education system, Māori education institutions demonstrate agency in constructing alternative ways of educating that valorise different forms of knowledge and pedagogies.

A further example of culturally informed pedagogy considers Te Kotahitanga, a research and professional development project addressing educational disparities facing Māori students. Using student voices to identify the discursive positioning of Māori student learning in mainstream schools, the project seeks solutions to differential achievement and experiences of education away from major cultural responses (Bishop et al., 2009). Responding to concerns amongst Māori about current pedagogical practices being mono-cultural and created within a context of epistemological racism, the project turned to sense making and knowledge generating processes of Māori culture, or matauranga Māori. The project generated an Effective Teaching Profile based on culturally responsive teaching and relational pedagogies, which also demands that teachers reject deficit theorising as a means of explaining Māori student achievement levels (Bishop et al., 2009). By way of professional development, Te Kotahitanga maintains its aims to support teachers in creating a learning environment
that is responsive to the culture of the child, and that accepts the existing knowledge of learners as being legitimate and official.

The question of who is in possession of ‘official’ knowledge can be asked of all learners, including students whose identity may appear to categorise their membership of the majority culture. When considering which particular markers legitimise acceptable scholastic subjects, schooling involves students engaging with hierarchies of knowledge, both official and unofficial (Reay, 2010; Youdell, 2006). Knowledge, and its relation to power, represents ideas and practices that constitute discourse within the critical frame of poststructuralism (Foucault, 2008). The conceptualisation of the subject as an effect of discourse underlines the significance of discourse to this research in multiple ways.

The discourses all students draw upon have implications for how they make sense of their identities at school, what counts as knowledge and learning, and where they might feature along the continuum of excellence in achievement for all. An examination of the practices regulating how discourses are constituted and heard, however, involves an acknowledgement of the social processes that produce meaning (Ball, 1990; Olsssen, Codd & O’Neill, 2004). Inclusive or exclusionary social practices in schools further contribute to the valorisation of certain identities, and subsequent negotiations of who we are and who we are not. For students simultaneously making sense of both their learning and their identities, the discursive resources at their disposal may make the difference between finding affirmation or isolation. The consideration of discourse moves to the final conceptual tool of this chapter.

**Discourse, wording the world**

Reflecting on the ethical application of language, the choices involved in “how we word the world” (St. Pierre, 2000, p. 484) suggest the capacity for language to simultaneously operate as a tool of constraint or liberation. Within a feminist poststructural context, St. Pierre (2000) describes how language upholds the lived social and material conditions of submission and injustice of women’s’ lives, whilst being integral to a move towards social justice. My earlier consideration of the humanist subject and its applicability to educational discourses, illustrates the power to voice...
particular educational repertoires of scholastic subjects and identities (see Peters & Burbules, 2004).

In setting out Directions for Learning, the New Zealand Curriculum (2007) legitimises a particular vision of a learner. Both the English-medium and Māori-medium curriculums “start with visions of young people who will develop the competencies they need for study, work, and lifelong learning and go on to realise their potential” (NZC, 2007, p. 6). The Curriculum document not only draws upon particular discursive constructs of learning and learner subjects, but also sustains production of these learner identities. St. Pierre (2000) explains the discursive maintenance of social conditions by identifying a pervading presence of humanist discourses in language, which determines structures fixed on essentialising and bounding meaning. On a more mundane level than a national curriculum, bounded practices occur daily in schools when students are categorised in ability or gender groups, streamed for remedial or accelerated learning, or when students are formally identified as having disabilities in order to secure additional resource funding. The practices are numerous, but recognising excellence in students provides the basis for this thesis.

The discourse of excellence becomes problematic for education when we consider its function to categorise achievement, or define hierarchies of performance. In these contexts, categorising excellence is likely to constrain recognisability since elite or exceptional excellence permits few learners. An educational focus on identifying categories, hierarchies, and binaries, argues Peters and Burbules (2004) reflects the dominance of a humanist position, and an engagement with knowledge and its production that privileges absolutes. As discussed in the previous section, Bishop et al. (2009) sought responses to disparities in achievement for Māori learners by rejecting the absolute position of knowledge produced by the majority culture, and educational initiatives derived from this knowledge. Analysing the discursive positioning of Māori learning, as perceived by Māori students and whānau, Bishop et al. (2009) were able to challenge long-held educational views that supported deficit theorising of Māori achievement levels. The common sense status of absolutes, or in my case, the desirability of excellence in achievement for all, may well provide the very material for
deconstruction and reconstitution made possible by poststructural analysis, a point missed by Cole’s (2003) critique examined earlier.

As considered in Chapter 1, excellence acquires some sense of cohesion in relation to mediocrity. The notion of binary oppositions between discourses, whilst commonly accepted and addressed in poststructural analysis, is not without contention. Foucault (2002) cautions against unquestioned continuities between opposing discourses as providing an absolute determinism or unchallenged coherency. Accepting that mediocrity or failure has always underscored excellence in achievement, sustains hierarchical relations of performance without necessarily addressing those circumstances that have led, or continue to lead, to hierarchical comparisons prevailing in education. The historicity of a discourse contributes to its understanding, as does attending to discourse as it occurs (Foucault, 2002). For instance, where the excellence discourse emerges from is significant in so much that it relates to the political economy, social conditions, and contemporary educational values. Those features currently contributing to the excellence discourse include, but are not limited to, neoliberal policies and the processes by which policies identify priorities for educational intervention or reform. Of particular interest to me are the discursive effects of localised, school-based interpretations of the *New Zealand Curriculum* (2007), intersecting with the identity work of individual children as students and learners. An additional consideration is the rhetorical language of excellence (Gillies, 2007), simultaneously constituting discursive achievement for all, and fixing its boundaries in public consciousness.

By interrupting the common sense of a dominant discourse, analysis attends to those rules that construct and justify the existence of particular discourses as self-evident (Foucault, 2002). Such an approach seeks to suspend the circumstances of continuity that individualise and sustain discursive dominance, examining instead how and why one discourse becomes legitimised over another. For example, how did excellence come to prevail in education over alternatives such as social justice or equity and equality? The task of discourse analysis is, therefore, to disassemble the conditions that construct one discourse in preference over another, render a discourse exclusive of others, and normalise the assumption there is no other way.
While one discourse may well be assumed to dominate, reciprocity appears to function between discourses. Excellence in education does not silence mediocrity. Instead, excellence acquires an understanding or sense of value within a relation that locates mediocrity as oppositional. Yet for the discourse of excellence to maintain a potent appeal, mediocrity within the education system becomes intolerable (Lucey & Reay, 2002). Paradoxically, excellence becomes both reliant on, and produced out of mediocrity. Schools could hardly aspire to mediocrity in achievement for all, and it is inconceivable within a hierarchy of achievement that anything less than excellence could be the ultimate aim. The privileging of one discursive construct, while creating a subordinate role for the other, simultaneously institutes a common sense acceptance of what is normal. So what happens for students when excellence appears to exist as the norm? The challenge for my research is to identify the mechanisms through which excellence achieves its common sense status.

Summary

As was indicated in the examination of the first conceptual tool, the subject, research approaches to education have tended to emphasise a scholastic subject empowered with moral and political agency (Peters & Burbules, 2004; Reay, 2010). Socialisation and socio-economic considerations notwithstanding, this subject is largely grounded in humanist traditions, a self-determined, knowing subject whose life as a historical project is shaped by moral and rational choices (Peters & Burbules, 2004). Within liberal humanist discourses, a predilection with categorising identity intersects the field of education with stark outcomes (Ball, 1999; Davies, 2010; Peters & Burbules, 2004; St. Pierre, 2000). Ball (1999) laments how the sociology of education demonstrates an over-reliance on categorising students according to identity markers, and has given rise to a discursive pathologising of certain student categories, most notably of the working class student (Ball, 1999), and in the context of New Zealand, Māori and Pasifika students (Bishop, 2010; Bishop et al., 2009).

In contradiction to the claim that poststructuralism offers no concrete possibility for social change (Cole, 2003), educationalists in New Zealand apply poststructural analysis to consider how schools have the potential to transcend hegemonic cultural capital whilst occupying a site within the structural field. Bishop et al. (2009) provide
an example of how poststructuralism supports kaupapa Māori theory to examine discursive positioning in one educational reform, Te Kotahitanga. More importantly, research and action addresses how different conceptualisations of school might offer alternative conditions of possibility for their students. In doing so, opportunities arise for defining success and corresponding scholastic identities differently.

Mindful of not claiming the endeavours of Māori communities as evidence of poststructural activism, and acknowledging my own application of a poststructural lens for reading Māori educational initiatives, the relevance of a poststructural tool for research in education seems to lie in the users’ commitment to transform. The vision of excellence in achievement for all certainly invokes a need for transformation in current educational provision, evidenced by the responses to differential Māori student achievement discussed earlier, and anxieties concerning the underachievement of boys.

The relevance of the second conceptual tool, interrelational identities supported by cultural capital, reflects Reay's (2010) assertion that educational research should focus on the process of identity making rather than categorising identity outcomes. This means recognising the contingent and provisional qualities of identities students might share throughout the research project, yet ethically reflecting that these insights constitute fragments of an ongoing process of identity crafting. A focus on process permits inquiry into the discursive resources students may draw upon, and acknowledges from the outset the possibilities for diversity rather than reducing diversity to categories.

Finally, accepting that scholastic subjects are an effect of discourse requires acknowledgement that certain discourses may be more visible or ‘already-heard’ than others (Foucault, 2002). Those discourses ‘not-heard’ may require greater commitment on my part to be included in the findings of this thesis. The conceptual tools of poststructuralism are not without a liberal, Marxist or humanist other, and I may at times draw upon discursive resources from these ways of thinking and valuing knowledge, especially should my participants draw on humanist discourses of the self.

The adopted critical frame in this thesis serves to explore the relations between students, the social world, and discourse. By applying the frame throughout the research
process, I will explore the interplay of the scholastic subject, excellence for all, and the school as a key site of knowledge and cultural transmission. In this way, I hope to create a platform within which to trouble the rhetoric that constructs the discourse of excellence in achievement as common sense, and investigate the possibilities for alternatives.
Chapter 3: Locating Excellence

Excellence, fixed in public understanding and coupled with cultural anxieties around schooling, choice, and imagined futures, appears to assert a formative social force. Political ideologies for productive citizens, and economic imperatives for a highly qualified workforce exercise further demands from the construct. Within a policy-dominated environment where excellence equates to performance and high achievement, it may be that the adage ‘for all’ is rendered questionable.

The literature reviewed in this chapter outlines different understandings of excellence within the educational field. While there appear to be four distinct discourses of excellence, the cumulative effects of each converge within the production of an accomplished scholastic subject. In this chapter, I argue that accomplishment operates both as an idealised construct, and as a necessary disposition in order to achieve excellence. Later in the chapter, I will discuss different ways of understanding and seeking excellence more reflective of the diverse cultural make-up of New Zealand.

The second consideration addressed in this chapter is how a neoliberal policy environment constitutes scholastic achievement in New Zealand. Intersecting the concerns of the nation state are global policy processes driven, in the main, by economic imperatives. The rhetoric of achieving on a world stage emerges as a key tool of persuasion in the policy constitution and legitimising of excellence.

The final section of this chapter reviews the effects of excellence discourses on the scholastic subject. The accomplishment of excellence at first appears validated by narrow and normative expectations. As a consequence, the aim of excellence for all becomes subject to social and structural factors that may operate as barriers to achievement for some students. The picture, however, is both complex and murky. The performance of excellence appears to require scholastic subjects who simultaneously excel in academic and extra-curricular domains. In concurrence with neoliberal discourses of a flexible subject who seizes opportunities, excellence demands multiple accomplishments. Given the suggested exclusions and ambiguities surrounding the
notion, the question arises as to how excellence has assumed such commonplace acceptance in education?

**Defining excellence**

A paradox appears to exist within attempts to give some clarification to excellence for all. Many researchers concur that the concept of excellence is slippery, and definitions remain imprecise, while the implications of excellence for all are unclear (Gillies, 2007; Lucey & Reay, 2002; Ng, 2007; Savage, 2011; Tharp, Estrada, Dalton & Yamauchi, 2000). Yet recurrent themes run through literature concerned with excellence, whether analysing political rhetoric, evaluating pedagogical practices, or interpreting classroom experiences. Predominantly, excellence in education appears to manifest in three ways. A fourth construct of excellence occupies a less prominent place in the literature field, but holds particular relevance to this research.

**Elite excellence**

The first consideration of excellence marks outstanding academic attainment or elite performance, and generally reflects a norm-referenced assessment system (Gillies, 2007; Tharp et al., 2000). In secondary education in New Zealand, the present system of National Certificate in Educational Achievement (NCEA) recognises **Excellence** as its highest award (NZQA, 2012). The introduction of National Standards in 2010, and the emergence of primary school league tables may come to play a greater role in signifying excellence in primary schools.

**Excellence in educational provision**

The second understanding of excellence in education relates to demonstrating highly valued qualities at an institutional or individual level, representative of leadership, teaching, and educational provision (Gillies, 2007). Within a discursive environment of evaluation, norm-referenced frameworks of accountability determine the measures and authorisation of excellence.

**Individual excellence**

Excellence for all sits within a discourse of individualised achievement, where students strive to achieve their unique potential (Gillies, 2007). Unlike the previous two manifestations of excellence, ‘doing one’s best’ likely operates in significantly less
defined and formalised ways, invoking relations of power negotiated on a more subjective student-family-teacher level (Foucault, 2002). Notable within contemporary educational discourses of doing one’s best is how responsibility for excellence lies with the individual (Allan, 2010).

**Differential excellence**

The final construct of excellence appears to share the same commitment to each student encountering opportunities to develop their potential, as suggested by individual excellence. Responsibility for differential excellence, however, rests in government and schools organising an education system that offers opportunities for every student to excel according to their own capabilities. In particular, standardised learning outputs are said to do little to account for variability within student populations (Van Avermaet et al., 2011). Duru-Bellat and Mingat (2011) argue that equity in education should not equate to all students achieving the same predetermined competencies, and the same levels or scores in standardised measures. Instead, educational output should be responsive to the differing talents, motivations and ambitions that represent a heterogeneous student population.

Aspirations to excellence, and the negotiation of personal potential both present affective considerations that play a significant role in this research project. In particular, the research questions of how students perceive themselves at school, and make sense of learning in relation to excellence for all draw upon discourses of individualism. While discourses of individualism pervade all four constructs of excellence in the varying degrees of who is responsible for achieving excellence, it is important to acknowledge that these understandings are also representative of particular dominant values. As I will discuss, political ideology and global economics influence the ways in which the value of excellence is produced in schools, and therefore, have the potential to inform discursive resources available to students. Literature reviewed in this chapter, however, illustrates that excellence in terms of individual and collective performance resonates across cultures (Covington, 2000). Differences appear to emerge with consideration of what constitutes excellence performance, and who benefits from excellence.
Cultural understandings of excellence

Expectations to do well and be recognised for achievement are motivators shared by many, however, the ways students choose to engage with competition to achieve in schools may differ. Graham, Meyer, McKenzie, McClure, and Weir (2010) discuss how Māori and Pasifika secondary students and their parents perceive achievement and motivation in NCEA. Graham et al. conducted research in two New Zealand urban secondary schools; students described the development of collaborative goal structures, where competition between students operated not for students to surpass one another, rather to encourage and raise the achievement of all. In this way, the motivation and competition between students became a collective enterprise. The students identified social influences as significant to their motivation and achievement, a theme Graham et al. (2010) identify as largely consistent with international findings on motivation. The point of difference emerges within the context of the students’ particular cultural backgrounds. For example, Māori students discussed their motivation as fostered through kotahitanga (unity), a notion that encompasses intrapersonal and collective understandings of “relatedness, competence and autonomy” (Graham et al. 2010, p. 171). The cultural context also raises questions regarding the purpose of achieving excellence.

A collective understanding of excellence for all could be said to function differently and with different intent to an individualistic imagining of excellence for all. In this sense, collective excellence serves to benefit the whole community alongside self-improvement. Like Graham et al. (2010) discussing kotahitanga, Mahuika (2007) reflects on Māori understandings of special abilities as holistic and reciprocal. Definitions of excellence intended to address cultural and spiritual giftedness transcend the emphasis on norm-referenced academic achievement, and include diverse world-views. Reviewing the literature relating to Māori and gifted education, Mahuika advocates a need within the current education system for Māori concepts of giftedness.

Culturally appropriate definitions could better support the identification of Māori students who are gifted, and aid the development of culturally sensitive educational programmes. Mahuika acknowledges that various mainstream multi-categorical approaches operate to identify giftedness, for example, meta-cognition and
multiple intelligences, but argues that interpretations differ from culture to culture. Whilst Mahuika addresses this point from the perspective of marginalisation of Māori students within current provision of gifted education, the idea of cultural interpretation applies both within and across diverse cultures. Perhaps the key activity for schools seeking to define excellence and corresponding learner identities is to ensure new ways that are representative of diverse school communities (Wrigley, Lingard, & Thomson, 2012).

Alternative structures and processes may provide schools with culturally responsive resources to recognise excellence in achievement amongst students of diverse cultural backgrounds. Bishop et al. (2009) argue current educational policies and practices maintain aspects of mono-cultural school identities, and continue to serve the interests of a mono-cultural elite. In the next section, I will consider literature that claims the education system serves economic goals, using norm-referenced standards to regulate achievement. From this argument, we can infer that particular opportunities for demonstrating excellence might also be valorised in mono-cultural ways. I commence the next section by tracing the lineage of discourses of excellence in education to investigate how excellence has become a legitimised aim of educational policy.

**An educational lineage of excellence**

Excellence represents an embedded convention in education. Within the domain of private education, elite schools have traditionally appealed to a certain social market seeking exclusivity and prestige, alongside the assumed surety of excellence in attainment and future life success (Allan, 2010; Meadmore & Meadmore, 2004). Emerging from literature concerning school practices intent on achieving excellence are some striking similarities between the private and public educational fields, notably a shared emphasis on performativity. In some respects, similarities could be anticipated given the assertion by Lauder et al. (1999) that state schools must behave increasingly like private schools to succeed in a performance-oriented market.

---

2 See for example, Tomlins-Jahnke’s (2008) consideration of cultural standards of excellence under development by Ngāti Kahungunu. See also Fletcher, Parkhill, Fa’afoi, Tufulasi Taleni and O’Regan (2009); Jones (1989); Nash (2000), and ‘Otunuku (2011) for discussions on the expectations of high educational achievement amongst Pasifika students and families.
For public education, the historicity of excellence is less entrenched. Gillies (2007) identifies excellence first entering educational discourses in the United States in the late 1950s, positioning excellence in academic achievement as a response to economic ‘crisis narratives’. Economic competitiveness arising from the Cold War, global marketing, and surging technological advances has influenced American education policy since (Tharp et al., 2000). Such economic imperatives are not unique. The pervasiveness of excellence in public education elsewhere around the world seems to have emerged most clearly within neoliberal discourses that have continued to shape the educational landscape since the 1980s (Gillies, 2007). The maintenance of an economic narrative persists in the current New Zealand Curriculum (2007), which advocates providing education intent on “meeting the changing needs of the workplace and the economy” (p. 42). Defining education policy to serve economic interests risks sidelong the social purposes of education (Wrigley et al., 2012), however, the role of global capitalism and markets requires greater attention. The following section examines more closely how globalisation influences government policy, which in turn impacts on understandings of scholastic performativity.

**Considering attainment within neoliberal and globalised networks**

In terms of schooling, Codd (2005) reflects on a New Zealand context where investment in education appears to serve increasing competitive advantage and economic growth, by profiting from the human capital of its educated citizens. Human capital theory measures the earning and productive capacity of individuals, hence the assumption that the more highly educated a population, the greater likelihood of wealth generation. Codd (2005) argues, however, human capital development to a large extent narrows the concerns of social democratic ideology in education policy. In a New Zealand education system previously focused on equality of outcome and democratic citizenship, the neoliberal agenda for education turns to the interests of the economy to determine policy (Codd, 2005, O’Neill, 2011). Wrigley et al. (2012) concede to an inevitability of economics-driven policy, described in their words as “corrosive” (p. 96). The idea of ‘inevitability’ requires substantiation; some argue the neoliberal position renders itself legitimate within a near-absolutist discourse, upholding that no viable alternatives exist (Codd, 2005; Wrigley, et al., 2012). Indeed, this entrenchment
may offer some explanation as to why performance standards are now underway in primary schools. A further factor contributing to neoliberal orientations in thinking about the purpose and governance of education systems plays out on a global scale (Rizvi & Lingard, 2010).

The neoliberal discourse of rolling back the state to meet demands of globalised markets is met, paradoxically, with increased intervention by a reconfigured state intent on protecting those same markets (Vidovich, 2007). Consequently, Vidovich proposes the impact of globalisation on policy-making may compromise the capacity of nation states to set education policy without reference to globalisation processes. Rizvi and Lingard (2010) point out, however, that the concept of globalisation is dynamic, non-uniform, and context-specific. While similarities in policy shifts occur across nations, the contingency of historical, political, and cultural factors mediate differences on national and localised scales. This said, Rizvi and Lingard acknowledge the discourses framing educational policy increasingly derive from international and supranational organisations.

Two examples of supranational policies that appear to have played a role on the national stage come from the European Union (EU) and the OECD. Van Avermaet et al. (2011) describe the effect of the Lisbon Strategy, devised in 2000. This particular EU strategy intent on growth, focused on creating competitive and dynamic knowledge-based economies. The Strategy aimed to achieve excellence in human capital by stipulating early participation in quality public education systems, setting benchmarks of attainment in core subjects for students aged 15, and aiming for high levels of tertiary educational achievement. All three aspects of this European strategy resonate with policy enactments from the previous Labour administration and current National government in terms of participation in early childhood education, National Standards, and encouraging access to tertiary education.

Wendt Samu (2011) identifies a second example of global influences. The key competencies advocated by the New Zealand Curriculum (2007) appear to echo a conceptual framework of competencies devised by an OECD initiative that commenced in 1997. Global influences, however, should not be assumed to be necessarily negative. Wendt Samu (2011) also suggests the underlying ideology of global ‘Third Way’
political and economic reform, have “driven the efforts to construct a responsive education system for New Zealand” (p.180). Despite the interdependence of perceived challenges across nations, the positioning of the state within global policy processes engages education in multi-dimensional structures and relations. The outcomes infer localised responses, yet remain contingent on national and international concerns.

Whilst the academic field widely acknowledges the impact of structures and social relations on attainment (see for example, Nash, 1999; Thrupp, 2007), the same cannot always be said of governments. The neoliberal turn, in particular, presents a policy climate in education where, amongst other features, choice and individualised responsibility intersect with market competition for student enrolments (Codd, 2005; Lauder et al., 1999; Nairn et al., 2012; Savage, 2011). Competition between schools manifests in multiple ways made public by promotional materials, an online profile, and increasingly, by way of performance rankings. League tables have become the latest feature of the primary education landscape in New Zealand, following the introduction of National Standards assessment procedures.

Governments justify school performance data in terms of school effectiveness, accountability, and market forces (Gillies, 2007; Lauder et al., 1999; Snook & O’Neill, 2010). Ranking primary schools in terms of their achievement statistics, widely considered inevitable by educationalists and teachers, eventualised in New Zealand at the hands of media. Using data, paradoxically described by Prime Minister John Key (2012) as “ropey” (Shuttleworth, 2012), Fairfax Media compiled and published its own league table of primary and intermediate schools. The quality of comparable data contributes to concerns regarding the utility of league tables (Thrupp & Easter, 2012); more precisely, questions arise as to the value of unadjusted scores (Tsolidis, 2006). School-based practices present further factors considered influential to performance data (Lauder et al., 1999; Thrupp & Easter, 2012; Tsolidis, 2006).

In their first report researching schools’ enactment of New Zealand’s National Standards policy, Thrupp and Easter (2012) highlight the significance of school-specific factors. The nuances of the individual school context create differing positions of advantage when schools enact the standards system, rendering the notion of standardised criteria somewhat cloudy. Thrupp and Easter conclude that schools may
subsequently engage with ‘game-playing’ strategies, as experienced in other nations where high-stakes systems apply. Reflecting on the Australian context for example, Tsolidis (2006) describes various school practices constitutive of ‘gaming the system’, including increased focus on literacy and numeracy, and techno-rationalist pedagogies. Parents too play the game.

When choosing a school for their child, perceived school performance is a principal indicator to determine choice, influencing movement of students from schools judged as low performing to schools ranked more highly. For example, Lauder et al. (1999) outline the implications of middle class ‘flight’ on New Zealand schools as a result of market practices, where ‘choice’ can create social segregation as schools polarise on the basis of the socio-economic status (SES) of student composition. In contrast, Nash and Harker (2005) present an alternative interpretation of white middle-class flight, suggesting students from low SES, Māori and Pasifika backgrounds also choose to bypass their local school. Either way, the effect of declining enrolments in low SES/decile schools further disadvantages students there (see also Carpenter, 2009; Stubbs & Strathdee, 2012). The global and neoliberal turns in education policy to improve school effectiveness appear to contribute new challenges to constructing education systems that imagine and create better futures for learners (Wrigley et al., 2012).

The next section considers how the pursuit of educational excellence might be reconciled as being compatible with the aim of organising an equitable education system. I will consider the Finnish education model, proposed by some as an example of how excellence as a global, national, and localised imperative is realised by schools.

**Where excellence meets equity?**

Differential excellence within an education system encompasses the development of a common yet differentiated set of core competencies, facilitated by assessment programmes that allow for a certain degree of differentiation among different student groups (Duru-Bellat & Mingat, 2011). This approach suggests a departure from high-stakes testing and norm referenced standardisation of assessment (Van Avermaet et al., 2011). Evaluation of such approaches, therefore, examines the extent to which students are enabled to follow a learning trajectory reflective of their
personal and academic needs. Crucially, as Duru-Bellat and Mingat (2011) point out, the excellence of an education system can then be measured in terms of the level of equity it provides for.

Achieving differential excellence by providing equity in excellence is a considerable challenge faced by the New Zealand education system, and indeed many others (OECD, 2008). Addressing disparities in achievement levels has initiated responses in New Zealand such as Te Kotahitanga (Bishop et al., 2009), discussed in Chapter 2. Te Kotahitanga seeks to increase equity and excellence in educational outcomes through partnerships developed between student, teacher and whānau, and to challenge deficit theorising implicit in an education system dominated by the majority culture. As Bishop et al. point out, the danger of deficit theorising in education, which could apply to various categories of students perceived as underachieving, rests in a learning paradigm that sets up interventions requiring students to adapt to the expectations of an educational system (see Van Avermaet et al., 2011, for a similar argument). In contrast, Te Kotahitanga promotes teaching and learning strategies that are flexible in response to students, and support processes of collaboration and mutual respect (Bishop et al., 2009). In their advocacy of deconstructing system-centred learning paradigms Van Avermaet et al. (2011) make similar suggestions, so that students can initiate and take responsibility for designing their learning pathways. The principle of partnership advanced by Bishop et al. (2009), and indicated by Van Avermaet et al. (2011) as necessary for differential excellence, outlines the importance of all parties involved in education collaborating and contributing to a sustained and concerted effort to raise levels of excellence and equity.

In other aspects too, the public education system in New Zealand appears well placed to address excellence and equity. In terms of contextualised educational approaches that might contribute to achieving differential excellence (Van Avermaet et al., 2011), the Tommorrow’s Schools Education Act offers possibilities. Devolved autonomy to schools was intended to enable school leaders and Boards to make decisions on educational provision, reflective of and pertinent to their communities. Furthermore, the recently revised New Zealand Curriculum (2007) additionally aims to support schools in giving effect to the partnership defined by the Treaty of Waitangi.
The Curriculum recognises the professionalism of teachers to create adaptive and localised learning opportunities, and involve students in decisions relating to their own learning (NZC, 2007). Each of these features of the education system presents schools with opportunities to build partnerships in learning, while maintaining high expectations that are responsive to individual student need. These principles underpin excellence and equity. The political context of education, however, has given rise to measures that appear at odds with differential excellence.

Educational approaches considered by Van Avermaet et al. (2011) as oppositional to achieving differential excellence operate in New Zealand alongside those that are favourable. Tomorrow’s Schools has promoted competition for student enrolments and choice between schools (Lauder et al., 1999). Pedagogies intent on empowering learners to design their own learning pathways, may contradict broader expectations to measure achievement in ways that standardise outcomes (Thrupp & Easter, 2012). Having introduced standardised assessment throughout primary schooling, the current government looks likely to introduce primary school performance tables based on national standards reporting. Additionally, in a recent announcement by the Ministry of Education (2013), future provision of Te Kotahitanga in schools is to be subsumed within a “broader” achievement-raising programme. My interpretation of this decision suggests a move away from initiatives focused on equity in education that redistribute resources according to students’ needs, to an approach that favours equality of educational opportunity, and that focuses more broadly on equal distribution of resources.

A complicated context of excellence and equity emerges that might create important contradictions for how students make sense of their identities as learners, and how they view their potential to achieve excellence. A consideration of the Finnish education system follows, a system often held as successful in reconciling excellence with equity, but with complications of its own.

The Finnish model

In common with numerous education systems, a key aim of public education in Finland has been to provide quality education that achieves high overall performance, while evening out disparities in student attainment levels (Linnakylä, Välijärvi &
Arffman, 2011). Yet where comprehensive schooling appears in many nations to have become a relic of social democratic discourses, and rejected in favour of systems focused on competition and choice (Grek, 2009), Finnish basic education retains the principles of publicly funded, non-selective, comprehensive education. A further notable feature of the system, in terms of the discussion in this section, is that while national guidelines for grading student performance exist, national standardised testing does not take place in Finland (Grek, 2009; Linnakylä et al., 2011).

In their analysis of assessment data sourced from PISA and several other international studies, Linnakylä et al. (2011) outline how performance differences between schools and between regions in Finland are low by OECD standards. Despite an appearance of equity in comparison to other OECD nations claimed by the PISA data, Linnakylä et al. (2011) acknowledge PISA also indicates that approximately 20% of students in Finland have difficulties in reading, mathematical and scientific literacies.

The use of data sourced from international studies such as PISA, to substantiate claims of high equity in the Finnish system, however, demands further problematising. There exists a certain irony in justifying differential excellence on the basis of educational indicators derived from PISA studies that, according to Grek (2009), ignore the diverse national contexts that generate the data. Grek (2009) reflects how PISA decontextualises the knowledge, culture, and life experiences of the 15 year-old students compared in its studies. Identifying a ‘comparative turn’ in political decision-making, Grek (2009) describes how, despite widespread criticisms of the testing frame and statistical validity of PISA, the PISA ‘brand’ contributes to an expert discourse in global educational policy field.

Statistical and comparative educational indicators have acquired a taken-for-granted status in global policy (Grek, 2009). Using comparative studies such as PISA provides governments with one tool to initiate and legitimise educational reform, a situation Martens and Niemans (2010) call “governance by comparison” (p. 7). The rhetoric of performing highly on the world stage appears to intersect with discourses of
excellence in education, where excellence operates to describe “world-class” (Parata, 2013) education systems and quantifiable educational outputs.

Excellence as a rhetorical construct provides the basis for the following section. While contingent national and local factors suggest heterogeneous adaptations to policy processes, the rhetoric of education policy appears to sustain global imperatives. Gillies (2007) identifies the ubiquity of excellence as a global discourse and, therefore, it should come as no surprise that excellence features as a value in the New Zealand Curriculum (2007). My aim is to investigate how students make sense of excellence within the classroom context. To do so effectively requires examination of how governments apply rhetoric to sustain political, economic and social commitment to the discourse of excellence for all.

**Rhetorical excellence**

Major structural changes to the education system in New Zealand initiated by the Tomorrow’s Schools Act in 1989 emerged from the previous year’s report, Administering for Excellence. Using a business model, as befitting the commercial background of the report’s authors, Administering for Excellence laid the foundations for the neoliberal turn in education. Significantly, the guise for change was excellence.

Excellence for all exercises a suggestive power that is both malleable and ambiguous. Occupying a key position in the vocabulary of education, excellence appears to appeal to both the political Right and elitist views of education, and the Left’s regard for equality (Ng, 2008). Tensions arise when government policies intent on equity in education simultaneously present a perceived threat to elite attainment of excellence. To accommodate the desire for elitism and equity, Van Avarmaet et al. (2011) suggest government policies turn to excellence for all. Excellence then joins what Hartley (2006) describes as an e-litany of contemporary educational policy, alongside efficiency, effectiveness, and equity. Their alliterative qualities aside, the thread that seems to join these policy aims is economic (Codd; 2005; Gillies, 2007;

---

3 The descriptor used by the New Zealand Ministry for Education in an overview of the New Zealand education system, and by Hekia Parata, Minister for Education, in her speech to delegates at a recent seminar in Chile.
Hartley, 2006; Lauder, 2009). As governments increasingly turn education systems towards an economic purpose, the adherence to a human capital theory of investment engages the state in what Lauder (2009) terms, “a form of educational engineering” (p. 199).

The discourse of excellence in education in New Zealand seems, in recent times, to operate in discrete and subtle ways, unlike other education systems. In contrast to government moves in England, Scotland, Singapore and Australia, for example, where excellence often sits resolutely in the title of education strategies, application of excellence appears to assume a less conspicuous position in materials and initiatives administered by New Zealand’s Ministry of Education (see Gillies, 2007; Hartley, 2006; Ng, 2008; Savage, 2011). Since Administering for Excellence, excellence rarely appears as an explicit driver for government to establish a platform for change. A search of the Ministry of Education’s website reveals excellence as a NCEA accreditation, excellence as a value in the New Zealand Curriculum (2007), and excellence in leadership used in materials distributed to Boards of Trustees (Ministry of Education, 2012). These are not insignificant considerations, however, I argue excellence operates more implicitly, rather than drawing upon the discourse to publicly steer centrally mandated initiatives. Moreover, these examples of excellence in Ministry documentation place responsibility for delivery firmly with school leadership, the school community, and teachers.

The situation in New Zealand may well represent a specific neoliberal ideology devolved through school management policies. Initiatives in England such as Excellence in Cities launched in 1999, and Excellence and Enjoyment (2003); Targeting excellence (1999) and Ambitious, excellent schools (2004) in Scotland; School Excellence Model (2000) in Singapore; and Rewarding teaching excellence (2009) in Australia appear to place the government in a clear position of leadership. These excellence initiatives illustrate the idea that governments can influence standards of education and attainment on a national or system-wide basis, underscored by the interests of the economy and economic competitiveness (Lauder, 2009). The reiteration of excellence throughout education policy serves to establish a discursive consensus regarding the hegemonic purpose and aims of education policy, and a need for change
When excellence operates at an intrinsic level of school leadership, practices and pedagogy, the effect of rhetoric may differ. Without the fanfare of publicly announced initiatives, the expectation of central funding and resourcing is likely diminished, leaving schools to bear the accountability for interpreting and delivering excellence.

As a rhetorical tool of persuasion, excellence enters the language of governance and filters through to policy enactment. At the micro level of school and classroom, excellence may well perform in discursively emotive and moralistic ways, since the assumption of a shared understanding of excellence appears to rest on the emotive properties of the notion. Reflecting on the common sense quality of excellence in public discourse, Gillies (2007) also notes a lack of attempts to define excellence in education.

The equality suggested by the rhetoric of excellence for all appears to rest in tension with the reality of differential achievement. Thus far, I have outlined how policy and performativity intersect with excellence. The final focus of this chapter returns to the scholastic subject. To support later analysis of how students make sense of their achievement and their identity as learners, I will locate the scholastic subject in current literature concerning high achievement and accomplishment.

**Conceptualising the scholastic subject**

Allowing performative imperatives and outcomes to define what counts as excellence risks marginalising students, and undermining the identity work of those who fail to make the norm-referenced grade. Drawing on Bourdieu’s (2010) theory of cultural capital, Lucey and Reay (2002) note, “like ‘taste’, excellence is a mechanism for attributing intrinsic worth and intellectual capacity to some individuals and lesser worth to others” (p. 334). The affective implications of an educational culture intent on performative excellence, has the potential to challenge both students’ sense of achievement and their sense of self-worth. Despite hierarchic and normative systems of measuring attainment, Lucey and Reay suggest identifying those who gain most from an education system is not as straightforward as could be assumed. The same cannot be said about those who consistently miss out.
Low decile schools are repeatedly ranked behind in performance measures of normative assessment (NZQA, 2012; Snook & O’Neill, 2010). When students from schools in lower socio-economic locations are struggling to meet a ‘national average’, then excellence for all becomes extremely problematic. Indeed, it is this apparent ‘failure’ to achieve that provides the measure against which excellence is produced. The potential strain on excellence appears counter-balanced by a discursive normativity that all should strive to achieve their best. Gewirtz and Cribb (2009) explain this situation as “a common set of values, shared by the school and family, around a commitment to the value of achievement and the principle of meritocracy” (p. 29). Accepting that commonly held values around achievement are the case, schools subsequently need to harness students’ apparent motivation to succeed. Where then do students stand in terms of the dispositions required to achieve their best? Taking the position that schooling aims to produce flexible and accomplished subjects, my intention is to consider how excellence and performance coalesce within current educational discourses.

Multi-accomplishment and doing it all

Likening the production of identities to an entrepreneurial project, Skelton and Francis (2011) trace the evolution of an adaptive multi-accomplished subject. In the case of schools, I take entrepreneurial identities to mean students willing to take risks and make the most of educational opportunities in order to achieve. While measurable performance contributes to an acceptable scholastic subject, the literature that follows suggests qualifications or high achievement alone are unlikely to be sufficient.

To further demonstrate adaptive abilities, in these neoliberal times a successful subject needs to be seen to contribute (Skelton & Francis, 2011). In the workplace this means what an individual can offer and bring to an organisation. For students, this implies not simply what the school can do for the child, but what the child can offer the school (Tsoidis, 2006; Vincent & Ball, 2006; Vaughan, 2002). Consequently, an all-rounder scholastic subject emerges with the potential to produce and promote

---

4 NCEA results illustrate school decile rating operates as a significant determinant for students achieving NCEA at all three levels (NZQA, 2012).
themselves as desirable subjects rich in curriculum credentials and cultural capital. The next step for the scholastic subject is to make the ‘right’ choices.

Choice, as espoused by traditional liberal principles, should be available to all, and is intrinsic to life as an accomplishment (Walker, 2008). This research project seeks to examine the sense learners make of their educational opportunities, particularly how choice and achievement associate to produce accomplishment of excellence. My discussion of the humanist subject in Chapter 2, invokes consideration of the significance of choice to students’ capacity or willingness to take up opportunities. Within ongoing decentralisation of the welfare state, current neoliberal discourses of choice locate responsibility with individuals as architects of their own life trajectories (Codd, 2005; Nairn et al., 2012). Research suggests, however, the range of influences extend beyond the discursively constructed.

Factors impacting choice are numerous, and variously discussed as the education policy environment (Ball, 2008; Nairn et al., 2012), and what counts as legitimate knowledge (Bishop, 2005; 2010). More localised influences include institutional school cultures that produce inclusions and exclusions of particular scholastic subjects (Youdell, 2006), and peer cultures equally demanding of acceptable identities (Allan, 2010; Jackson, 2006; Skelton & Francis, 2012; Tsolidis, 2006; Youdell, 2006). A final consideration, which my own research also reveals as particularly pertinent, is intersecting cultures from the home and community environment (Bishop 2005; Jones, 1999; Nairn et al., 2012; Nash, 2000; Snook & O’Neill, 2010). Within such a discursive and socio-cultural melange, individuals are expected to make the ‘right’ choices, and possess “the knowledge, competencies and values . . . to be successful citizens” (NZC, 2012, p. 4). Yet the complexity of a situated life, and the interrelational nature of identities suggest making choices is not a neutral activity.

Producing a multi-accomplished student appears to be a shared enterprise. The family environment plays a primary role in presenting opportunities, and producing dispositions that enable children to engage with choice (Bourdieu, 2010). Making the most of multiple opportunities also places responsibility on schools to ensure opportunities are available to their student community. Yet the role of discourse in producing acceptable subjects should not be disregarded.
The next section reviews how discourses can contribute to the production of scholastic subjects within the particular frame of excellence. An examination follows of how gender interacts with high performing scholastic identities, and considers the emotional labour involved in achievement. Finally, I will begin to explore how the notion of a multi-accomplished all-rounder implies a scholastic subject of excellence, a subject position that is perhaps idealised when we consider excellence for all.

**Introducing the ‘renaissance child’**

The expectation of all-round performance turns childhood into a project of experiential accumulation and enrichment. Vincent and Ball’s (2006) research into how 59 middle-class families engaged with child-care choices in London revealed the enthusiasm with which parents immersed their children in extra-curricular learning. The concern to provide experiences intended to “foster creativity . . . physical competence, confidence, and good social skills” (p. 157) gave rise to a pre-school subject that Vincent and Ball named the ‘renaissance child’.

The renaissance child aims to accrue pre-school cultural and social capital (making the ‘right’ social connections), and understandably, involves a significant investment both of time and economic resources. According to Vincent and Ball (2006), an enrichment of the childhood experience constitutes planning ahead, preparing the ground for future educational and social successes. Specifically, the future entails entry to the ‘right’ primary and secondary school.

The formulation of a ‘curriculum vitae’ (Vincent & Ball, 2006) or a ‘portfolio’ of talent and skills (Skelton & Francis, 2011) may serve to promote a child’s readiness to achieve. En route, the child might also gain opportunities for important social learning, leading to the accomplishment of social capital (Vincent & Ball, 2006). At the intermediate or late primary stage of education, it is likely that the embodiment of the renaissance child is well developed. In effect, the renaissance child may have accrued at least several years of participation in extra-curricular arts and sports, or competitive inter-school intellectual activities. As a consequence, these students may be rehearsed in diverse performances and accomplishments. The renaissance child might develop into a multi-talented adolescent, for whom high achievement is the norm.
Complicating multi-talented and multi-accomplished identities

Despite being the beneficiary of enrichment opportunities, the renaissance child remains subject to factors that impact on a sense of self. In their application of the renaissance child as a frame to analyse high achievement and gender in a range of UK schools, Skelton and Francis (2011) found girls and boys encounter opportunities to take up performances of success in education differently. Their study focuses on students’ choice of curriculum subjects, and draws upon liberal and neoliberal discourses of the subject, and talent and accomplishment to consider the various subject positions available to students.

Achieving a place at the top of a performative hierarchy does not necessarily ensure high achieving students are rendered immune from the social ranking of peer hierarchies. Skelton and Francis (2011) found ‘well-resourced’ boys, more than any other group, had the potential to access diverse productions of identity, including identities that might otherwise be considered feminine. Demonstrating sporting ability and popularity on the one hand, and professing to English being their favourite subject on the other, Skelton and Francis considered these particular boys embodied the flexibility to traverse traditional gender constructs. These boys demonstrated the capacity to negotiate masculine/feminine tensions of learning, and still be met with approval by their peers. With fewer valued masculine resources high achieving, but less popular, boys struggled to negotiate the feminine space of the English class, both in terms of enjoyment and attainment (Skelton & Francis, 2011). This group of boys were considered by their peers deficient in the necessary masculine capitals such as popularity or sporting ability, and consequently, encountered restricted opportunities to perform adaptable, all-rounder identities. Indeed, Skelton and Francis found peer responses constrained opportunities to embody gender-flexible identities for most students, well-resourced boys being the exception.

The availability of the renaissance scholastic subject was also restricted for girls. Skelton and Francis (2011) examined the experiences of high achieving girls who identified physical education (PE) as a favourite subject. Not unlike other studies, they found girls performing in the traditionally masculine space of PE encountered barriers to being and doing diverse femininities. Even though renaissance identities include
sporting prowess, high attaining girls were constrained in converting their physical capital or sporting accomplishments into social capital (Skelton & Francis, 2011). The physical capital of these girls lacked a similar exchange value to that of their male peers, their sporting achievements failing to attract a similar level of recognition. Performances of masculine identities attributed to sporting accomplishment contradict aesthetic and embodied normative femininities (Skelton & Francis, 2011). To accommodate their participation in sport, the high attaining girls engaged in ‘repair’ work afterwards, re-establishing normative femininities to claim valorised identities.

The findings from the renaissance child study suggest an interesting dilemma for the intersection of gender and multi-faceted excellence. Differences both between and within genders appear to undermine the potential of excellence for all. According to the research of Skelton and Francis (2011), identities demanded of an all-round scholastic subject take the form of gender enactments that simultaneously transcend and reinforce normative understandings. Moreover, their findings also propose that only a select few students have the capacity to enact acceptable all-round performances, placing further doubt on the transferability of excellence for all.

I propose that the renaissance child presents an idealised scholastic subject as a basis for examining the implications of educational policy and practice on student identities. In the applications of the renaissance subject discussed in this section, Skelton and Francis (2011) acknowledge the low number of student participants involved in their study. Alternatively, for Vincent and Ball (2006) the renaissance subject emerged from the actions of parents supporting the development of their preschool children. Nevertheless, the notion of renaissance or all-rounder identities locates the scholastic subject within discursive liberal and neoliberal imaginings pertinent to this thesis. In order to further analyse understandings of the self as a learner, a more nuanced exploration of the gendered implications for excellence is required than that offered by the renaissance child.

The relevance of ‘project girl’ and having it all

Girls’ achievements in gaining qualifications from the education system appear to operate as common sense. Indeed, the ‘boy-turn’ and its ensuing anxieties rely on a binary of girls’ success and boys’ failure to sustain its immediacy (Weaver-Hightower,
2003). A particular ‘can-do’ female subject, who embodies the successes of a meritocratic education system, offers relevance to my thesis due to her transformation as a can-do student who anticipates multi-accomplishment. In Chapter 6, I explore how an expectation that all students demonstrate can-do attitudes supports the discourse of excellence in achievement for all.

The emergence of the social category ‘can-do girl’ endeavours to mobilise a subject defined by her potential to do it all and have it all (Harris, 2004; McRobbie, 2007). In her examination of various subject positions made available to young women, Harris (2004) identifies the can-do girl as a site of possibility, optimism and reinvention. Telling a young woman she has the capacity to have it all, like referring to a student’s potential, maintains an ongoing process of individualisation and responsibilisation. Investing in potential becomes a self-driven and flexible process, demanding of multiple accomplishments, and giving sense to the notion of the entrepreneurial project of the self discussed in the previous section, Harris (2004) cautions, however, that the can-do subject position is not available to all girls. Those girls unable or unwilling to perform the desired identities or attributes find themselves constructed as ‘at-risk’, a phrase that appears frequently in education.

Identifying students as at-risk complicates the goal of excellence for all. Initiatives that have seen changes to the welfare state, the marketisation of schools, and fee-paying structures to enter tertiary education, for example, impact negatively on the educational achievements of young women from low-income families (Nairn et al., 2012). Reflecting on the UK context, McRobbie (2007) suggests the very governmental practices that have made visible the achievements of girls, have generated inequities that do not bestow such repositioning to all girls (nor indeed all boys). It appears the obstacles to accomplishment and attainment remain resolutely imbricated in markers of low SES and minority ethnicities. Those well positioned to maximise their potential, however, might not always experience the push towards excellence in achievement in ways that are productive of reward.

Anxiety and excellence

Failure is omnipresent within the discourse of excellence, and is likely to be accompanied by anxieties that are managed in diverse ways. The fear of failure operates
as a persuasive motivator. Among secondary students, Jackson (2006) found for many a fear of failure is more compelling than wanting to succeed. The claim that hard work and ambition should achieve equitable outcomes may prove insufficient to address barriers to excellence for all.

Even within the competitive field of high achievement, there will be those whose performance provides the failure against which to measure excellence. When schools award certificates of excellence, or when students enter optional international tests,\(^5\) as is the case with students in this study, few can achieve high distinction. Emotional difficulties may arise for students who have excelled in a restricted field, but once located in a new school or test cohort, discover their best no longer places them at the top. In particular, middle-class parents perceive success as imperative and needing to be sustained, and are more likely to “unquestioningly” position their child as clever (Lucey & Reay, 2002; Walkerdine, Lucey & Melody, 2001). For many families, high attainment presents a long-term project that commences with pre-school education, and requires strategic maintenance to achieve the desired results (Vincent & Ball, 2006). Within these values, high academic performance may be taken for granted without consideration of an emotional cost.

As previously considered with the renaissance child, ability or potential may not necessarily equate to excellence in achievement. Anxiety can accompany the sustained performances of high achieving girls, irrespective of class (Walkerdine et al., 2001), this despite girls’ attainment in examinations tending to be higher than boys’ (NZQA, 2012). Lucey and Reay (2002) found for the predominantly middle-class girls in their study, anxiety represented an affective dilemma framed by parental expectations. These girls negotiated feelings of not being good enough with not being allowed to fail. Demonstrating that high parental expectations transcend the domain of the white middle-class, Nash (2000) encountered male Pasifika students negotiating the pressures of their working class parents’ ambitious expectations.

\(^5\) Some students voluntarily took the opportunity to sit tests produced by the University of New South Wales. A number of full primary and intermediate schools organise participation in the International Competitions and Assessments for Schools (ICAS) tests.
The performativity expected of boys also represents a site of anxiety. In schools, boys negotiate complex masculine constructs ranging from ‘geek’ to ‘lad’, a spectrum of embodiment navigating a non-gendered subject to macho-masculinity (Lucey & Reay, 2002). Supplementing the all-rounder male is the laid-back, high attaining boy, whose public performance suggests effortless achievement (see also Jackson, 2006; Skelton & Francis, 2011). Lucey and Reay (2002) note the perception of a laid-back approach belies the learning and effort that underpins such attainment.

A discursive construct of endeavour, considered particularly prevalent in New Zealand, is the tall poppy syndrome. Excellence in achievement becomes the product of luck within this discourse seeking to minimise the implications of personal endeavour (McClure, Meyer, Garisch, Fischer, Weir & Walkey, 2011). The effect of the tall poppy discourse is to render the scholastic subject susceptible to social disapproval or regulation for achieving excellence. Students may discuss their scholastic success in terms of being lucky, and reject meritocratic effort, natural ability, or collective enterprise when making sense of their learning. This intricate interplay of discursive positioning confronts students with a contradiction. Common sense advocates the benefits of working hard, aiming high and doing one’s best (Gewirtz & Cribb, 2006), while a perceived cultural inclination to modesty and self-deprecation appears to encourage the colloquial ‘keeping your head down’.

The emotional stakes involved in achieving excellence seem high. Young people negotiate personal and family expectations within a performance-oriented system that espouses broad definitions of excellence, yet appears to adopt narrow terms. The tensions revealed in the literature appear largely representative of students from dominant ethnic groups, or those with greatest access to economic, social, and cultural capital. Within these socio-cultural groups, privilege and position do not necessarily translate to excellence. For students experiencing a mismatch between the dominant culture in schools and their own culture, however, the pathway to excellence is likely a more turbulent prospect (Graham et al., 2010). Where students encounter barriers presented by mono-cultural values, the negotiations involved in constructing a scholastic subject position may present additional affective challenges. Subsequently, a student’s capacity to manage the anxiety of achieving and maintaining excellence
depends on the discursive resources available to them to make sense of their learning. Covington (2000) draws on achievement goal theory to understand affective dimensions of success and failure.

**Using goals to understand success and failure**

Covington’s (2000) achievement goal theory describes students being actively engaged in their own learning, and demonstrates how cognitive self-regulation controls a conceptualisation of what counts as quality of achievement. The quality of learning a student engages with, and the will to further develop understanding in one’s studies relates to the types of social and academic goals students prioritise for themselves (Covington, 2000).

In achievement goal theory, students’ academic goals may follow one of two orientations. Learning goals refer to competency, understanding, and appreciation for what is being learned, whereas performance goals involve increasing one’s ability status over peers by way of outperformance (Covington, 2000). Self-motivating processes to achieve, coupled with quality cognitive self-regulation, prepare students for success, both in demonstrating positive achievement behaviour and engaging with learning. Academic goals, for success-oriented students, include engaging with failure to produce more robust learning. Proactively responding to feedback, for example, demonstrates how students monitor their understanding of what is being learnt to identify what is deficient in their knowledge or understanding, thereby informing future learning (Covington, 2000). These types of learning behaviour describe favourable dispositions for achieving excellence, investigating interrelational identities, however, requires attending to the broader nuances of students’ lives.

While Covington (2000) refers to the influence of material conditions and race, these considerations do not constitute a substantial focus of the literature he reviews. A significant body of research exists elsewhere, however, which has examined how cultural and structural factors intersect with students’ academic goals, or their resistance to school goals and performative discourses (Graham et al., 2010; Jones, 1989; Lucey & Reay, 2002; Mahuika, 2007; Nairn et al., 2012; Nash, 2000; Walkerdine et al., 2001). A
synthesis of these diverse fields contributes to building a holistic understanding of students’ engagement with achievement and for my purpose, excellence.

Thus far, I have argued how excellence relies upon failure for recognisability. Achievement goal theory contributes to understanding the identities embodied within an idealised scholastic subject by offering an explanation of how success-orientation and meta-cognition enable potential in learning. Achievement goal theory also offers an understanding of how students respond to failure, particularly in relation to performative measures of excellence.

Withholding effort and appearing unwilling to take cognitive risks in learning suggests the antithesis of entrepreneurial learner identities. Covington (2000) attributes such actions to a defensive repertoire that students develop to shield themselves from failure. The fear of appearing to fail for some students pre-empts their engagement with learning, creating barriers to success and requiring students to develop self-worth protecting strategies. Students motivated to avoid failure risk consequences to identity work of being labelled as ‘can’t-do’ or ‘won’t-do’ scholastic subjects (Jackson, 2006). Performative educational cultures have the potential to exclude students who rely on self-protecting mechanisms that resist norm-referenced standards of achievement. The goals that students set for their learning, therefore, add a further layer of complexity to the aim for excellence in achievement for all.

**Summary**

What should be a laudable and socially just aim, excellence for all appears trapped in the conventions of social privilege, ranking and elitism. Paradoxically, our understanding of excellence relies upon failure against which excellence can be measured. This leaves a constant imbalance between excellence for some and excellence for all. With the discourse of excellence currently constitutive of an assumed public consensus based on league tables and government rhetoric, the education system appears challenged in meeting the aim of universal high achievement. Rather than narrowing the disparities of educational achievement and opportunity, dominant constructs of excellence seem to maintain traditional inequities of gender, race and socio-economic background.
Persuasive arguments suggest that excellence operates primarily as a technology for regulation, driven by economic imperatives rather than any real desire for equity. Indeed, research indicates excellence in educational policy and practice carries significant emotional as well as structural consequences. Lucey and Reay (2002) suggest policies intended to increase educational attainment rely on exclusion and differentiation of students. Alternative or new approaches of working towards excellence may need to uphold equity as a complementary goal if all are to be included.

Structures and processes already in place in New Zealand, such as Te Kotahitanga, provide schools with pedagogically responsive resources to recognise excellence in achievement amongst students of diverse cultural and socio-economic backgrounds. Māori and Pasifika conceptualisations of collective good offer alternative ways of acknowledging performative outcomes of excellence. Culturally responsive pedagogies that encourage students within collaborative achievement goal structures may add substance to the aim of excellence for all. When excellence is considered within an individualistic discourse of meritocracy, the adage ‘for all’ appears to operate as rhetoric.

A substantial body of literature relating to excellence in achievement considers the role of policy as constitutive of public education, and in the next chapter, I set out to invert this perspective. I will explain the methodology I use to place children’s voices at the fore of my research to investigate personal experiences of excellence for all.
Chapter 4: Methodology and Inquiry

In an unexpected turn of events, the research process undertaken for this study has become as much an object of analysis as the data collected from participants. For this reason, the following chapter assumes a particularly reflexive tone as I endeavour to make sense of my own research experience.

The primary focus of this research was to deepen understanding of how children make sense of excellence in education. Specifically, I aim to investigate how individual students in one New Zealand school construct an identity for themselves as learners when faced with the possible contradictions of excellence in achievement for all.

My personal disposition favours using a relational approach to interacting and working with people. Guba and Lincoln (1994) propose that questions of method are secondary to questions of paradigm guiding the researcher. Paradigm equates to a set of beliefs or a worldview that informs action. Recognising evolution in the field of social science methodology, Lincoln, Lynham and Guba (2011) propose an ‘interbreeding’ of paradigms, whereby theories that may appear to hold irreconcilable differences interweave to provide supporting arguments. I subscribe to such an approach, as exemplified by my discussion of poststructuralism and the theories of Bourdieu in Chapter 2.

This chapter sets out the qualitative research design I followed to investigate students’ experience of excellence for all. Throughout references will be made to the methodological theory underpinning this plan of inquiry. In the first instance research question are introduced, and sub-questions used to elaborate the research goals. A description follows of the research process in three main sections: participants, the plan of inquiry, and data analysis. Whilst I will allude to advantages and limitations of my research design throughout this chapter, I reserve a more thorough evaluation for Chapter 7.

As an alternative approach to writing the methodology chapter, Silverman (2005) suggests a more informal style that he terms the “natural history of my research”
This approach offers the reader some personal insights to the developments of the researcher’s thinking in process, and draws from field notes (Silverman, 2005). I will discuss my investment in ethical reflexivity in the second section of this chapter; a paradigm that supports self-awareness and critique, and that can be served by adapting aspects of the natural history approach to illustrate this research design.

**The research question**

The research question focuses on students’ experiences of constructing identities as learners within educational discourses of excellence. This does not preclude broader socio-cultural factors operating to inform students’ identity work, rather it prioritises the role of school environment. This chapter commences with a brief natural history of how the Excellent Me! project found its focus.

Having initially set out with a different research intent, as described in Chapter 1, I happened upon a discovery that intrigued me. My search of school websites revealed the distinct presence of discourses of excellence in education. Notably, all the intermediate schools and two primary schools in the geographical area that I searched made statements pertaining to excellence in some way. What struck me most was the espoused aim of excellence for all. I wondered how schools envisaged making excellence for all happen, and more importantly, what students thought of this aim?

Before proceeding further, I undertook a brief literature search to gain a sense of academic work in the field of excellence. The literature presented a picture of various dimensions of excellence discourses, yet could be enhanced, I felt, by greater representation of students’ perceptions and understandings. This opportunity within the field contributed to narrowing the research question from the enormity of excellence for all, to focusing on students’ perceptions. Generating sub-questions drew upon poststructural theoretical ideas to explore what might contribute to an overall sense of how students encounter and engage with excellence for all. Table 1 sets out the overarching research question and links the sub-questions to theoretical ideas.
Table 1

**Linking the research questions to theoretical ideas.**

How do individual students in one New Zealand school construct a subject position for themselves as learners within the potentially oxymoronic discourse of excellence in achievement for all?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Sub-questions:</th>
<th>Theoretical Ideas</th>
<th>Methodology (Applied throughout the research)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Which discourses do students apply to themselves in school?</strong></td>
<td>Identities/subjectivation - the ongoing project</td>
<td>Visual methodology - using visual approaches with children</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Critical social theory - youth studies and dominant discourses available to children</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Counter-discourses or those rejected</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Power/knowledge - making sense of what counts as learning</td>
<td>Discourses analysis</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>How do students identify affirmation at school?</strong></td>
<td>Agency - transforming, transcending subjectivation</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Cultural capital - negotiating normative expectations of learning and achievement</td>
<td>Situated voice</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>How do learners make sense of excellence?</strong></td>
<td>Critical social theory - youth studies and dominant discourses available to children</td>
<td>Ethical reflexivity</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Cultural capital - negotiating normative expectations of learning and achievement</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Which discourses do teachers and school leaders draw upon in their endeavours towards excellence in achievement for all?</strong></td>
<td>Question removed</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
While Table 1 is simplistic, the exercise was useful for contemplating cohesion throughout the research process. As indicated in Table 1, I originally included a sub-question addressing teachers’ endeavours, the removal of which will be explained in the later section on Participants. The ethical framework underpinning the research design and process is unpacked in the next section.

**Ethical reflexivity and research**

Research widely asserts that the researcher engages in evaluative judgements throughout the research process. Gewirtz and Cribb (2006) suggest researchers invariably apply value to what counts as the research question, researcher conduct, and research outcome. Advocating a process in social research they term ethical reflexivity, Gewirtz and Cribb propose researchers find ways of ‘self-consciously’ addressing rigour in description, explanation, and values. Analysis of data, for example, presents the analyst with a choice of where to place an emphasis, a choice, which by implication is political (Gewirtz & Cribb, 2006). Ethical reflexivity in this regard, demands researcher’s focus on the treatment of evaluation and political judgement within research, and the articulation of value assumptions. This position is not without contestation.

Abraham (2008) attributes the term political/ethical reflexivity to Gewirtz and Cribb’s (2006) emphasis on political values. He argues that a lack of clarity in Gewirtz and Cribb’s recommendations renders the routine application of political/ethical reflexivity as impractical and inefficient. Abraham (2008) agrees, however, that the extent to which researchers deploy political/ethical reflexivity is a matter of individual judgement.

Within the field of research with children, reflexivity acknowledges adults and children are heterogeneous groups, actively engaging in their own synthesising of culture, structure and agency (Davis, Watson & Cunningham-Burley, 2006). Christensen and Prout (2002) advise that accepting children as competent social actors presents a more complex research field, with greater scope for ethical dilemmas and new responsibilities for researchers. The basis for reflexivity, therefore, requires starting from a position of ‘ethical symmetry’ (Christensen & Prout, 2002). Discussing
ethnographic methodology, Davis et al. (2006) advocate that adopting a reflexive position enables “cultural meanings to be elucidated from the roles, tools and ethical stances employed during . . . the research process” (p. 237). The flexibility inferred by Davis et al., resonates with the reflexive position inherent in poststructural theory.

The analysis process adopted for this research project accepts that the researcher constructs theory from the data (Richards, 2009), a position that demands that I maintain the integrity of the data and my responses to it. A poststructural frame provides guidance, recognising that ethical responsibility in the relational exchange of an interview and subsequent analytic process takes on a reciprocal form (Davies, 2010). Both the researcher and participant are mutually dependent in the production of acceptable identities. Davies (2006) reflects that the recognisability of the researcher and the subject also remains mutually vulnerable, since both are implicated in the production of the other. Both the researcher and the participant create viable subject positions for one another, which are likely to change throughout the research process.

This process of subjectivation leads to what Davies (2006) calls ‘uncomfortable’ reflexivity; uncomfortable because the researcher subject position is dynamic, and at times, unfamiliar. Ethical reflexivity in this sense demands recognition of the unfamiliar within myself to facilitate recognising the unknown in the student participants. Maintaining ethical reflexivity involves ongoing critical self-analysis and scrutiny of the research process, which moves beyond a simple form of self-confession (Davies, 2006). Instead, Davies proposes that ethics of reflexivity are sustained by an acceptance that differences between researcher and participant are not reducible to normative roles and practices. Ethical reflexivity recognises that while differential power relations operate between researcher and subject, the research participant has agentic capacity to resist or respond to the research process. Irrespective of the paradigm, I recognise consistencies within definitions of reflexivity to substantiate the approach as ethical, credible and appropriate to research with children. The following section addresses the actions undertaken to recruit first a school, and then child participants.
Participants

To recruit a school I adopted a purposive selection process based on set criteria (Silverman, 2005). My search of school websites demonstrated that many intermediate schools invest in notions of excellence, thus narrowing the population to a specific age band of students. Intermediates are publically funded schools, and my interest lay in how students and schools in the public sector engage with discourses of excellence. Private schools have a long tradition of aiming for excellence in achievement, and as discussed in Chapter 3, tend to market themselves on this basis (Allan, 2010; Meadmore & Meadmore, 2004). Choosing excellence currently marks some public schools as different to the majority.

I initiated contact with the principal of each school, identified through my online search, by letter (Appendix A). Within the timeframe of completing a Masters study, in-depth data from one site seemed a manageable task. I followed up the letters of introduction with a telephone call to each school. During a second call to each school, one principal expressed an interest.

The acceptance of an invitation to participate poses a dilemma for the researcher seeking only one site of inquiry. School principals and teachers are extremely busy; students too manage numerous commitments during and after school. When one school agreed, I felt it was inappropriate to ask a second school to be a ‘reserve’ choice. Having only one site of inquiry, however, can potentially place a research project at the mercy of circumstance, and schools are multi-functioning organisations susceptible to various demands and contingencies. I will explore this vulnerability more thoroughly in Chapter 7.

I found the principal’s response very encouraging, yet full agreement to participate required approval from the BOT. The principal presented copies of the Information Sheets (Appendix B) to the board, and the subsequent response was affirmative.
The research field - Kanuka Intermediate School

Kanuka Intermediate School\(^6\) provided the context for my examination of how excellence in achievement for all was operating in one New Zealand school. I described the particularities of the intermediate education system in Chapter 1, the focus here relates to the individual site, and serves to build an understanding of the school context. All school-generated material referenced as data derives from the public domain. Challenges to the research timetable prompted a logistical response involving a decision not to interview leadership and teaching staff, hence my reason for using publically available data. I sourced public data from Kanuka Intermediate’s website and from the Education Review Office (ERO).

In common with all intermediates, Kanuka Intermediate School caters for students in years 7 and 8, and is located in a South Island urban area. According to the most recent ERO report, the school has a near-even gender composition and a roll of over 200 students, of whom one quarter identify as Māori or Pasifika (www.ero.govt.nz, 2012).\(^7\) The school serves a diverse community and has a decile rating of 6, which, according to the Ministry of Education’s (2013) explanation of decile ranking, suggests socio-economic diversity in the local community too.

In materials available online, Kanuka Intermediate School declares a commitment to providing excellence in educational experience, and wide-ranging opportunities towards achieving personal excellence. Kanuka Intermediate takes a holistic view of the child, as illustrated in its mission statement addressing student achievement, interest and confidence. The school recognises the quality learning foundations students have achieved at their contributing schools, and aims to build on these by providing targeted learning opportunities. It is clear that provision of opportunities and enabling students’ choices to engage in challenging and interesting learning take prominence in publicly available materials.

---

\(^6\) In order to maintain the anonymity of the research setting for this project, I will refer to school materials available in the public domain by using Kanuka Intermediate School as a code name.

\(^7\) The date in this citation refers to the year I retrieved the information from the ERO website.
Choices in learning feature amongst the areas of strength recognised by ERO at Kanuka Intermediate, where the school endeavours to match students’ learning to fit their interests (www.ero.govt.nz, 2012). The latest ERO report outlines strategies to individualise learning employed by the school. According to testimonies printed in the school information brochure, parents recognise and value opportunities made available to their children through the school’s ethos and learning programmes. The school brochure does not include testimonies from students, underlying the significance of providing a research platform for students’ reflection on their learning environment and experience.

**Recruiting the student participants**

My original research design assumed a recruitment process inclusive of diverse student groups since I was keen to hear wide-ranging experiences of learning within discourses of excellence. As stipulated in my university ethics application, I intended to seek up to eight students between the ages of 10 and 13 years with no exclusion criteria. I also indicated that participation in the project should be voluntary rather than co-opted. My preference for voluntary participation was two-fold; the ethical considerations of adult/child asymmetric power relations, and my concern to invite diversity of student voices. The recruitment process that eventuated was a combination of the principal’s initial selection followed by consent on behalf of those students who chose to participate. A discussion follows of the process used to gain assent from the students and informed consent from their parents/carers, and includes a brief description of the participants.

**Assent and informed consent**

As part of the procedural ethics process (Guillemín & Gillam, 2004), I sought to gain assent from the children willing to participate in my research project. For children to be in a position to give assent, Phelan and Kinsella (2013) suggest they should be aware of the following questions (amongst others): Why am I here? What is the research about? What will happen during the research, and to my input specifically? Can I ask questions, and will my questions be answered? Do I have to do this? Most importantly of all for young people to assent, they need reassurance they will not in any way be disadvantaged should they choose to cease participation. Phelan and Kinsella
propose that researcher mindfulness of such questions goes some way to upholding the dignity of child participants.

For my first visit to the school, the principal had selectively gathered a group of 13 students to meet me, a number of whom, the principal explained, were part of an extension group. Valentine (1999) reflects that within institutions such as schools, structures of compliance can operate to coerce students (and teachers) to consent to research participation. Taking part in research may offer educational value to a school. In this case, the principal expressed a school commitment to research, and the opportunities participation might afford students’ learning (Field Notes, 22/06/2012). So while the principal’s selection of a group deviated from my original plan for an ability-inclusive approach to recruitment, I believe those initial interactions were not entirely detrimental to students giving assent to participate. Of the 13 students, five expressed an interest to participate. Had the students felt coerced, I might have anticipated this number to be greater. At one stage, the principal expressed concern at the low number of participants for my research, but no further students volunteered. Indeed, one participant later withdrew.

To facilitate the process of giving assent, I addressed the considerations advocated by Phelan and Kinsella (2013), and endeavoured to avoid the impression of being too teacher-like. Clearly, there are conventional boundaries within teacher-student relations, and differential power. Since I have a teaching background, my hope was to avoid embodiment of teacher-like behaviours that might create relational constraints from the offset (Phelan & Kinsella, 2013). I concluded by distributing Information Sheets and Consent Forms, both for students and to pass on to parents/carers (Appendix B).

The language used in both sets of Information Sheets and Consent Forms posed an ethical dilemma. Maintaining the dignity and safety of the project’s participants, and at this point their parents/carers, requires ongoing reflexivity (Jenks, 2006; Phelan & Kinsella, 2013). The task of writing both demanded keeping information concise, avoiding jargon, using age-appropriate language, and meeting the demands of the University’s ethics procedures. These are necessary considerations of course, however, the dilemma I encountered involved using language that presumed competence of two
different audiences. The sheets intended to facilitate informed consent from adults were relatively straightforward in comparison to those for children.

Asking my peers to review the sheets and forms furnished me with conflicting advice, some of which was very useful, and some I felt underestimated the literacy skills of students of intermediate school age. Even amongst this small group of postgraduates studying at one university, we exhibited varying perceptions of the difference between adults and children, and amongst children themselves (Christensen & James, 2006). This situation demonstrates the challenge in setting aside assumptions regarding children. Jenks’s (2006) suggests problematising what we already know about children throughout the research process by maintaining a personal commitment to reflexivity.

Within three days, five students had returned their parents’ informed consent forms and formalised their own assent. Yet as Phelan and Kinsella (2013) note, the assent process requires constant revisiting. I was asked by the principal to provide the students with a guide, so that they might make a start on their activity. I created a pamphlet outlining the first research activity, and reiterated students’ options to withdraw without consequence (see Appendix C). After a prompt and promising start, difficulties arose with gaining access to school to further my research in person.

**The challenges of delays**

As I noted previously in the section titled *Participants*, principals follow demanding schedules with a substantial amount of their time engaged both on and off site. Such was the situation at Kanuka Intermediate, which meant that having the principal as the main point of contact was particularly challenging in terms of maintaining communication. For some months, I was unable to secure dates to meet up with students and had no other appointed staff member to contact. Since my efforts to arrange a meeting with students proved unproductive, my supervisor became involved and facilitated my returning to the school. I will reflect on the implications of this experience for my own development as a researcher in Chapter 7.

When I revisited the school almost three months later, one student informed me of his decision to withdraw. I believe the delay between the early meeting with students
and the subsequent visit is notable, and reinforces for me the importance of developing and maintaining relationships with research participants. The students who remained part of the research inform the next section.

**The four student participants**

Initially, two girls and three boys assented to take part; after one student withdrew four remained in the project. Participant numbers constituted a gender balance within the group, although gender was not the main feature of the research. One student was in Year 7 and three were in Year 8; all students were members of an extension group and consequently had some familiarity with each other. The two girls had a prior friendship. Three students described having New Zealand/European heritage, and one student had recently emigrated from an Asian country. The students chose their own code names: Athena, Josh, Hoffman and Qwerty. Throughout the findings chapters, however, I will present quotations as anonymous since I interpret and present data that I consider to be highly personal to the participants involved. To maintain confidentiality, I have rendered the data unidentifiable to any one participant by attributing a number to each student. Each number remains consistent throughout the thesis.

**Teachers and leadership team participants**

For the logistical reason of time delays in the research process, I opted out of seeking interviews with teachers and a member of the leadership team as originally planned. In doing so, I acknowledge I have restricted my investigation of pedagogical practices that contribute to the learning environment of excellence in achievement for all. My compromise was to use materials produced by the school or from official sources, notably ERO, in the public domain. This decision had the potential to remove or substantially reduce the place for the school’s voice in the research findings, but also provided the opportunity to enable students’ voices in ways that appear under-represented in the field of excellence.

While I had originally suggested up to eight student participants in this study, I was extremely happy to receive four affirmative responses, and could rationalise having no first-hand adult representation. Having committed to privileging student voices, my priority was making those voices heard. I felt relatively confident that the research activities and tools could facilitate multi-layered communication between the students
and myself (Christensen & James, 2006). The plan of inquiry elaborates on the operational aspects of my research design.

The plan of inquiry

Thomson (2013) advocates using the term ‘constructing data’ to describe the process of interaction and reciprocity that occurs between researcher and participant in qualitative research. Constructing data reflects the social constructivist paradigm of what counts as knowledge, but also relies on the data being accepted as trustworthy and reliable. Ethical reflexivity serves to make clear my own values and decision-making processes throughout the research. In addition, an established field of researching with child provides rigorous ethics.

The ethics of researching with children

I locate the methodology of this project within an approach that challenges traditional assumptions of adult/child distinctions (Christensen & James, 2006). Normative and hierarchical inter-generational discourses constitute the child and the adult within bounded relations of power. Historical analysis indicates these relations are sustained within ‘Western’ cultures (Jenks, 2006). Yet hierarchical relations and the capacity for children to negotiate power can manifest in ways that differ within diverse cultural settings (see for example, Rameka, 2011, for contemporary Māori constructs of the child).

Positioning children within research relations demands awareness of the asymmetrical power relations between researchers and younger participants. In an earlier section, I stated my commitment to recognising children’s voices. Thomson (2008) describes how the notion of voice encapsulates children’s capacity to speak and their right to do so. Indeed, Roberts (2006) reflects on social research practice that is well rehearsed in listening to children, but not hearing them. Of particular consideration is the situatedness of voice. The situated voice demonstrates an acceptance that the representations communicated by my research participants reflect not a homogenised voice of children per se, rather nuanced voices shaped by a certain set of conditions. Simply adopting child-centred approaches to research may not be a sufficient response without an acceptance of the heterogeneity of child participants. The danger of generic
‘child-centred’ approaches is the potential to stray into biologically deterministic assumptions of the child subject and child development.

Questioning whether it is possible for an adult researcher to create equal power relations with child participants, Jenks (2006) advises recognising “the grounds of difference” (p. 87), and acknowledging the differential histories of relational power that adults and children bring. Drawing upon reflexivity may support a researcher in the precarious act of recognising rather than assuming differences.

Building on the ethics of working with children and facilitating symmetry in research relationships, I explored research activities that might involve participatory roles for the students in the research design or in creative modes of communication (Loveridge, 2010; Thomson, 2008; Weller, 2012). Visual methods offer potential to displace the dominant role of the researcher, and re-position roles as more collaborative. The research activities in this project shared the intent to empower children to express themselves in flexible ways both as individuals and as a group, and to co-construct data to investigate the research question. Alongside visual methodology, I opted to use semi-structured interviews and a student focus group activity. The following section develops the theoretical and ethical arguments for the use of visual methodology, and outlines my approach to interviewing.

The visual

Visual approaches to qualitative research build on the interest many children show in working with visual tools, thus furnishing an approach that may already have some meaning to the participants (Bragg & Buckingham, 2008; Christensen & James, 2006). Whilst images share some similarities with other texts, images have the capacity to communicate in different ways that also reflect diverse cultural histories (Thomson, 2008). In this respect, visual research approaches may resonate with children’s cultures, such as doodling or graphics, and facilitate access to a wider range of voices than interviews alone (Bragg & Buckingham, 2008; Christensen & James, 2006).

The research activities

Inspired by the scrapbooks used by Bragg and Buckingham (2008) and the ‘anti-CV’ developed by Higgins, Nairn and Sligo (2009), I devised research activities...
intended fundamentally as elicitation tools. Drawing on my previous experience as an intermediate teacher, the activities were intended to be sufficiently open to allow individuals to choose their own approach.

Negotiating methodology in the field of identity is not necessarily exclusive to working with children, but does demand attention (Higgins et al., 2009). Individual interviews between children and researchers can be experienced as intimidating for the participant or provide limited access to emotional and symbolic aspects of participants' lives (Bragg & Buckingham, 2008; Thomson, 2008). Group interviews have the potential to be dominated by interpersonal dynamics (Bragg & Buckingham, 2008; Nairn, Munro, & Smith, 2005). Possible solutions lie in providing opportunities where young people's creative production might enable identity work and critical reflection (Bragg & Buckingham, 2008; Higgins et al, 2009). My response was to instigate identity portfolios.

**Individual portfolios**

In the first instance, I termed the activity the identity portfolio. Portfolios do not demand highly developed literacy skills and can be readily adapted to accommodate each child’s preferred style of construction. An added advantage is that production need not be onerous. The principal had previously suggested that a number of students enjoyed using online presentation tools, sliderocket\(^8\) being a particular platform mentioned, so I added this to the repertoire of choices. When I met with the students, the term ‘identity portfolio’ did not seem to resonate. Acknowledging the significance of establishing a culture of communication with children in the research setting (Christensen & James, 2006), I needed to attend to the language I was using. Consequently, I changed the name of the activity to the *All About Me!* presentation, which included three different ideas for students to consider: their identity, their learning, and their perceptions of what achievement means at their school (Appendix C).

---

\(^8\) Sliderocket (www.sliderocket.com) is an example of a Web 2.0 tool (also termed E-tool) allowing users a participatory role online. Some students at Kanuka Intermediate appear to utilise Web 2.0 tools on the school’s network.
The addition of a presentation option, which was being used in school at the time, and my own choice of language might inadvertently have changed the format of the activity. The term *presentation* carries certain visual conventions, particularly when aligned to Web 2.0 and electronic publishing tools. Subsequently, all four participants endeavoured to use presentation tools, with varying degrees of success. The students’ use of online publishing platforms\(^9\) as a methodological tool has provided unanticipated layers of data. Worthy of further consideration at this point are the steps I have taken to avoid information that identifies individuals being included in the research.

I had talked with the students regarding protecting their confidentiality and anonymity, and that of any third parties represented in the presentations. I reiterated this in the investigation brief (Appendix C). The principal too advised students regarding online security at our meeting (Field Notes, 22/06/2012). Matters of anonymity and confidentiality, however, demand more nuanced consideration when students engage in a Web 2.0 platform. The two students, who managed to create and save their presentations online, did so under their own names.\(^{10}\) They used existing accounts that contained additional items of schoolwork, consequently challenging the principle of confidentiality for people included in their presentations, and anonymity for themselves since the postings identified their names.

One student was quite clear that she had gained permission from her family members to use their photographs. A second student also used a Web 2.0 tool, but uploaded generic photographs representative of her family and pets. Both students held the impression their work was in the public domain. Later, I found neither of the two presentations in the public domain (although other schoolwork was). A third student used PowerPoint and inserted generic graphics, thereby assuring confidentiality of his work and remaining anonymous. The fourth student had no presentation to share.

---

\(^9\) One student used prezie (http://prezi.com/); one used sliderocket (http://www.sliderocket.com/), and a third student tried unsuccessfully with both.

\(^{10}\) Both students told me this while waiting to upload their presentations, and to enable me to search the platforms later. Informally, we discussed using their real names. Neither student appeared to perceive using their real names as a risk.
Having encountered too many technical difficulties using Web 2.0 tools he gave up; a consideration worth bearing in mind for future research design. Nonetheless, he was willing to discuss how he saw himself in an interview.

In terms of the research activities, the two students who created online identity portfolios managed their identity work within platform privacy settings. What was not evident to me was whether they did so intentionally or accidentally. Clearly, there are ethical considerations emerging both for research and school use of online participatory technologies that need more rigorous appraisal. Recent studies consider the disparity between school designated boundary structures involving the use of Web 2.0 technologies, and learners’ circumvention of such structures (Clark, Logan, Luckin, Mee & Oliver, 2009; Muñoz & Towner, 2011). Clark et al. (2009) outline the need for teachers, learners, and institutions to develop shared strategies and understandings around use in schools. Muñoz and Towner (2011) go further; the management of online identities represents one of a repertoire of ‘new literacies’ for the 21st century.

The presentations, as they actualised, may have presented a potential breach of ethics. Guillemin and Gillam’s (2004) discussion of the ethical tension between subject of and participant in research suggests an alternative reading. Guillemin and Gillam argue that providing the opportunities for subjects to take up the goals of the research as their own, transforms their role to that of participating in research. I expand on this as personal learning in the final chapter. A similar opportunity occurred with the second visual tool.

**Mapping the journey to excellence**

The second visual tool involved the students devising a route map to excellence. Route maps serve the purpose of directing the user and the reader from a start to an end point, operating within a particular sense of space. Emmison and Smith (2000) explain how the destination is core to a route map’s construction and organisation since the map may have multiple starting points. Psathas (1979) describes how not all routes and areas are shown on maps, thus maps simultaneously represent the seen and the unseen. I felt these interpretations of the purpose and context of maps could be used as a research tool. Indeed, the construction and subsequent sense making of a map appeared to offer a
multi-dimensional opportunity to investigate how students encounter a learning journey. The student participants appeared not to share this view, instead they agreed upon *The Idiots [sic] Guide to Excellence at our School!*

![Image of the front cover of 'The Idiots [sic] Guide to Excellence' (student 2)](image)

*Figure 1: The front cover of 'The Idiots [sic] Guide to Excellence' (student 2)*

Perhaps in recognition of the initial suggestion of a route map, student 2 has drawn a car travelling along an arduous, if not attractive, road to illustrate the Guide to Excellence. Acknowledging students’ agency and participation within the research process demands commitment to reflexivity, and such situations test a researcher’s espoused values.
Adapting to the students’ suggestion of a guidebook for achieving excellence offered insight as to how learners engage with and make sense of excellence for all. Both the original and the modified design required students to draw upon practices and discourses reiterated within the school and broader socio-cultural contexts. If excellence holds “wide-spread support” (NZC, 2007, p. 10), the implication is that there may be a series of common sense practices that will lead to its achievement. In terms of eliciting data for interviews and the focus group activity, the format most relevant and favoured by students would likely entail greater levels of participation and discussion (Christensen & James, 2006).

**Semi-structured interviews and focus groups**

In-depth interviews enable access to the meanings people make of their experiences and social worlds by providing a platform for interaction and exploration (Miller & Glassner, 2011). Three students shared their presentations, during which I asked questions generally related to what they presented (Appendix D). The sessions were deliberately unstructured to facilitate building rapport and confidence in the research setting. My intent was to establish foundations for more developed discussion during the individual semi-structured interviews. In this regard, the content of the presentations influenced the direction each interview took (Higgins et al., 2009). Informally, I tested information offered by the participants by way of inviting participants’ responses to my summarising of information, or by reiterating questions using the participants’ own language (Lincoln & Guba, 1986). Post-interview, my offer to provide transcripts for checking was taken up by two students. The two other students declined, and appeared content to move on from the project (Field Notes, 23/11/2012).

I used an unstructured approach for the focus group activity where students created their guidebook to excellence, being led, for the most part, by the students’ conversation. These students had some familiarity with each other, likely from their participation in the extension group, and due to the school being relatively small. This familiarity may have facilitated group dynamics more readily between the participants than in situations where participants are initially unknown to one another. I digitally recorded all conversations with student assent, and transcribed each recording.
Challenges with meeting participants resulted in a deviation from the original research design, but by no means left me with a dearth of material from which to derive a sense of students’ experiences of excellence. An explanation follows of the method and processes I applied to analyse student interview data, presentations, field notes, and materials in the public domain that related to Kanuka Intermediate School.

**Data analysis**

I adopted a general inductive approach to data analysis in this project, which shares strategies from a range of qualitative analysis procedures (Thomas, 2006). Principally, Thomas describes a rigorous process of analysis drawing upon detailed readings and interpretations of raw data to derive concepts, themes, or a model. Furthermore, the approach allows for unanticipated theories and interpretations to emerge from the data. I added discourse analysis to the general analysis framework summarised by Thomas (2006). Thomas himself identifies differences between discourse analysis and a general inductive approach, most notably in terms of poststructuralists’ acceptance of multiple meaning in text, talk, and social practices. I felt the systematic and inductive nature of the analysis framework, however, facilitated the application of discourse analysis by way of detailed readings, thematic induction, and provision for flexible interpretations.

What follows are the steps Thomas outlines as inductive analysis. I will also make clear my strategies for discarding certain data. These steps support transparency and rigour in the data analysis process and contribute to the trustworthiness of this particular qualitative project (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). The final section offers consideration of any additional steps taken to support trustworthiness.

**Preparation of data**

I transcribed all interviews and completed checks for accuracy, utilising the same format for the transcripts to enable consistency. I felt the principles of noting interactional structures of speech could support analysis after the event. My preparation took the form of annotating transcripts for relations between adjacent utterances, often signalled by volume changes, pauses, emphasis, and whether the content of the conversation may have provoked changes in utterances (Peräkylä & Ruusuvuori, 2011).
I then submitted each audio recording to a contact summary form (see Appendix E), cross-referencing with other field notes related to the focus group and presentation. This form served as a means of reflecting on the contact as an event in its entirety (Miles & Huberman, 1994), and constitutes one example of field notes.

**Close reading of text and creating themes**

I read each text repeatedly to gain familiarity with the data and consider possible meanings. The emergent themes generally related to, or were resonant of dominant and localised educational discourses derived from the students’ speech. For example, all students described their commitments to a number of varied activities. One student, however, appeared focused on a perceived lack of success in sport, despite his numerous other accomplishments. The students’ differing perspectives and comments connected with the all-rounder subject position, discussed in Chapter 3. At this stage, I began to identify the following emergent themes: self as a learner; contradictions in the understanding of excellence; differential valuing of achievements; engaging with opportunities; the construct of an all-rounder student; the sport-intellectual dichotomy, trying one’s best, but not achieving excellence, and peer groups and excellence.

**Overlapping themes and unrelated data**

Where appropriate, transcript extracts of speech appeared under several themes. The process of overlapping inductive analysis offers insights as to how contingent factors might operate to privilege certain views or opinions, while rendering other factors apparently irrelevant. I considered the all-rounder student constitutive of several themes: how students saw themselves, taking and making opportunities, and differential valuing of achievements. A contingent factor explaining the emergence of an all-rounder student construct, in this instance, may have been that all participants identified as high achieving students. The relevance of all-rounder identities might have resonated differently with an alternative participant group composition. The process of constructing themes from particular aspects of data, however, renders other elements of data as unrelated to the themes.

As Thomas (2006) notes, an inductive analysis of data may leave a significant amount of the text unused. I found this situation with my data. Some aspects of the conversations bore little or no relevance to students’ identities as learners or excellence
for all, the main themes of analysis. I propose the value of some elements of conversation lie in their function of making a somewhat artificial interview situation seem a little more fluent. This relational component of conversation recognises the importance of providing space to talk.

**Continuing revision of the thematic system.**

The final step of inductive analysis demonstrates the rigour of repeatedly revisiting data to search for sub-themes, contradictions, or new insights. This process served to identify those identities that seemed to hold the greatest discursive relevance to students, as well as highlighting individual differences. A second specific tool applied at this stage was the search for rhetorical moves. While I claim no expertise in the method, I found this search particularly useful for identifying contradictions.

**Rhetoric, the persuasive move**

Rhetoric as a discursive practice provides a frame within which to examine how constructs of excellence for all might achieve the status of an educational truth (Gillies, 2007). The discursive employment of rhetoric by a speaker calls upon techniques that suggest argument or persuasion, consequently rhetoric plays a key role in expressing opinions or justification (Billig, 2001).

Underscoring the significance of contingency and context, rhetorical utterances carry meaning in relation to other utterances (Billig, 2001; Wetherell & Potter, 1992). In conversation, rhetoric acts as a resource in both constructing and making sense of discursive meaning (Billig, 2001; Wetherell & Potter, 1992). Exposing rhetorical moves in the analysis of talk may reveal fragility in discursive constructs.

Billig (2001) contends that references to common sense discourses pose a dilemma for the speaker, who is managing a response while trying to be read as unbiased, or not acting in self-interest. Such negotiations are significant in relation to the poststructural lens adopted for this thesis. An analysis of how the students juxtaposed seemingly contradictory positionings could illustrate the processes by which excellence for all sustains a common sense status. The emergence of contradictions suggests an undermining of the justification for excellence, yet the discourse of excellence remains generally unquestioned.
Constructing my findings

The final stage of inductive analysis entails the representation of findings, and requires re-evaluation of the analysis process to extract those quotes most illustrative of a theme. At this point, I revised my original themes to produce the final seven themes: constructing an understanding of excellence; taking and making opportunities; quantifying and recognising excellence; the can-do student; multi-accomplishment and educational capital; family and culture, and the emotional labour of excellence. As inductive analysis permits, there is some overlap between these themes. Engaging with opportunities, for example, appeared to carry significance for students in multiple ways that I will discuss more fully in Chapters 5 and 6. In contrast, having initially identified contradictions in understandings of excellence as a separate theme, I subsequently found contradictions emerging within each of the themes. Rather than dealing with contradictions discretely, I decided to provide alternative constructs within the analysis of each theme.

In the same way that the constructed accounts and ideas communicated to me relate to a certain group of students in one New Zealand school, the data is also representative of this particular group of students meeting with me. In the next section, I will examine the inquiry process in terms of trustworthiness (Lincoln & Guba, 1986).

Trustworthiness

In response to the ontological and epistemological debates that raged between quantitative and qualitative scholars, Lincoln and Guba (1986) rejected the imposition of reliability and validity concepts for qualitative research, instead suggesting the notion of trustworthiness. The debate of whether trustworthiness equals validity remains unresolved for some researchers, but has diminished significantly with many scholars in the qualitative field seeking rigour in their research using other strategies (Morse, Barrett, Mayan, Olson & Spiers, 2008).

Making specific mention of rigour in my research process at the end of the methodology chapter, I am possibly guilty of “relegating rigor to one section of a post hoc reflection” (Morse et al., 2008, p. 19). I counter this caution by returning to ethical reflexivity, explicitly addressed in this and Chapter 7, and embedded in the two findings
Ethical reflexivity acts a strategy that constantly calls into question my responsibilities as a researcher, seeking justification for my actions, and seems appropriate to use for rigorous evaluation at the end of the thesis.

**Summary**

In this chapter, I have endeavoured to demonstrate the implementation of rigorous standards throughout the inquiry process. I have reflected on the theoretical underpinnings of the general inductive and poststructural methodology selected to drive my inquiry into excellence for all, and how these two approaches can work in tandem to analyse and thematically organise data. Led by a personal commitment to ethical reflexivity, I have begun to evaluate how implementing values, such as empowering children in the research process, can challenge or create tensions with ethical procedures. The use of Web 2.0 tools, for example, illustrated how supporting the students’ adaptation of the research process to a format meaningful to them, presented the potential for breaching their confidentiality by placing personal information in the public domain. The following two chapters discuss my findings constructed from the analysis, and produced under the seven thematic headings introduced in an earlier section. In the first of the findings chapters, I examine the role school plays in students’ crafting of identities.
Chapter 5: Excellence in School

When schools adopt excellence as a value to be nurtured amongst their student body and as the aim of achievement, the production of excellence becomes a shared enterprise involving students, teachers and school leaders, their families, and the wider community. It is within this shared enterprise of excellence that students negotiate their identities as learners, as well as their learning and achievement. The task of performing within multiple educational discourses could be read as overwhelmingly asymmetrical, with the odds of students finding their ‘own way’ stacked against them. For example, in Chapter 3, I discussed the effect of global economic imperatives on national educational policies, indirectly positioning students’ identity work in a substantially broader context. Such a view, however, dismisses the agentic capacity of students to make sense of their identities, and to engage with the discursive constructs to which they are subjected.

The following discussion explores the concept of excellence for all primarily, though not exclusively, from the perspectives of students whose voices were given a platform via interviews and observations. In addition, I will draw upon evidence and information from the wider public domain, making reference to materials that Kanuka Intermediate publishes on its website, findings from an educational review, and more generally, considerations of excellence from other intermediate school websites.\(^\text{11}\) Three main analytic themes constitute the discussion of excellence in this chapter. Constructing an understanding of excellence explores the definitions offered by students, and identifies the discursive resources that may contribute to their sense of achieving excellence in an educational context. Taking and making the most of opportunities investigates a distinct characteristic of education for emerging adolescents; that of choice and getting involved in diverse opportunities. Finally, quantifying and recognising excellence considers the effects of institutional practices on students’ understanding and recognition of excellence, and demonstrates how students

\(^{\text{11}}\) To protect the anonymity of any school source of data, I will paraphrase all information discussed in the public domain.
interact with the rhetoric of excellence for all. Collectively, the three analytic themes will establish a frame to discuss how the students in this study made sense of their identities as learners.

**Constructing an understanding of excellence**

The *New Zealand Curriculum* (2007) has emphasised the place of excellence within public education by locating excellence as a key value. Yet despite government endeavours to establish excellence as discursively commonplace, the ongoing production of excellence in education is complicated by localised interpretations.

**Personal excellence**

Excellence is embraced by a number of intermediate schools across the country; many, like Kanuka Intermediate, adopt the notion of personal excellence ([www.educationcounts.govt.nz](http://www.educationcounts.govt.nz), 2012). Students at Kanuka Intermediate commence their learning trajectory within an environment clearly focused on personal excellence. The school website and information brochure promote the school’s endeavours to ensure that all students achieve personal excellence. As mentioned in Chapter 4, parents testify to actions the school has taken that have encouraged their children to aspire to excellence across many aspects of their learning and personal development. The education that students receive at Kanuka Intermediate appears highly regarded by leaders of local high schools, whose remarks in the brochure highlight the willingness of Kanuka Intermediate students to engage in learning. Indeed, two of the five principals cited in the brochure use “excellent” to describe either the work of Kanuka Intermediate in preparing its students, or the conduct of the students themselves.

In terms of educational provision, the latest review of the school by ERO\(^\text{13}\) identifies a number of teaching and learning strategies that effectively impact on student

---

12 Based on my analysis of school websites, it should be noted that not all primary and intermediate schools choose to espouse excellence ([www.educationcounts.govt.nz](http://www.educationcounts.govt.nz), 2012).

13 While the latest ERO review is available from ERO and the school’s website, the publishing date of this report is omitted to maintain anonymity. Instead, the date of 2012 refers to when the document was retrieved from ERO.
confidence and attainment (www.ero.govt.nz, 2012). Having made the commitment to personal excellence and excellence of educational experience for its students, Kanuka Intermediate appears to exercise a range of pedagogical practices intent on fostering these aims.

When personal excellence features so prominently as part of a school’s ethos, it seems fair to assume that students will begin to develop an awareness of how excellence functions from the offset, and modify their understandings as they move through the school. Yet there is a sense of provisionality attached to the notion of excellence. The brevity of the two-year intermediate school experience, and the potential for differences in culture and teaching from class to class may act to undermine the emphasis of excellence for all. The students participating in this project, nevertheless, seemed comfortable speaking about excellence. That the concept is abstract and generally unquantifiable appeared to be no hurdle to their conversing on various understandings of excellence, nor indeed on the contradictions and tensions that emerged.

Of the four discourses of excellence discussed in Chapter 3, the students readily engaged with two: excellence as elite achievement, and excellence as individual potential. This first quote articulates an understanding of excellence that was shared by all students in the group: “You stand out to achieve excellence and everybody acknowledges that you’ve done something really well…[but] it could be personal. Personal excellence” (4). The dichotomy between the two definitions of excellence, exceptional performances that “stand out” and “personal excellence” does not at first appear to trouble members of the group. From an early stage in the focus group activity, the students acknowledged and worked with the difference. The use of the term “personal excellence” reiterates the phrasing used by a number of intermediate schools, and reflects that this student has engaged with Kanuka Intermediate’s ethos. The ease of use of the term excellence suggests that excellence occupies a position of discursive normativity at the school.

All four students subsequently picked up the thread of the conversation, and expanded upon the difference between outstanding excellence and personal excellence, as reflected by the following explanation: “You’ve gotta be way above everyone else and that would be excellent or you could get a lot better than you had, and that would be
excellence as well” (2). Once again an exceptional form of excellence appears to reside without contradiction alongside a more democratised, self-improvement discourse in the student’s understandings.

The idea of each student continually improving reflects an aspect of Kanuka Intermediate’s ethos that, according to the information brochure, challenges students to achieve personal excellence. The four students’ engagement with localised discourses of excellence may demonstrate a certain investment with learning and attainment. All four students were members of an extension group, and, as will be discussed Chapter 6, described high levels of motivation and commitment to their education. At this point in the conversation excellence appears as a generic yet malleable concept, devoid of any type of norm-referenced measure or quantitative value, and unaligned to particular curriculum areas or dispositions.

Under such circumstances, defining personal excellence is likely to be a subjective task, as the following comment indicates: “There’s your personal sense of achievement” (1). Personalising achievement not only individualises excellence, it can illustrate how one student internalises the discourse to establish some form of personal relevance. When schools individualise excellence they may privilege a range of indicators specific to their particular context. In an endeavour to provide opportunities and values inclusive of all students, personal excellence needs to be relevant to the student body and wider community. As Gewirtz and Cribb (2009) note, some commonality exists around a shared commitment to the value of achievement.

The aspiration for personal excellence and the notion of an individual’s potential for doing and being are embodied within the idea of a rational individual, inevitably bound to make choices that will enhance personal wellbeing (Levinson, Gross & Hanks; 2011; Walker, 2008). In the absence of explicit reasons for some schools aspiring to personal excellence while others do not, one explanation seems to infer excellence is the rational choice for personal wellbeing. The following comment demonstrates the common sense status that the excellence discourse appears to hold: “Everyone wants excellence really, but you can’t get recognised” (2). This student’s unquestioning allocation of the desire for excellence to “everyone” demonstrates the rationality of excellence. Student 2 then juxtaposes wanting excellence against recognition. Later in
this chapter, I will examine institutional systems and practices at Kanuka Intermediate that acknowledge and celebrate excellence. In the school context, an expectation of students to attain their personal best entails constant improvement on what students have achieved or demonstrated before. This approach to self-improvement provides one form of comparative measure, yet does not define personal excellence. Reconsidering student 1’s suggestion of a “personal sense of achievement”, a concrete example of excellence remains elusive.

I endeavoured to make sense of how students form a subjective judgement of what counts as excellence. Student 4 offered clarification: “Doing the best they can do and achieving well, yep, cos not everyone’s at the same level so doing their best might differ from someone else’s best” (4). Student 4’s consideration of what counts as measures of personal excellence appear to sustain discourses of individualism. Differentiated levels of achievement are readily accommodated by the notion of ‘doing your best’, however, this democratised or egalitarian version of excellence seems intangible. The meeting of abstract concepts and subjective judgement creates ambiguity. What once seemed a clear understanding of excellence to the students, that you could be “way above everyone else... or you could get a lot better than you had“ (student 2) becomes unstable under shared scrutiny during the focus group discussion.

While the students were creating their Idiots Guide one student suggested having a page dedicated to “what I did to achieve excellence” (4). As the conversation progressed around what the students thought constituted excellence in achievement, student 3 prompted the following discussion:

So how do we know that we’ve actually achieved excellence? (3)
But you don’t know, it’s kind of an opinion isn’t it? (2)
Yeah. (3)
If you think you can’t do any better? (4)

The deliberations returned to individualised improvement as an indicator of excellence. Yet a second ambiguity emerged in measuring personal excellence: “Usually it's a huge improvement and not a huge achievement” (3). This differentiation between improvement and achievement pertains to individual measures of excellence. No doubt
in the classroom context, a student and a teacher are in a position to make a judgement on how a student’s learning has progressed. A “huge achievement”, however, is set apart, perhaps signalling that all students can improve whereas a huge achievement demands something less universal. A hierarchical ordering seems to emerge between the discourses of excellence in the students’ reflections, where one form of elite excellence takes precedence over personal excellence.

Their consideration of achievement as an indicator in the quest for personal excellence developed further:

How do you measure personally that you’ve done your best? What is it that tells you, actually this was the very best I could have done? (KB)

When you’ve achieved better than before. (1)

These comments indicate the discursive specificity that equates personal excellence to self-improvement at Kanuka Intermediate. One group member, however, began to question the common sense of continual improvement as a route to excellence:

Yeah but next time you do it you’ve got to be better than that time. (4)

Yeah. (3)

And go on and on and on. (4)

At one stage you’ll be up to the top, you’ve just got to stay there. (1)

There is actually probably no way to achieve in that process of excellence. (4)

The introduction of the idea “up to the top” suggests several tensions with the process of excellence by improvement. In the first instance, there is a sense of never getting to excellence, implied by student 4’s consideration of improvement going “on and on”. I am reminded of the ancient Greek myth of Sisyphus, a man condemned forever to push a boulder up a mountain only to find that it would roll down again (Camus, 1979). Camus presented Sisyphus as a metaphor for the absurdity of life spent engaged in repetitious and futile tasks, not the intent behind student 4’s comment I would suggest. We can assume personal excellence has more laudable aims. Student 4’s questioning of excellence achieved by repeated improvement, however, demonstrates how a common sense discourse can begin to unravel. Despite the assumption of an individual intent on
enhancing the self implicit within a liberal construct of the subject, the rationality of excellence, might not be shared by all students if the end point is unquantifiable or constantly out of reach.

A second reading of this conversation introduces the idea of comparative achievement. Student 1’s suggestion of aiming for the top and staying there relates to the discourse of elite excellence, where a student’s performance needs to be exceptional to surpass that of their peers’, and then remain exceptional. This idea illustrates how elite excellence may achieve primacy as the dominant discourse of excellence despite schools’ endeavours to uphold more equitable practices and opportunities for all students.

The use of “just” in “just got to stay there” has interesting connotations. The adverb is used frequently by members of the group throughout the interviews and focus group, and thus appears to function as a colloquialism, similar to like or yeah. Alternatively, I believe there are instances when the students employ just selectively and to certain effect. In this case, student 1 appears to employ just as a rhetorical move, diminishing somewhat the difficulty inherent in sustaining exceptional performance. Just meaning simply “have to stay there,” is clearly a more difficult task than implied.

Having discussed definitions of excellence, which appeared shaped by Kanuka Intermediate’s school culture, the students went on to consider the dispositions and scholastic practices that can contribute to achieving excellence.

Talent

Differing opinions on how to achieve excellence generated a discussion about talent: “Natural talent is usually much better than hard work talent … it just comes to you really easily and it’s something that stays with you” (1). “Hard work” as talent is interesting. The phrase may have simply represented a slip of words, however, the comment followed disagreement amongst the group regarding whether hard work was necessary to achieve excellence. Student 1’s remark represents a summary of the points made in the students’ debate. The suggestion that natural talent is “usually much better” in comparison to hard work talent could acknowledge that some students may be more disposed to or dependent on working hard, and subsequently achieve as a result of their efforts. The observation also appears to propose that some people have a natural ability
that requires little effort on their part to achieve, a position that is judged as generally more preferable. Consequently, this comment invokes two familiar discourses in education: giftedness and meritocracy.

The notion of *natural* talent reflects a discourse of innate ability. Within the field of gifted education, while innate ability is considered necessary, ability alone is insufficient for development of a special talent; also essential are commitment, persistence and effort (Subotnik, Oswzewski-Kubilius & Worrel, 2011). It may be comforting to think that natural talent will lead to personal excellence, but it appears that hard work is critical to sustained productivity or creativity.

A further consideration of natural talent emerges from student 1’s comment that natural talent “just stays with you”. Effort, practise, and commitment are perhaps silent within this comment, reduced by the rhetorical simplification of *just*. The longevity implied by “stays with you” suggests accomplishment as the norm. Allan (2010) reflects on the anxiety and disappointment felt when high achieving students encounter situations where their achievement suddenly becomes less exceptional. I will discuss such an experience in Chapter 6.

In one respect, student 1 seems to resist the notion of effort by privileging natural talent over hard work. Conversely, referring to high levels of effort as talent activates the discourse of meritocracy. Harris (2004) reflects how the can-do girl represents celebratory discourses of educational success due to her production as a self-driven subject with the capacity to achieve in a meritocratic system. At Kanuka Intermediate performances of meritocracy appear to be located within broader discourses of meritocracy, where opportunity, choice, and effort intersect, the former two of which I will discuss further in this chapter and the next. A self-driven or can-do individual’s engagement with effort marks their endeavours as meritocratic in their desire to succeed. A second student picked up the discussion to consider the benefits of meritocratic effort:

*If you work hard then you can choose what you want to be good at because you can work hard at it, and then that will just pay off and grow whatever you choose to do, however long you need to.* (2)
Student 2 suggests the reward for working hard and increasing choices amounts to a “pay off”. The particular material connotations implied by “pay off,” suggests links with Skelton and Francis’s (2011) description of identity as an entrepreneurial project. We are not clear of the ultimate reward that student 2 had in mind, however, embedded in “pay off” is some form of goal or gain.

Student 2 reinforces the argument by explaining that hard work will “just pay off”, the rhetorical use of just constituting a persuasive move. Student 2 counters the previous discussion of natural ability enabling excellence, and instead proposes effort as an alternative route to success. The certainty implicit in just acts to close down alternative considerations (Billig, 2001). Also present in this comment is the discursive resource of individualised responsibility, an aspect of scholastic identity work that I will explore more fully in the next chapter. Suffice to say, individualised responsibility operates in discursive partnership with meritocracy to confer ownerships not only to choice, but to the outcomes of choices too.

Providing the most effective learning environment for students to work hard and achieve, requires schools to offer wide and varied opportunities. There after, the responsibility for making the ‘right’ choice from the opportunities appears to fall on the individual student. The next section of this chapter will discuss opportunity, considering how Kanuka Intermediate defines the educational opportunities it offers, and how students might subsequently engage or interpret the opportunities made available to them.

**Taking and making the most of opportunities**

From listening to students’ discussions and reading materials in the public domain, the impression emerges that students at Kanuka Intermediate are immersed within a culture of opportunity. Defining the field of choice and opportunity assumes particular relevance to intermediate or middle years education. As examined in Chapter 1, intermediate schools espouse distinct conceptual frames for teaching and learning of students in the middle years. Kanuka Intermediate is not alone in its commitment to providing diverse and meaningful learning opportunities for its students, as this ethos appears to be a strong theme amongst intermediates around the country.
(www.educationcounts.govt.nz, 2012). The provision of choice, and students’ subsequent participation in opportunities are recognised strengths of the school, according to parent testimonies in its information brochure and a recent educational review (ERO, 2012). Participation forms the focus of the next section.

**Getting involved**

When asked to identify one key piece of advice for younger students to achieve excellence the group responded unanimously:

- Get involved with everything. (2)
- Yes. (3)
- Yeah [together]. (1 & 4)

Despite the collective agreement, and in terms of the overall data it appears that for certain students, participation factors more prominently in their thinking about achieving excellence than for others. Student 2, for example reflected most often on opportunities in school:

- Well in this school… there are opportunities that come for everyone to do and so everyone does get a go to do all sorts, um, no matter what person they are and so you get some really good experiences just being here, just being at school. (2)
- So you think school makes that opportunity available to everyone? (KB)
  - Yeah and then the people like go the extra step and like sign up for other things they like, you know, get the extra bit and then everyone else just, there’s a lot that happens that everyone can have a go at. (2)

The intersection of opportunity and achievement appears to require additional effort or an “extra step” to accomplish personal excellence. These comments suggest universal opportunity may only take students so far; to benefit most from opportunities made available to them students may need to demonstrate engagement with choice and flexibility in their willingness to try. Getting the “extra bit” appears to tip the balance towards new possibilities.

Student 2’s comment indicates how possibility comes with opportunity and choice (Harris, 2004). Possibility is perhaps the unspoken, yet implicit outcome of
opportunities and choice in this comment, making the extra effort worthwhile. While engaging in choice and possibility is an individual’s responsibility, student 2 acknowledges students are not alone in their endeavours to take up opportunities or get involved: “The teachers do try and encourage you to do something you never thought you could do” (2). This comment demonstrates a silent partner in what might otherwise be seen as the individualised act of making choices, the encouraging teacher.

Publicly available materials and the most recent educational review outline a range of pedagogical strategies that Kanuka Intermediate enacts to enable students to engage in challenging and interesting learning. These strategies are recognised as highly supportive of students’ achievement and personal development (www.ero.govt.nz, 2012), and are highly valued by students, judging from the responses of the students in this group. The students in this group had each represented the school for academic, cultural, or sporting endeavours, and spoke with pride about this:

Our [sports] team got first in the [province] championships… and there’s the achievement gallery out there and we’re on it. (4)
Probably just when I represented the school for a whole lot of events. I’ve been really proud that I’ve been chosen for that. I’ve been privileged enough to represent [school]. (1)

Student 1’s application of just in this response can be interpreted in several ways. She may be referring to recent occasions when she has represented the school, although the sentence construction suggests a rhetorical move to downplay her achievements. As discussed in Chapter 3, the tall poppy syndrome operates with particular cultural and discursive resonances in New Zealand (McClure et al., 2011). Student 1 appears to understate her efforts and achievements, initially by starting her response with “probably just”, and then reframing her representing the school, on what appears to be a number of occasions, as a “privilege”. The tall poppy discourse contradicts the common sense neoliberal assumptions that render success as calculated (Nairn et al., 2012), and repositions success as the result of luck or external factors. In this instance, the background of student 1’s response to her achievements is not clear. Student 1 could be drawing on a range of discursive resources about her representing her school, embedded in her family’s culture, and/or from school and wider New Zealand society.
Students’ achievements are highly valued at Kanuka Intermediate. The school celebrates students’ accomplishments on its website, acknowledging students’ varied achievements in academic, sporting and cultural fields. Yet as discussed in Chapter 3, schools also benefit from enrolling students who performatively have much to offer (Tsoidis, 2006; Vincent & Ball, 2006; Vaughan, 2002). When schools are forced to engage with market practices to attract students, making available diverse opportunities for students to learn and achieve may be vested with more than pedagogical ethos. Kanuka Intermediate draws links between diverse, challenging opportunities and personal excellence in its publicly available materials. I am not wishing to attribute market factors to Kanuka Intermediate’s commitment to providing opportunities, nonetheless, such practices may act as a point of difference in the education market place. Earlier in this section, I discussed student 2’s observation that taking up opportunities may operate as a normative expectation and practice of Kanuka Intermediate’s culture, excelling at these opportunities, on the other hand, demands more effort. The suggestion that participation can lead to personal excellence may still leave some students feeling short in their accomplishments, as Allan (2010) found in her research with high achieving students attending an elite private school, where opportunities abounded. The students discussed an alternative view to engaging with all opportunities, instead advocating greater circumspection in selecting where to focus effort.

Strategic thinking

Examples of calculated or strategic thinking that did emerge in conversation were devoid of future-focused intent. The students offered no insights as to their employment ambitions, nor considered an educational trajectory beyond which secondary school they had chosen. Instead, conversation reflected their intermediate school experience. One student in particular reflected on concentrating efforts in areas of learning more likely to render results:

So what makes somebody a successful student do you think? (KB)
Well, that depends on what they think. If they think they are really gifted in mathematics and academic subjects, then I think they should follow what they can do instead of focusing on something they are hopeless at. Because that’s just wasting their life. (3)

Emotive language peppers this opinion; *just* in this sentence operates emphatically, perhaps reinforcing student 3’s conviction in his belief or bounding his argument. Student 3 appears to resist the notion of all-round achievement, suggesting that effort spent on something that students are not good at is a waste of time. Earlier in the interview, student 3 had spoken about his endeavours to improve his performance in sport, and the frustrations he had experienced. The strength of feeling in this statement could be illustrative of the pressures students encounter when they engage with expectations to be all-round high achievers. This position could also exert pressure on the school’s discourse of excellence by improvement, questioning where students’ efforts should be best placed.

**Pursuing your passions**

Student 1 introduced to the conversation the notion of passion as a prerequisite for meaningful excellence:

[To student 4] What would make you an excellent artist? (KB)
I’d have to practise. (4)
You’d be doing it every day and not have the passion for it. (1)

Passion complicates the discursive dominance of effort. In student 1’s response, passionless practice renders the endeavour for excellence formulaic. She seems to suggest that passion is required to commit to meaningful pursuit of personal excellence. In doing so, student 1 established a counter position for strategic engagement with excellence, placing interest before achievement and diminishing the focus on outcome.

Several members of the group resisted student 3’s advocation of strategic thinking around developing natural ability, although earlier the group had accepted the concept of natural ability without contest:
Say some person has a natural ability for art but is really bad at sports; they should get their art going rather than trying really hard at sports. (3)

I really disagree with that cos if they really don’t like art, there’s no point doing art if I hated it . . . If you loved sport and loved trying at sport and don’t mind how bad you are and know you’d get better… If you try hard it doesn’t matter. (2)

In student 2’s argument, passion prevails over ability with appropriately emotive language, illustrated by her dualism of love and hate. Student 2 dispenses with exceptional performance in favour of effort and enjoyment. This response might indicate how affective considerations can resist the discourse of elite excellence. Some respite is offered in the form of “you’d get better”, a reiteration of self-improvement, but not quite the discourse of elite excellence.

While strategic thinking and pursuing passions appear to advance oppositional engagements in learning, both are linked by students’ individual interests in certain areas of the curriculum; the group mentioned mathematics, science, art, and sports. Supporting students to develop their interests appears throughout Kanuka Intermediate’s published materials. In terms of the research question and how students make sense of their learning and identities as learners, the four students appeared to have internalised and embodied aspects of their school’s values and culture. During their discussions of taking and making the most of opportunities at school, the students made direct and indirect references to pursuing personal excellence. No doubt these influences operate alongside socio-cultural values representative of their family and home life. The final section of this chapter considers extrinsic representation of personal excellence through institutional reward and acknowledgement systems.

**Quantifying and recognising excellence**

Kanuka Intermediate deploys a range of practices to recognise and celebrate students’ achievements, some of which are immediately visible to a visitor either to the physical school site or online. A recent educational review highlighted that students’ achievements were well promoted at the school (www.ero.govt.nz, 2012). The students themselves explained a range of awards and opportunities for recognition that are
available in school. Those described to me included praise in the classroom and classroom teacher rewards; weekly class certificates awarded in assembly; house points and house rewards; school patches\(^{14}\) (awards that are stitched onto the school uniform); displayed photographs of students who have made exceptional achievements; features in the school newsletter, and end of year awards. There may be more practices in place at Kanuka Intermediate to recognise and celebrate achievement that were not mentioned by the students, I am aware of the school website for example, but this was not referred to during interviews.

**School award systems**

All schools institute formal practices that determine the basis upon which students’ performances can be evaluated and rewarded. Covington (2000) refers to how incentive systems can mediate achievement goals by positively reinforcing desired performances and conduct, or triggering negative reinforcers for noncompliance. In Foucauldian terms, a school’s incentive or reward system operates as a regulatory technology (Foucault, 2008). The discourses of excellence are, in turn, constructed and served by incentive systems. Reflecting on the prevailing culture of performativity in education, Covington (2000) proposes that schooling has become “a failure-oriented (competitive) ability game” (p. 185, original parenthesis), whose rules encourage students to outperform one another. Such a position privileges elite excellence and exceptional performance, displacing personal excellence or excellence for all.

It would seem that differential processes of valuing achievements are evident to students: “The school patches, they’re for people who do really well in something, like for tests or in sports or performing outside of school to other people” (4). In the case of the school patches, students literally embody their reward, their school uniforms bearing the evidence of success. Within the micro-society that is school, the patches are representative of cultural and academic capital. Yet it would appear that amongst the patches available to students, some patches carry greater worth than others. An academic patch, for example requires:

\(^{14}\) I have changed the name of this award to protect the anonymity of the school, and will henceforth refer to the achievement gallery when discussing photographs for the same reasons.
You just have to be like, really high in national standards or the school standards or something. (4)
You wouldn’t get one if it was personal. (2)

From the students’ explanations and examples, the academic patch represents achievement within standardised criteria, in this case national standards. The implied requirements of an academic patch could reflect the pervasiveness of an assessment culture determined by norm-referenced measures of high achievement. Student 4’s use of *just* and *or something* to underplay high attainment in national standards does little to dispel the exclusivity of the academic patch. Student 2’s comment develops this as a shared understanding, suggesting personal achievement may not measure up against this norm. When Covington (2000) refers to a failure-oriented ability game, he refers to the failure upon which excellence is produced and depends (Lucey & Reay, 2002). Students awarded an academic patch have achieved excellence defined by norm-referenced attainment measures, and have outperformed their peers.

Achievement for the citizen patch, in comparison, suggests a different set of expectations. When asked in the focus group how to achieve a citizenship patch, the following interchange ensued:

Well by um, helping societies. (1)
You could just, like, organise a wee [small] thing, so that’s just a choice . . . To achieve excellence in that you don’t have to be anything, you don’t have to be really special. (2)

The citizenship patch appears more universally available to students. The rhetorical employment of *just* and *wee thing*, infer it is easier to gain this patch from these students’ perspective. This patch seems lacking in cultural and academic capital, anyone can do it and “you don’t have to be really special”. Yet when asked whether many students across the school did organise events or fundraisers, students offered the following response:

Not many really, likes it’s a choice… but anyone can do it. (2)
It’s easy to do. (1)
It’s really simple and you can get a lot out of it. (2)

Despite the maintained ease of achieving excellence in citizenship, “not many” students choose to do so, implying the patch is not special enough. While the academic patch demands exceptional performances of norm-referenced attainment, the students judge excellence in citizenship to be a matter of choice and motivation. Choice occupies a central position in school discourses, but is deployed selectively when judging what counts as achievement. The discourse of choice is applied to achievement in citizenship, but not, it seems, to academic achievement. The processes by which choice becomes individualised and reiterated as central to achievement, risks minimising complicating factors that might act as barriers to some students. Previously, student 2 explained how many opportunities at school are universally available, but some require an extra step. If that extra step incurs a financial cost, for example, individual choice may not be the determining factor.

Interestingly, this conversation passed between two students in the group who wrote on their pages of The Idiots Guide to Excellence:

*Figure 2: Extract from The Idiots Guide to Excellence (student 4).*

*Figure 3: Extract from the Idiots Guide to Excellence (student 1).*

It could be that these students did not concur with the direction the conversation was taking (Figures 2 and 3). For whatever reason, they chose not to verbally intervene, but asserted their voices on paper. The underlining of excellence represents a value-laden act that not only rhetorically defends the author’s position, but also ensures this opinion
is attended to. The idea of helping others may carry an intrinsic value among many students. Students may recognise the worthiness of selfless acts on the part of other students, but are unwilling to undertake the required actions to organise an event. Other factors will no doubt inform the apparent lack of popularity of this type of activity, but the patch can also be achieved in other ways not discussed during the focus group. In Chapter 6, I will consider how gaining a citizenship award did represent a major achievement for one student.

While the prevailing school reward system aims to incentivise students to perform in certain recognisable and measurable ways, the discussion of the citizen patch demonstrates how student investment may not eventuate as anticipated. A further example appeared in student 4’s apparent reluctance to overtly celebrate the types of norm-referenced high achievement recognised by the academic patch, inferred by the use of “or something” to describe high achievement. The restraint illustrated by student 4’s response to the patches system, however, is not a position all students chose.

In his All About Me! presentation, student 3 wrote, “In my class and year group, I had the most patches and certificates by the end of the second term” (3). In particular, student 3 valued the intermediate school’s reward system in comparison to his primary school, where “they certainly did appreciate you with words of course, but you didn’t really get anything to keep”. The notion of keeping a reward as opposed to receiving praise can illustrate how differences in value systems between students and teachers manifest. Student 3’s observation on the appreciation shown by teachers at his former school is not offered as criticism, but his preferences for some form of material acknowledgement is clear.

Demonstrating how the dynamics of school and classroom achievement processes change in relation to individual learner differences (Covington, 2000), student 3’s valuing of certificates contrasted with others in the group:

What kind of things do people do to get the certificates? (KB)
Ah, anything, like the teacher gives out around three every week, just [pause] Bob’s done well in his writing. (2)
The use of *just* in this extract provided student 2 with a chance to think of an example, but could also indicate the relative ease involved in achieving a weekly certificate. Students appeared aware of how performance is evaluated to gain a certificate: “There’s the certificates that’s given out in assemblies, they sometimes, they mostly go to the ones who always don’t get other things” (4). Students 2 and 4 understand what Bourdieu (2010) refers to as the rules of the game. Having awarded such certificates myself as a primary teacher, I recall the process of keeping a list to ensure that all children in the class are recognised for an individual performance throughout each term. Students seem aware of these practices, perhaps even complicit in the enactment of recognition by acknowledging “a lot of people don’t have very big awards” (1). Student 1’s comment could indicate students’ readiness to accommodate the differential achievements of their peers within the school-based systems available to them.

When schools stratify achievements and then reward accordingly, the rules operate on both overt and covert levels. It is easy to imagine school ‘rules’ being explicit regarding the level of achievement expected for an academic patch. In my own recount of keeping a certificate list, I would not have contemplated announcing to the class my clandestine observations of particular students’ performances when their turn was up for a certificate. The rules of the game operated covertly. Yet students 1, 2, and 4 understand that certificates offer an alternative form of recognition for achievements that would not otherwise make the norm-referenced grade, therefore serving an inclusive function. Students’ observations of how excellence for all can operate to include and exclude students’ achievements offered further insights to recognition.

**Inclusive/exclusive excellence**

When award systems contribute to the process of achieving personal excellence, the implication is that practices need to demonstrate inclusivity otherwise the situation becomes oxymoronic. Acknowledging differential excellence relies on systems that provide students with a formalised measure of personal improvement and progression (Van Avermaet et al., 2011). A recent ERO review described a culture at Kanuka School inclusive of all students (www.ero.govt.nz, 2012). Elsewhere in this chapter, I have referred to students’ perceptions that opportunities are available to all equally, underpinned by discourses of choice and participation. I have also discussed the view
that performative achievement goals can rest in tension with inclusive practices, notably when achievement is subject to normative measures of attainment (Covington, 2000; Lucey & Reay, 2002). Kanuka Intermediate practices, such as the weekly certificates, seemed to address the potential for exclusion from reward by providing a platform for universal recognition. Students in my study, however, questioned whether equity was as evident in other school practices:

Well, the people who it’s harder to achieve for [pause] they should be awarded achiever [patch] even if it’s just quite a small thing because people who have learning difficulties should really be acknowledged when they do make huge progress . . . They’d really appreciate it if someone was going “we are really proud of you for making this progress”. (1)

Student 1’s comment reiterates a point made by student 3 in an earlier section, regarding the difference between recognising a huge improvement and a huge achievement. Student 1 references a school patch, which she feels could be made more available for students of differing abilities to achieve. By suggesting the achievement criteria could be broader, Student 1 appears to reinforce the academic capital of the achiever patches as a means of elite recognition and reward. This consideration is significant to the discourse of excellence for all and the school discourse of excellence by improvement, as Student 1’s perceptions imply that personal excellence should be more differentially valued by the school award system. For personal excellence to be incentivised for all students, an individual’s “huge improvements” may need to be repositioned within institutional systems, adding value and capital to achievements in ways that are non-normative and non-hierarchical.

Student 1’s suggestion for changes to the evaluation and recognition of achievement to enable more students to be awarded patches offers one example of differential excellence. School practices need not necessarily undergo onerous change to facilitate greater inclusion of students’ achievements into systems already invested with local cultural and academic capital. The assumption here is neither that such approaches are missing from Kanuaka School nor that students were unaware of universal recognition. Nevertheless, if personal excellence is heterogeneous then institutional acknowledgements should have the capacity to recognise heterogeneity too.
Exceptional excellence and competition

The recognition of personal excellence through exceptional academic performance is historically embedded and incentivised within the education system. For example, at the secondary level of education the Ministry of Education offers a range of scholarships each year that provide “recognition and monetary reward to top students” (www.nzqa.govt.nz, 2013). Students offered a scholarship constitute approximately 3% of students in each subject. At primary and intermediate schools, awards are generally more localised.

One exception is the range of examinations available through the International Competitions and Assessments for Schools (ICAS). Students’ participation in these tests is optional, but fee-paying. The tests, developed by ‘subject-matter experts’ through the University of New South Wales, offer competitive skills-based assessment that in turn provides students and schools with a diagnostic report, and a placing of students’ performances relative to the test population (www.eaa.unsw.edu.au, 2013). According to the ICAS website, students from over 20 countries participate each year. Three of the four students interviewed had undertaken one or more of the tests. When asked what motivates people to take the tests, students’ responses indicated three main themes, the first being achievement:

- Wanting to achieve . . . I wanted to like see what I would get. (1)
- See how well you can do. (4)
- Actually knowing what you would get compared to, your score compared to Australasia. (3)

The intrinsic incentive implied within these responses is achievement-driven with a competitive edge. In studies of academic self-concept, the big-fish-little-pond theory conceptualises the role of frames of reference and school context on learners’ identities (Parker, Marsh, Lüdtke & Trautwein, 2013). The metaphor has some relevance to the three students’ curiosity or desire to discover their position relative to peers in the Pacific-wide region. These students did not explicitly place themselves above their peers at school, but were willing to embrace the outcome of participating in an international competitive domain. Covington (2000) cautions, however, the incentive to
being highly placed in a performative cohort can construct other students as the main obstacle to achievement.

ICAS reinforces the positioning of students’ performances by awarding hierarchical certificates. Students who attain within the top 1% of test participants receive a high distinction, whereas distinction recognises the achievements of the next 10% of students. The school also reiterates these differences in student attainment: “If you get, I think it’s like a high distinction you get a photo taken for the gallery and if you get a distinction, there are [slight laugh] group photos that are taken of all the different subjects” (2). Student 2’s amusement at group photographs for students achieving a distinction is perhaps understandable. Attainment in the top 10% of an international test cohort certainly seems an exemplary achievement, however, the discursive frame of exceptional excellence is bounded by comparative measures. As a consequence, high distinction merits greater recognition irrespective of the effort involved.

The second theme that emerged from the students’ comments was fun: “I kept doing it because it’s really fun, the tests are really fun and it’s really exciting seeing what you get” (2). The idea of sitting an exam would not appeal to all students as fun, and for others may present a source of significant anxiety. Despite societal emphasis on measurable outcomes, Covington (2000) identifies the ‘all-important’ factor is how students define success. Success-oriented students view their ability as a tool to achieve meaningful personal goals. While many students wish to achieve their best irrespective of the accomplishment of others, success-oriented students engage with their learning to develop their skills and understanding, and demonstrate willingness to work hard.

The third response to my question, why take ICAS exams came in the form of self-improvement:

I started doing them because they’re very accurate; they cover everything. I just wanted to see where I was. Like, those tests are just like so that you can see what you need to work on, like exactly. It just shows you your exact marks and then where you are compared to everyone else. (2)
Student 2’s comment demonstrates the self-efficacy and meta-cognition involved in maintaining an academic scholastic identity, and in the pursuit of excellence by improvement. It could be argued these dispositions relate to the ‘hard-work talent’ that the students discussed in the Talent section. Student 2’s explanation also points to particular scholastic dispositions, an embodiment of the success-oriented student described by Covington (2000).

For success-oriented students, the ICAS tests offer an ideal opportunity to respond to comparative measures of attainment, and respond to diagnostic information for learning. Of note, students participating in ICAS tests pay a fee. In terms of the earlier discussion on inclusive and excluding systems of recognition, the cost of participating in the ICAS tests may act as a barrier for some students depending on their access to material resources. Both the academic recognition and access to individualised diagnostic feedback may subsequently be denied to certain groups of students, not because of unwillingness to make the right choice, nor make the most of this opportunity. It may be that Kanuka Intermediate provides material support to students whose endeavours for personal excellence would be enhanced by participation in opportunities such as ICAS tests. Nonetheless, participation in ICAS highlights how choice and engagement with opportunity can be displaced by factors that are beyond individual students’ control. Alternatively, as was the case for one student in the group, the opportunity to participate in ICAS was rejected because it was not the ‘right’ choice for that individual.

**Summary**

The students’ discussion of excellence for all has demonstrated how the discursive resources available to them operate as significant sources of meaning. The role of the school as producer and effect of discursive meaning appears to hold a prominent position in how the students in this study made sense of their learning. Consistent with the espoused character of intermediate education, the students recognised the choices and opportunities offered at school as intrinsic to achieving personal excellence.
Students concurred that making the most of opportunities by getting involved was the most important piece of advice they could offer others aiming for personal excellence. Disparities did emerge in consideration of what constituted the ‘right’ choices to make, reflecting how the dynamics of achievement change in relation to individual learner preferences. In conversation, opportunity and choice intersected with effort, constitutive of the discourse of meritocracy.

The students challenged the certainty of meritocracy, long embedded as an educational discourse, advocating instead natural talent, passion, and fun. The students identified how their personal investment in learning encompassed a broad range of attributes, adding meta-cognition, competition, and curiosity to those already mentioned. These insights illustrate the attitudes and values that Covington (2000) identifies as belonging to a success-oriented student.

The students in this study located their engagement with personal excellence in the pedagogical strategies, institutional award system, and the school ethos of excellence by improvement. Aware of the rules of educational performativity and the differential evaluations made of students’ attainment, members of this group valued and sought recognition for the achievements of their peers. Yet despite the school’s many endeavours to promote excellence for all, the discursive primacy of elite excellence emerged at various times during the research.

For the most part, students appeared comfortable with the simultaneous functioning of elite and improving excellence. Occasions did arise when the rhetorical certainty of excellence began to unravel, inciting students to question the relevance and fairness of each construct. In these instances, students demonstrated their agency by appearing to draw on value systems informed by sources of meaning beyond the school’s culture.

In the introduction to this chapter, I remarked that the task of performing as a student within multiple discourses could be read as asymmetrical, yet the students in my study were negotiating their own ways. The nuances of students’ situated lives mean that the collective coherence of learner identities as espoused by school policies and values can fragment and individualise. In the next chapter, I will explore further how
students made sense of their identities as learners by drawing upon a range of discursive resources currently dominant in the field of education.
Chapter 6: Scholastic Identities and the Idealised Student

The *New Zealand Curriculum* (2007) in setting out a vision for what education should provide to young people in New Zealand also begins to define the types of learners and future citizens schools should produce. Stipulated within the Curriculum’s vision, values and key competencies are characteristics, dispositions and attitudes that will be adapted by schools and their communities in localised curricula. As a consequence, the identity work that students engage in, their sense of place and how they understand their learning will by some degree be influenced by government policy. The Curriculum, while acting as a starting point for schools, is one of many influences on identity in school spaces. The aim of this chapter is to consider children’s crafting of their identities as learners within a school culture that promotes personal excellence.

The chapter consists of four main sections. The first section explores the promotion of a ‘can-do’ student by Kanuka Intermediate to support the development of learners who demonstrate individuality, motivation, and responsibility for their own successes. In the second, I will investigate how *multi-accomplishment increases a student’s educational capital* at school, and begin to consider the implications for students judged to be lacking the ‘right’ educational capital. The third investigates how *family values and culture* intersect with learning and achievement. The final section of this chapter turns to *the emotional labour of engaging with discourses of excellence*.

**The ‘can-do’ student**

A ‘can-do’ approach to learning is emphasised as crucial to success on Kanuka Intermediate’s website. The materials do not elaborate on which characteristics constitute a can-do attitude, but the school relates participation to a can-do approach to learning. In the previous chapter, the students revealed their understandings of the importance of engaging with opportunities to achieving personal excellence, reiterating a key educational principle of intermediate education. Engaging in opportunities not only serves to enrich learning, but facilitate a sense of belonging at school. Kanuka Intermediate, in linking can-do attitudes with participation, inadvertently invokes a can-
do subject position that also carries meaning within discourses of national identity and gender.

The notion of a can-do attitude as culturally valuable has both an historical and a contemporary lineage. In the context of New Zealand colonial history and the early construction of national identity, Dalziel (2000) discusses how growing to nationhood involved creating a community of achievement. Establishing national uniqueness and marking out differences from Britain was thought to require particular characteristics of the European settlers. Dalziel notes that while the characteristics were conventionally aligned to masculinity, other characteristics such as courage, innovation, perseverance, ingenuity, and self-reliance were also celebrated as attributes of frontier femininity. The valuing of can-do attitudes became central to creating the success of a ‘new’ nation. Can-do attitudes related to these historical antecedents are demonstrated within contemporary educational discourses.

The *New Zealand Curriculum* (2007) maintains innovation as a value to be encouraged. Other characteristics discussed by Dalziel (2000) appear to re-emerge as key competencies. Ingenuity has become *resourceful*, and in an apparent discursive transformation, self-reliance now manifests as knowing how to *act* independently and demonstrate *resilience*. I will consider independence and resilience further in a later section. Perseverance functions within the competency of *managing self*, where having a *can-do attitude* is also associated with students’ *self-motivation* and seeing themselves as *capable learners* (*NZC*, 2007).

With can-do attitudes constitutive of learning in the Curriculum, it is unsurprising that I have noted other intermediate schools adopting a ‘can-do attitude’ in their publicly available materials (www.educationcounts.govt.nz, 2012). A second consideration of the prevalence of a can-do subject in educational discourses could reflect the practices schools might adopt to compete in an educational market place (Lauder et al., 1999; Tsolidis, 2006). Drawing on slogans and the catchy language of advertising, schools’ publicity materials serve a multi-layered function that not only sets out the type of education a school provides, but the type of ‘consumer’ it hopes to attract (Tsolidis, 2006; Vincent & Ball, 2006; Vaughan, 2002). It is perhaps reflective
of the neoliberal turn in education that a can-do subject intent on personal success has found a place in the marketing of education.

The final contemporary enactment of can-do subjects relates to Harris’s (2004) work on girlhood. Harris explains how the ‘can-do girl’ embodies celebratory discourses of girls’ success by demonstrating attributes and dispositions that appear to render life a project of infinite possibility. Harris suggests the can-do girl acts with a capacity for reinvention and self-direction; she is intent on success in all domains of her life, and is willing to take responsibility for her choices. It is easy to see why the can-do girl occupies a particular place in current educational discourses, where the boy-turn has accentuated her position as the new ‘winner’ in the educational stakes (Weaver-Hightower, 2003). There is much to explore in Harris’s (2004) constructs of girlhood, but for the purposes of this chapter I will focus on the notion of can-do attributes of both girls and boys, which are judged to facilitate success and right choices.

Having established a place for can-do attitudes in this research project, it is now worth considering how the students experience the process of becoming can-do subjects. I will also explore the relevance of can-do attitudes to the celebratory discourses of excellence. In particular, I will focus on how Kanuka Intermediate appears to create a learning culture commensurate with constructing can-do identities by investigating students’ understandings of their place in school, their responsibilities as learners, and any tensions that may arise as a result of their endeavours to achieve.

**Establishing individuality and finding a place at school**

Having a sense of place at school appears to be integral to demonstrating a can-do approach to learning at Kanuka Intermediate. While engaging with opportunities seemed to operate as the dominant discursive resource students drew on, individuality emerged as important to students in defining their sense of self and place at school. One student recognised the role Kanuka Intermediate plays in supporting this particular aspect of personal development: “Practically everyone here is different. All really unique characters and personalities and things, yeah. [School] encourages that. They don’t want everyone to be the same. They want everyone to be really unique. Yeah, they treasure that here” (1). This comment illustrates how individuality operates as a shared investment. For this particular student, the choice of “treasure” to describe the
position of the school in relation to personal development indicates the level of value placed on the notion of individuality.

Students’ sense of individuality became manifest when they endeavoured to describe how others might see them as learners. This particular interview question presented some difficulty to all the students (Field Notes, 23/11/2012). Three of the students were hesitant in their answers, but all expressed a hope that others saw them as they saw themselves. The aspiration of being recognised favourably is illustrated by the following comment: “Well, I just think they see me as someone that throws themselves into doing things and is quite academic and will give things a go” (1). While the students were aware of my focus on excellence, academic achievement appears to take second place to participation in this comment. I highlighted the students’ privileging of involvement and participation in the previous chapter, and how this position reiterates the school’s values. In contrast, a second student, who performed as perhaps the strongest advocate of opportunity and participation throughout the research activities, chose to respond to ‘how do others see you’ in the following way:15

![Figure 4: How others see me; slide from All About Me! (student 2).](image)

---

15 The slide presented in this chapter is a reproduction of the original shown to me during an individual interview. I am unable to access the online platform where the presentation is saved.
Figure 4 illustrates how for student 2 learning is a passion that marks out individuality. The discussion of passion during the focus group, which I explored in greater detail in Chapter 5, offered a counter-argument to the benefits of effort and natural giftedness to achieving excellence. Implicit in this slide is a joy for the act of learning, where the student is reflecting on engagement in the learning process rather than the outcome. Student 2 elaborated further, “Well, I just like things when I have to work really really hard, like, do really hard work and I actually learn heaps but when it’s a bit more boring then I don’t try very hard” (2). Learning offers this student a sense of pleasure and challenge. A stipulated passion for the learning process is likely to translate into meta-cognition that appreciates what is being learnt, thereby aiding the development of deeper understanding, and increasing competency (Covington, 2000). We are not certain whether the student sees this disposition as differentiating a sense of self distinct from peers, although we can assume that a passion for learning is a cognitive advantage when striving for personal excellence.

Schools have a number of pedagogical and cultural tools at their disposal to develop individuality, for example, individuality holds prominence in theories of child-centred learning (Edwards, 2001). An ERO review (2012) praises Kanuka Intermediate for a practice that enables teachers, students and parents to collaborate in matching students’ learning to students’ interests. The school advocates the importance of responding to a student’s preferred learning style, and endeavours to individualise learning in the classroom in a number of ways, reported by ERO and in Kanuka Intermediate’s own publicity materials.

Some scholars question the discursive common sense of placing the learner at the heart of teaching. Edwards’ (2001) critique of learner-centred approaches focuses on how conceptions of the learner reflect and reproduce positions representative of broader social developments. Demonstrating an expansion of Bourdieu’s (2010) theory concerning the role of schools in the social reproduction of culture, Edwards (2001) proposes that conceptions of the learner constitute assumptions and practices that are not politically neutral. The discourse of learner-centred education and its constitutive practices operate within wider government measures to transform economic, social and political practices. In the New Zealand context, Edwards’ argument resonates with the
work of a number of educationalists whose studies have linked neoliberal educational policy to economic and social imperatives (see for example, Codd, 2005; Lauder et al., 1999; Nairn et al., 2012; Stubbs & Strathdee, 2012). At this point, it is worth recalling that individuality is intersected by personal responsibility, a disposition I will explore in the next section. This intersection of individuality and individualised responsibility may be reshaping discourses of child-centred learning, as they are conventionally understood. For the two students discussed here, the conventions of school practices and culture facilitated the crafting of individuality, and imbued a sense of place. Mindful of Edwards’ (2001) critique, the following section illustrates an example of how individuality in school culture has potential to isolate and disempower the social learner, introducing a cautionary note to the production of can-do attitudes and attributes.

**Challenges to individuality**

The following comments consider how one student was willing to celebrate being different from peers:

![Figure 5: How I see myself; slide from All About Me! (student 3).](image)

The point of difference when we discussed Figure 5 was the comment regarding being “old fashioned”. Student 3 elaborated further:
Um, like, unlike heaps of the people I know, um, like I don’t really like, um [pause] heaps of the new stuff that come around, like I don’t really like iPads at all . . . Because I just, I really prefer big books and strong, wrapped up more . . . Or like, I actually, like I haven’t wrote with a ball-point pen for so long . . . I just carry my fountain pen around with me all the time . . . Yeah like in music, I really prefer, whenever I am listening to music it’s specifically all the time classical music [slight laugh]. (3)

Student 3 goes to considerable lengths to describe various habits, preferences, and interests. A number of hesitations interrupt the student’s explanations signalled by *um*, *like*, and pauses. The use of *just* suggests a rhetorical move to naturalise the use of a fountain pen, when by implication, the majority of students write with ballpoint pens. The student’s apparent unease when explaining this slide could be illustrative of what Foucault (2002) proposes as *self-surveillance*. This student appears aware of being different, perhaps from being subject to the gaze of peers or teachers, and now subject of the interviewer gaze. Nonetheless, when the opportunity arose by way of the presentation and interview, the student’s response was to share these examples of ‘doing’ difference, rather than silencing individuality.

Within the interview space, this student’s description of using a fountain pen offers a seemingly mundane insight to school life. Yet Youdell (2006) suggests that it is in the everyday interactions, routine practices, and minutiae of school life that “students come to be performatively constituted … as students and learners” (p. 51). When a discourse of individuality prevails as an aspect of school culture, students have the possibility to exercise discursive agency and make visible the processes of how student subjects may come to be (Youdell, 2006). Conversely, students might choose to resist dominant constructs of being a learner or doing learning. Depending on the particular classroom environment, resistance may include performing successful scholastic identities. The same student who was willing to celebrate seeming different, reflected on the reactions of some peers to how he related to teachers:
I think I’m a good learner and my teachers always enjoy having me as a student, and I enjoy it as well, even though I have had to put up to having been called the ‘teacher’s pet’. It’s not my fault! I just get on with some teachers [better] than I do with my best friends! (3)

Student 3’s reflection is noteworthy on a number of levels. In the first instance, the student divulged being called a “teacher’s pet”. This comment presents what Guillemin and Gillam (2004) refer to as an ethically challenging moment. The dilemma as a researcher was to assess the gravity of this disclosure. The student did not appear concerned that peers in the classroom used the term, and had elected to include the comment in a presentation. I asked whether other students in the class were subjected to similar name-calling; the student replied, “Yeah, heaps of the time” (3). The student’s body language portrayed relative ease given the interview conditions, and the tone of speech appeared matter-of-fact.

I asked why people might use the phrase ‘teacher’s pet’? The response was: “I guess they’re trying to stop you from learning as well” (3). In contrast to Figure 2, where student 2 discusses a love of learning, an enjoyment of learning for student 3 is constitutive of social tensions amongst peers to the extent that derogatory comments may construct the learner as an abject ‘other’. In this instance, the student appeared unconcerned, although when asked if other members of the class took the comments personally, replied, “some do”. The manner of student 3’s interactions with teachers may have provoked certain peers to respond with name-calling. Student 3 appears to rationalise the situation by reversing the abjection, constructing as the ‘other’ peers who interfere with learning due to their own implied disengagement, illustrated by “stop you learning as well”. This reversal offers student 3 a strategy to resist interference.

The interactions with peers described by student 3 demonstrate the complexity of resistance as an act. The recount of “teacher’s pet” might simultaneously represent one set of students resisting an idealised construct of a scholastic subject, while student 3 resists the disapproval of peers by the reiterating an enactment of the very subject that is the object of tension. Investigating how the students in this study understand their learning and their motivations to achieve, irrespective of peer pressures, could illustrate what a can-do approach to learning might look like.
Motivation and responsibility

Cognitive self-regulation offers one explanation of how students interpret and respond to success and failure in terms of future learning (Covington, 2000). The following slide offers insight to the fine line between reading failure as helpful and reading failure as disappointment:

![PART 1](image)

*Things i [sic] usually keep to myself*
This that I usually keep to myself are things that I am not real proud of, such as:

- Losing a chess game
- Failing to type fast
- Doing bad at sports
- Getting bad scores in math

*Figure 6: Things i [sic] usually keep to myself; slide from All About Me! (student 3).*

At first glance, it would appear that failure is omnipotent in this slide; “not real proud” does not resound with the positivity of success-orientation or can-do attitudes. The apparent negativity of this slide is reinforced by: “losing”, “failing”, “doing bad”, and “bad scores”. Yet this slide demonstrates perfectly why researchers need to act with an ethical commitment to participants throughout the research process. The conversation that accompanied this slide contextualised the seemingly, failure-focused statements in a completely different light. In conversation, student 3 explained what he was doing to address his performance in each of the activities he had identified (Field Notes, 16/11/2012). The following excerpt relates specifically to getting bad scores in maths:

> Um, usually, well a few days ago we had an end of the year test, I got 39 out of 40 . . . The thing I like about it is the thing I got wrong is something I didn’t know about, not anything I did wrong. (3)
The student had previously spoken about frustrations that arise from making basic errors, but the maths test had presented the student with an opportunity to reflect on a specific aspect of maths learning that was unfamiliar. Covington (2000) describes this type of positive response as an adaptive acknowledgement of a failure to understand. Clearly, scoring so highly in a maths test is cause for celebration and the student appeared justly proud, however, in the case of the wrong answer, student 3 also seemed pleased to identify a specific area of “long division” for future learning.

Setting goals to guide a learning trajectory designed to develop a student’s potential constitutes one pedagogical approach that could contribute to schools achieving differential excellence for students (Van Avermaet et al., 2011). Goal setting emerged during the focus group activity as a practice at Kanuka Intermediate shared between student, teacher and parents, and is described as follows:

At the start of the year at the first interview with the parents and teachers, we had to set some goals for ourselves and those would be stuck in the, er, table, er, into our desks so that we’ll always be reminded. (3)

The process of goal setting does not appear in the publicity materials that Kanuka School puts out, so my understanding is based solely on the students’ interpretations. It is common practice for schools to involve parents in their child’s education and establish a tripartite of learning involving child/home/school. Yet my initial thought was of the potential for fraught negotiations or ownership of a goal. In Chapter 3, I discussed how parental expectations could conflict with students’ aspirations for their learning, regardless of culture or class. Harris (2004) has described the ‘never-good-enough’ girl, a subject very similar to the anxious middle class girls encountered by Lucey and Reay (2002). Nash (2000) recounts the tensions experienced by working class Pasifika boys. The students in this study were quick to explain that the goals could be varied and not necessarily linked to performative outcomes:

It can be anything, it can be really vague. (2)
My one was, um, focusing on results and perfect presentation. (3)
So goals don’t have to necessarily link with achieving excellence? (KB)
Not really. It’s just making yourself a little better. But that doesn’t mean that you’ll achieve excellence. (3)

Embedded in the final comment is an example of a strategy the school employs to establish its ethos of self-improvement. From the beginning of the school year, the goal setting process envelops students within the school culture. I was interested in the rhetorical shift away from excellence to “just making yourself a little bit better”. I questioned the students on whether individuals set themselves aspirational targets:

Well, people who are ambitious will do that. People usually stick to being quite safe with their goals. They do it if they (1) know they can actually achieve their goals. (2) Yeah. (1)

But the teachers do try and encourage you to do something you never thought you could do. (2)

This interchange sheds some insight on defensive repertoires (Covington, 2000). In these terms, setting unchallenging or easily achieved goals constitutes a failure-avoidance strategy, as opposed to a success-oriented approach that demands cognitive self-regulation to actively engage with learning. These articulations concerning how students might participate in goal setting demonstrate the potential for such processes to reinforce defensive responses to learning. An example of how Kanuka Intermediate intervenes when low aspirations manifest is explained by teacher encouragement.

One student in this group had already confirmed personal goals of “results” and “perfect presentation” (3); two other students reflected on whether the level of aspiration represented by their goals had changed over their time at the school:

I haven’t really noticed a difference in year 7 and 8. (2)

Yeah, I’ve stayed pretty much the same but it’s probably cos it’s your last year you want to try as much as you can. Yeah, do your best. (4)

These two reflections illustrate achievement requiring constant effort. The reward for academic or social endeavour is the pride in knowing you have done “your best”. The anticipation of pride acts as a motivator to encourage success-oriented individuals to
strive for excellence (Covington, 2000). However, as considered in Chapter 5, effort intersecting with meritocracy has potent powers to render some scholastic performances as acceptable while constituting a perceived lack of effort on the part of others as abject.

Additional dispositions and attributes appeared to coalesce around a can-do student construct. In the next section I will consider the constitution of a learner well placed to engage with the discourses of excellence through multiple accomplishments, and the emergence of a student subject positioned as oppositional to idealised constructs.

**Multi-accomplishment and increasing educational capital**

By participating in opportunities constitutive of a can-do attitude at Kanuka Intermediate, students can also become involved in performances of diverse interests and abilities that contribute to the multi-accomplished subject discussed in Chapter 3. In terms of excellence, multi-accomplishment may require students to excel across both curricular and extra-curricular areas. Sport offered a common extra-curricular activity that all the students in this group had participated in. Each student had represented the school in at least one sport, but married their sporting endeavours to their academic achievements with differing degrees of ease. For several students, sports reflected a significant part of how they saw themselves: “Um, I see myself as an achieving student [slight laugh]. And I do well in all my work and sporty” (4). Whilst academic achievement warranted a nervous laugh, for this particular student, “sporty” was appended comfortably to the end of the sentence.

During an All About Me! presentation, a second student crafted a slide illustrating numerous sports. The student discussed this slide in the following terms: “This is sport cos I like sport um I play hockey for [province] and I’ve played it for ages and it’s amazing and . . . I play basketball and netball and soccer and cricket and rugby and other things, like, once” (2). Student 2 probably participates in more sports than most, and was clearly passionate about this level of involvement. Student 2 also appeared realistic about the time required to sustain the development of skills, explaining, “when it’s that season, it takes ages,” demonstrating an understanding of the commitment required for exceptional achievement in sports too. Differences emerged in
how students judged their sporting achievements, and whether these achievements were considered good enough.

The high achievement and multiple talents of an idealised all-rounder can create tensions for students who endeavour to produce these accomplishments. One student appeared to be working through a perceived imbalance between sporting and academic achievements:

![PART 3](image)

*Figure 7: "Sport v science and maths"; slide from All About Me! (student 3).*

This particular dilemma was challenging for student 3, who described the problem as being able to “only focus on one subject”. In producing this particular graphic (Figure 7), student 3 incisively portrays academic achievement pitted against sporting achievement, and alludes to a discursive binary that sets the mind against the body. Paradoxically, acceptance of this oppositional binary resists the need for all-round performances, yet the tension remained. The picture was further complicated when the student reiterated the differential valuing regularly accorded to academic and sporting accomplishments: “I guess at school academic subjects take more importance than sports” (3). This view may be reflective of the student’s own values, or may be representative of a broader societal view where sporting achievements carry cultural capital, but may lack academic capital (Fitzpatrick, 2011).
Kanuka Intermediate places high value on sporting, cultural and academic achievements as emphasised in publicity materials, noted by ERO (2012), and evidenced by the achievers’ gallery in the school foyer. The school, therefore, attributes *institutional* or educational capital across all three fields (Fitzpatrick, 2011). Yet the school is not seen to value all achievements equally, demonstrated by the student’s comment that the school privileges academic subjects.

Fitzpatrick (2011) reflects how the mind/body dualism emerged from Enlightenment constructs of the rational subject, for whom the mind provided the defining component of humanity. The hierarchical dualism of mind/body has been sustained over time to align physicality to anti-intellectual dispositions and lower-order skills (Fitzpatrick, 2011). It is difficult to know the influences informing student 3’s view, but the conversation continued in the following way: “I think others see me the way I see myself, but are sometimes jealous about how good I am at academic subjects, but they just rule the sports arena” (3). This student’s consideration of jealousy as a reason for a group of peers to object to academic success illustrates the differential capitals attributed to success in academic and sporting fields. Indeed, the notion of field is invoked by the use of “arena”, a place of performance and competition.

The educational capital of the sporting arena or achievement in school sports appears to be undermined in this case by the rhetorical employment of “they *just* rule…” where *just* acts to diminish the power of sporty students’ performance. An alternative rhetorical use of *just* may indicate an acknowledgement that sports represent the sole domain of the sporty students’ successes. On this basis, student 3 is comparing specialist accomplishment in one field to multi-accomplishment, using *just* to find in favour of the latter.

The reported behaviour of students who “rule the sports arena” could be read as their agentic attempt to disrupt the value attached to academic achievement, and add value to their own sub-cultural sporting capitals. This being the case, some students may be unwilling to engage in becoming an academic can-do subject, preferring sporting accomplishments. The practices discussed by the students in this project offer additional illustrations of resistance to an all-rounder or can-do learner construct.
When idealised subject positions fail

The matter of differential effort and achievement emerged during the focus group activity at a tangent to a question regarding the personal qualities students might need to achieve excellence. One of the students offered a viewpoint that ‘named’ the silent ‘others’ in the discursive environment of excellence. Here is an extract of the conversation to give a sense of how one student’s opinion was met by the group:

What I have seen is that, like, some people just it’s sort of impossible for them to achieve excellence, even personal achievement. They never actually put their heads into their work and actually do something useful. (3)
So what would be the skill or quality that would change that behaviour? (KB)
Er, I’ve just given up thinking about it. (3)
What’s the speech cup [called]? (1)
They haven’t done the speech competition this year. (2)

It almost seems that students 1 and 2 did not hear the initial observation of student 3; their response was complete avoidance of the opinions offered. Such a response suggests the views of student 3 are controversial in some way. Perhaps from a sense of loyalty to their school or unnamed peers, no other student seems willing to support the accusations laid against those perceived as unmotivated to work hard enough. This may have been a matter the other members of the group were unwilling or uneasy to discuss in front of me, either to agree or contradict the points raised. Situations where participants resist engaging with certain matters present an example of how participants can manage an interview and withdraw momentarily (Valentine, 1999). Applying their agency in the process of constructing and maintaining a subject position, students 1 and 2 may have presented themselves in ways they wished to be viewed, in this case avoiding controversy and appearing neutral. In doing so, however, no voice was allocated to the ‘other’ students who purportedly disengage with excellence, and their absence from this research was reinforced for me.

The observations offered by student 3 affects a number of discourses discussed throughout this thesis. The views encompassed in the first sentence challenge discourses of excellence. Excellence for all is rendered questionable or “impossible” for some students. Indeed, the route to personal excellence is blocked since the impression
offered is that some students do not invest in achievement. It may be that students who appear to resist discourses of excellence could be drawing upon defensive repertoires. Covington (2000) describes a self-worth protecting strategy adopted by some students who withhold effort in anticipation of failure in their studies. The reasoning behind this strategy is that not trying provides students with a potential cause of their failure. In this context, I am taking “their work” to mean academic studies, so the comment suggesting students are unwilling to work acts in opposition to meritocratic discourses advocating effort as the route to success. Rather than risk appearing incompetent in their learning, some students comply with the claim that their low performances are due to their lack of effort. When meritocracy dominates educational discourses, one outcome of withholding effort is the potential risks of condemnation by fellow students, not to mention the implications for students’ academic progress.

A second judgement appears in this comment, represented by “do something useful”. If doing is the embodiment of a discourse, then the students alluded to here not only appear to object to hard work, but reject meritocracy. The discussion of how peers engage with academic achievement introduces consideration of how identities are validated. The positioning of anonymous students as ‘others’ in relation to a meaningful, meritocratic, and academic subject is compounded by “never actually put their heads into their work”. Drawing upon the discursive mind/body dualism, this comment measures worth in terms of the work of the mind. The identities of students who appear achievement-adverse and/or effort-adverse become constrained within discourses that prioritise the academic potential of a student, and a willingness to work hard. One student suggested the route to demonstrating acceptable identities lies in “having the right attitude” (4). What that ‘right attitude’ might be was left ambiguous.

The comment emerged during the focus group and was met with acceptance by other members. There may have been amongst this group of students an implicit understanding of what constitutes the right attitude. It could be the term has a rhetorical, common sense status that defies the need for further elaboration. In terms of the discourses operating at Kanuka Intermediate, the right attitude involves a can-do approach to learning.
The students’ identity work discussed in this chapter indicates the positioning of a can-do subject that depends on a student’s capacity for multi-accomplishment in order to realise excellence. Choosing the ‘right’ personal goals may better support a student to achieve personal excellence, particularly if those goals focus on future learning. Choosing mind over body will facilitate acquisition of the ‘right’ type of educational capital available in school, a position we have learned some students might reject. Attempting to achieve the flexible and multi-skilled performances of an all-rounder relies on students choosing a ‘can-do’ approach to taking and making the most of opportunities. Yet how far the ‘right’ choice facilitates opportunity may be shaped by the types of capitals students possess. As Bourdieu (2010) notes, the cultural resources available to students are influenced by socialisation within their families. The next section will consider students’ reflections on how families contribute to their identities and their learning.

**Family values and culture**

I did not specifically ask the students about their families, family values, or cultural heritage, but three students introduced to conversations details about their home lives and backgrounds. In this section, I will consider how students thought about the role families play in achievement from two different perspectives. The first will focus on a suggested transition from parental influence on academic performance to personal responsibility. In contrast, the second will explore how a family legacy played a significant role in one student’s achievements.

During the focus group activity, a conversation developed about how to support students who may seem unambitious in terms of achieving excellence. The discussion turned towards parental input and home life, and the following comment was offered to the group:

It’s only partly to do with how you’re brought up. (2)
So do you think that parental support is part of it then? (KB)
Yeah, I think it’s a huge part. (3)
Yeah, if you’ve been neglected then, then you’re going to struggle [slight pause] for the rest of your life.
So is that something that needs to be in the guide? Make sure your parents get involved? (KB)

Well, earlier in your life that it’s important … But when you get to this age, then you become more independent but it would still be hard to go through that neglect, so that you can make, like, try and do things yourself if you haven’t had much. But, I don’t know. (2)

I think it’s the first step for changing their attitude is not getting paid any pocket money until you, like, do something for getting the pocket money. If it just comes into your hand, just like that, you never learn to work for anything. (3)

Several discursive resources appear within this extract of conversation, notably, building the foundations for success, resilience, responsibilisation, and meritocracy. Student 2 draws upon the importance of early parental support. Vincent and Ball (2006) recorded the efforts that middle class parents were willing to undertake to ensure their pre-school children had the ‘right’ or ‘best’ start in life. Student 2 then goes on to suggest that a time comes when children transition to being “more independent”, and implies that students at “this age” are more responsible for their own achievement. Social and economic hardship are recognised as potential barriers to success, but “it’s only partly to do with how you are brought up,” and “you can . . . try and do things yourself.” There is a sense that student 2 is still thinking through this point of view by ending on “I don’t know”. The uncertain suggestion that students who have experienced hardship might still “try” calls upon a capacity for resilience.

Building resilience through hard work emerges in the final comment from student 3, and is linked to “attitude”. The right attitude for this student is not one of privilege and entitlement, rather learning to work for success. Student 3 uses the context of receiving pocket money to offer a broader discursive application of meritocracy. Student 3 seems to imply that when pocket is gifted, rather than earned, a child loses out on the opportunity to learn the value of hard work. Parental pandering is dispensed with by both students involved in this conversation, in favour of students engaging with meritocratic effort and autonomous responsibility for their achievements.

Managing oneself in such a way could be said to illustrate a can-do approach to achieving success. Effort joins the can-do attributes discussed previously in this chapter;
principally, setting goals, engaging with learning, and participating in opportunities. The achievement of excellence, in this regard, increasingly becomes a solo endeavour.

The second discussion in this section illustrates how the influence of family can operate differently in students’ identity work. The importance of ancestry emerged throughout one student’s individual interview, and revealed how family values can become manifest in students’ achievements. Student 1 commenced the All About Me! presentation with a slide depicting family members, and explained how interests in travel and music “has gone through my family for generations”. When asked whether there were any ideas that the student had chosen not to include, student 1 offered the following response: “Something that also kind of really shaped me that I didn’t go into was the fact that my great-granddad lived in the same house as I do now. So I kind of live where my ancestors lived”. For this student, a sense of place, and time were linked to the home. Massey (1992) discusses how space is constituted through social relations and lived practices. For student 1, home and identity appear symbolically related not only by current relationships and social practices, but also by those of past generations of family members.

When asked about a greatest personal achievement at school, student 1 replied: “The [charity] support, that was pretty special cos, like, my great-granddad was Head of that, so that was a part of me … I’m not religious like he was, but I’d done something.” Student 1 had organised a fund-raising event with some friends for a certain charity, which the student’s great-grandfather was once Head of, making the event particularly significant. The students involved in organising the event received acknowledgement in school for their actions, an achiever and a citizenship patch. I discussed how the citizenship patch appeared to carry less sub-cultural capital amongst the group in Chapter 5; in this case, the citizenship patch was accorded a different kind of merit. Being able to enact and sustain family values in a way that was meaningful and tangible meant that this student could embody ancestry “as part of me.” The cultural capital of charitable acts within the family provided the motivation for personal excellence in ways that school cultures and incentive systems cannot. This particular example of citizenship learning demonstrates how families clearly act as powerful informers of social and cultural values, and who also have the potential to enrich what counts as
achievement at school. The final discussion of findings in this chapter will investigate how discourses of excellence affect students’ emotional responses to their achievements.

**The emotional labour of excellence**

The discursive constructs of the can-do student and all-round performer, discussed in the first two sections of this chapter, are based on the assumptions that success is uncomplicated, and that students readily accepted personal achievement. In this section, I challenge the common sense implicit in these assumptions by considering two situations when students’ negotiations of their achievement appeared troubled or uncertain. The situations differ quite markedly, but both relate to exceptional achievement. The first experience presents an example of how even when achievement receives public acknowledgement in school, self-doubt can leave a student questioning their own worthiness for receiving such an accomplished reward. The second situation considers how a student responds when exceptional accomplishment is not recognised.

Despite investing in personal excellence, setting ambitious goals, working hard, and embracing opportunity, it would seem that some students might still feel overwhelmed when their personal commitment and efforts are recognised. One student described receiving the highest award at school:

Mm, um, [slowly] well, I got the, last year for that year at the final assembly, [faster] there are certificates that are given out, and I got the [highest] award for, er, like excellence in all domains or something, so [quietly] I got a really good certificate. (2)

Student 2’s reluctance and hesitation to confirm the award is evident in the deliberating sounds and changes of speed and volume in this passage of speech. To add to the overall sense of self-deprecation, the student adjoins “or something” to “excellence in all domains”, representing a rhetorical move to underplay the exceptional performances clearly demanded across the curriculum and school life to be the recipient of this award. Student 2 must have been proud of this accomplishment because the revelation of achieving the highest award came in response to the question, what is your greatest
achievement at school? Yet the tone of conversation suggested a degree of discomfort. Student 2 proceeded to explain:

- It was a surprise for everyone. (2)
- Why was it a surprise? (KB)
- Well, cos it’s a big competition, [both laugh] but I really wanted a certificate and I got a really big one. (2)

Student 2 alludes to the quality of competition for awards at the end of year presentation while still maintaining a certain amount of disbelief. Despite having set a goal to achieve a certificate, student 2 remained surprised at the level of the award actually attained. In Chapter 5, I introduced the idea of the big-fish-little-pond effect, which describes the potential of a high achieving group of peers to reduce a student's academic self-concept (Parker et al., 2013). Student 2 appeared self-consciously aware of the relative attainment of others in school despite being a high achiever too. I explored the idea of competitors:

- Well, what were they [other students] doing that was different to you? (KB)
- Ah, pretty much the same things that I’m doing, like just pretty smart people. (2)
- What do you think gave you the edge? (KB)
- Oh, cos I probably did the most things that year and got, yeah, I had the most patches, so that might of [pause] I don’t know really. (2)

The tall poppy syndrome generally describes a context where achievement is considered fortuitous, as opposed to the outcome of a person’s endeavours and ability, which could be the case here (McClure et al., 2011). Student 2 has recognised the accomplishments of peers and makes a comparison between performances, but gaining the edge is cautiously attributed to “probably did the most things”. Nevertheless, student 2 remains uncertain. Explaining student 2’s apparent reticence in discussing the award for excellence in all domains is difficult on the basis of one interview. The research and interview context itself may have contributed to the student’s response. Student 2’s attempts to negotiate the experience of receiving recognition is noteworthy in terms of personal excellence, and indeed, exceptional excellence. The celebratory discourses of
can-do, all-round achievement, accompanied by assumptions that success is easily met, can also be performed with modesty and self-reflection, as is the case for this student.

If we believe that students’ learning goals are positively associated with affective reactions, for example, pride or satisfaction in accomplishments, then it follows that the affects of success may be undermined when achievements are not acknowledged. The second example concerns a situation where a student participated in a team that won a regional competition. From the student’s perspective, however, errors occurred in school such that this achievement was not properly recognised. I asked the student about the ways that achievements are celebrated at school, and the following conversation ensued:

Um, well, kids, people recognise that you done, um, [pause] sometimes they’re not though. Because my friend and I won [competition], we were the overall winners this year, and, um, the week after no one was saying anything. And in the newsletter, when they were talking about [the competition], they had a picture of another person in [the competition]. And so that was kind of gutting afterwards, cos we worked really, really hard on it. And after last year, when we came third and nothing happened. But this year! We were really gutted. (1)

It appears student 1 may have initially intended to give a neutral answer, but after some hesitation, launched into an emotive description of frustration and disappointment. On the basis of student 1’s account, it seems a series of administrative errors may have occurred whereby the competition winners’ achievements were not celebrated as the student had expected. Student 1 seems to concur with an idea discussed previously where student 3 outlined a view that schools determine what counts as institutional or educational capital. Student 1’s experience demonstrates that when academic stakes are high and schools are judged to distribute educational capital unfairly, the consequences for students can be demoralising or distressing. Student 1 explained that the school did acknowledge the winners in the following newsletter. Unfortunately, it seems by that the point the damage was done.

I asked student 1 to propose alternative ways of ensuring achievements are acknowledged and celebrated. The following suggestion was offered:
Um, I think they should just be a bit more aware of what their students are doing, and, well, you can’t promote everyone, but if someone has achieved something and done really well, then they should say, “well done, we do recognise what you’re doing and it’s really helpful for our school.” And things like that. (1)

There is a sense of student 1’s ongoing disappointment in this response. The use of “they” serves to hold the school responsible for the student’s distress. At the same time, student 1 appears aware that incentive and reward systems need to be manageable, but also must function effectively to validate students’ achievements in school and the wider community. Indeed, “it’s really helpful for our school” infers an understanding that students’ achievements add value to a school’s reputation. As is noted elsewhere in the thesis, accomplished students enrich a school’s educational capital in the market for enrolments (Tsoidis, 2006; Vaughan, 2002; Vincent & Ball, 2006).

I interpret in student 1’s experience of feeling let down by school that excellence, whether exceptional or personal, is not quite the individualised task it might first appear. At the very least, achievements need some form of validation to acquire value or educational capital. Therefore, achievements require reciprocal contributions and commitments on the parts of the student engaging with discourses of excellence and the school promoting them. If one partner is remiss or fails the other, then the enterprise of achieving excellence is compromised.

Summary

I commenced this chapter by identifying the emergence of a can-do learner enshrined within the New Zealand Curriculum (2007). I now propose that the can-do, all-round performer intent on personal excellence represents an elusive construct. The promotion of can-do approaches to learning by Kanuka Intermediate demonstrates how the school constructs a discourse that is simultaneously an effect of wider educational discourses, in this case of the New Zealand Curriculum (2007), and of broader cultural discourses too. The can-do school culture appears further complicated by persuasive discourses of individuality, responsibility, and meritocratic effort. The idealised nature
of this scholastic subject, however, does not preclude students’ efforts to embody can-do attitudes and achieve multi-accomplishments.

Personal investment in high attainment and multi-accomplishment is not a simplistic enterprise. The experiences of students in this project suggest that those who achieve well at school can also meet resistance to their performances of excellence. Challenges present in the form of internal negotiations of success, competition, and exceptional achievement, which affectively complicate accomplishment. The interrelational processes of crafting identities clash as students attempt to validate their achievements within a performative and evaluative educational culture that constitutes the identities of some students as beyond the boundaries of can-do acceptability. The clearest example in this chapter relates to the discussion initiated by student 3, regarding peers whose perceived efforts to learn are questioned and positioned as incompatible to achieving excellence. Despite Kanuka Intermediate’s endeavours to value achievements across academic, sporting, and cultural fields, a hierarchy of achievement appears to exist for some students.

Respite from dominant constructs of excellence and achievement have emerged in the ways that students in my study have drawn upon resources more uniquely part of their internal lives and their home lives. Students offered insights as to how family values balanced, inspired, and affirmed their learning. One such example involved a student attributing worthiness to an accomplishment that benefitted members of the wider community, an act of excellence in citizenship that reflected her family’s heritage. The educational capital of citizenship awards appeared less relevant for other students in the study. The intersection of home, school, and peers illustrate why the project of identity making is such a complicated process. Assumptions embedded in the construct of learning as a can-do project appear to offer diverse opportunities for being and doing. Yet the discursive resources of meritocracy, multi-accomplishment, and individual responsibility continue to play a significant role in how students make sense of their learning, operating at the same time to enable and constrain ‘acceptable’ identities at school.

In the final chapter, I will review how my research has answered my original research question in light of my findings. I have located this thesis within an existing
field of literature; hence consideration ensues of how my research can contribute to the study of students’ identity work in school. My findings are evaluated in terms of implications for educational policy and practices that impact on teaching and learning. I will then return to ethical reflexivity to assess what I have learnt from the research process with regard to strategies for maintaining ethical symmetry with my participants, and rigour in my construction of data analysis. Finally, I will draw this thesis to a conclusion by suggesting possibilities for further research.
Chapter 7: The Discourses of Excellence and Student Identity

Excellence as a value in the *New Zealand Curriculum* (2007) has placed the concept prominently and directly within the daily educational experience of many students. Yet when excellence is simultaneously applied to all students and to those who demonstrate exceptional performance, the complex and contradictory nature of the construct emerges. The educational value of excellence for all appears to represent laudable aims, and implies that schools will address differentials in student achievement. By providing opportunities for students to develop excellence as a value in their learning and their achievement, schools will begin to set the direction for enhancing students’ subsequent life opportunities post-education (*NZC*, 2007). Implicit in this goal is a school context of high quality leadership and teaching, a learning environment where teacher expectations are consistently high and appropriately matched to diverse students’ needs. The literature reviewed in this thesis seems to agree on these goals of excellence, irrespective of the conceptual or theoretical standpoint. Tensions arise in considerations of the most effective or fair educational approach to take. My research offers insights into how students directly and indirectly experience excellence.

What started as an investigation into the general influence of excellence, evolved into an exploration of multiple discourses of excellence implicit in students’ efforts to make sense of their achievement, their learning, and their scholastic identities. This thesis originally questioned how students make sense of their identities as learners and their learning within the potentially oxymoronic discourse of excellence for all? The findings revealed a discursive context more complicated than I had imagined.

Reflecting on how economic imperatives have come to dictate attainment goals in the curriculum in many OECD nations, Van Avermaet et al. (2011) suggest that awarding credentials has become a major goal of public education. The impact on educational policy is to aspire for excellence for all. Adopting this policy has invoked greater governmental control in many education systems in terms of increased monitoring and evaluation, systems of standard setting, and standardised assessments or
high stakes testing, constituting measures to inform competition between schools (Van Avermaet et al., 2011). All these features apply to the New Zealand education system. This thesis has demonstrated, however, that schools in New Zealand have opportunities to approach excellence differentially.

Cultural understandings of excellence, for example, allow for collective interpretations. Through the notion of kotahitanga, competency and autonomy can serve as benefits to the whole community, as well as lead to self-improvement, on the basis of the interrelatedness that operates between the individual and their community (Graham et al., 2010). Te Kotahitanga describes a research-based approach to raising Māori student achievement in mainstream schools by valuing the cultural ways of being that Māori students bring to school (Bishop et al., 2009). Schools can apply this value to each student, but tensions created by increasingly rigid government directives privileging performative excellence have the potential to undermine practices striving for differential excellence. The flexibility for excellence implied in the *New Zealand Curriculum* (2007) may become compromised.

A number of scholars are critical in their reflections on excellence in education. Hartley (2006) suggests excellence joins an e-litany of contemporary educational policy, alongside efficiency, effectiveness and equity. Describing the term as government rhetoric, Gillies (2007) argues excellence plays on its emotive properties, while failing to address the more significant causes of inequality in education. The appeal of excellence to both sides of the political spectrum, according to Ng (2008), contributes to the suggestive power of excellence for all, which is malleable and ambiguous. Significantly for students’ daily experience of excellence, Lucey and Reay (2002) propose that excellence in achievement is measured and maintained against failure in achievement, effectively excluding a considerable number of students while recognising some. Using a qualitative approach, the purpose of my research was an attempt to make concrete what excellence means in the classroom from intermediate students’ perspectives.
The research question reviewed

To resolve the overarching research question: How do individual students in one New Zealand school construct a subject position for themselves as learners within the potentially oxymoronic discourse of excellence in achievement for all? I will address my findings to the three sub-questions in the following section. The first sub-question considers how learners make sense of excellence.

Making sense of excellence

The students’ considerations of excellence exposed three dominant discursive constructs at play in their identity work: elite excellence, personal excellence, and a localised construct I termed excellence by improvement. It is understandable that excellence is not easy to achieve. As a goal excellence is aspirational, and as an outcome excellence requires exceptional performance, whether in comparison to others or in terms of one’s own expectations. When schools institute excellence as a value, however, the approach that many schools seem to offer students is personal excellence (www.educationcounts.govt.nz, 2012). ‘Doing one’s best’, or personal excellence operates as a persuasive educational discourse, as discussed in Chapter 3. The students in this study appeared to engage with personal excellence, and indeed other discourses of excellence, seemingly untroubled by the malleability of the term. Students alluded less frequently to differential excellence, although the construct seemed more important to one student in particular. This situation might be explained by the apparent discursive primacy of elite excellence.

Elite excellence calls into question equity in education by following an international trend for accountability, often employing high-stakes testing or standardised assessments (Codd, 2005; Duru-Bellat & Mingat, 2011; Gillies, 2007). Yet knowing how their attainment compared to others mattered for three of the four students in this study. Covington (2000) reflects that students’ academic goals may either depend on competition and outperformance of peers, or relate to developing competency and a deeper appreciation for what is being learnt. Both approaches support students’ engagement with the discourse of elite excellence.
Of the three most dominant constructs, ‘personal best’ or personal excellence appears most likely to achieve the aim of excellence for all, although also replicates concerns expressed by scholars that excellence is ambiguous. Some students felt that while the notion of personal best can accommodate differential levels of attainment, achieving personal excellence is more dependent on the amount of effort students are willing to commit to their studies and their participation at school. The notion of effort refers to pervasive discourses of meritocracy and individual responsibility, which I will consider as discursive resources in a later section. Students’ understanding of their personal best remained unmeasured, but they offered some quantifiability in the suggestion of personal improvement.

Excellence by improvement appeared less viable to some of the students, being perceived as an expectation of learners to continually improve without end. This apparent lack of bounded meaning rendered the excellence by improvement construct fragile. Nevertheless, students appeared to retain a commitment to the value. Students resolved the paradox of continual improvement by drawing on the discourse of exceptional or elite excellence, suggesting, “at one stage you’ll be up to the top” (1). Despite the school’s apparent endeavours to universalise excellence, the students continued to reiterate the primacy of elite excellence.

The students demonstrated the potential to simultaneously draw on multiple discourses of excellence throughout the study. My interpretation of how the students understand leaning and excellence suggests that the students could generate and adapt academic goals according to the learning or performance context. Indeed, students appeared to maintain both performance and learning goals in the same task when the situation provided for both approaches to achievement. Ironically, participation in the International Competitions and Assessments for Schools (ICAS) examinations fostered one such example. Students simultaneously set performance and learning goals by comparing their achievement with peers, expressed desires to do well for their own sense of achievement, and responded to feedback provided by ICAS in their own learning. In this respect, the students navigated a terrain of multiple discourses of excellence to their own purposes.
The ambiguity, malleability and emotive properties that render educational excellence as conceptually weak to some scholars, may be the very factors that make excellence appealing to some students, and indeed schools. Where achievement cultures in schools privilege individual potential, definitions of excellence will need to be flexible. Kanuka Intermediate emphasises a learning culture of self-improvement to motivate students towards achieving personal excellence.

Motivation is shown to operate as a complex and at times unpredictable process in this study, where internal and extrinsic influences shape students’ responses. The second research question explores how students perceive their motivations and asks how do students identify affirmation at school?

**Excellence recognised and rewarded**

Institutional practices contribute much to students’ understanding of what counts as excellence in achievement, although these are not the only influences informing students’ understandings of excellence. Educational traditions are well rehearsed in acknowledging exceptional performance, so the challenge appears to be implementing practices that will facilitate and reward excellence for all. Kanuka Intermediate’s incentive and reward systems endeavour to value students’ performances in diverse fields; academic, sporting, and cultural, and yet at various times the students reflected on the educational capital bestowed on academic achievement. When students construct their understanding of educational capital on institutional norms, alternative incentives and rewards intended to recognise broader forms of achievement may seem inferior.

The matter of weekly school certificates presented an insight into a common practice in many schools towards maintaining differential excellence. The students not only recognised the unspoken rules of the reward game when it came to certificates, but also played their part in the game. Three of the students appeared to accept that certificates offer an alternative form of recognition for student achievements that might otherwise appear unexceptional. One student went further, suggesting the school needed more approaches to recognising diverse performances of personal best. Students described differential excellence even if they did not use the term. This particular student demonstrated an understanding of how recognition and reward practices have a
role in creating greater equity and excellence for more students than is possible in schools emphasising elite excellence.

The educational capital of achievements defined by elite excellence was further challenged when one student reflected on the role family history plays in how value is attributed to achievement. The significance of family values enabled this student to identify a citizenship activity as their greatest personal achievement at school despite of her diverse academic accomplishments.

A second student offered a description of interactions with particular peers not involved in the research project that inferred some groups of students in school resist dominant forms of educational capital. Performances of educational capital deemed acceptable by teachers became a source of tension for this student who had encountered name-calling. The student suggested others in school value their own sporting achievements more highly than the academic achievements of their peers. My observations of the school site indicated that sporting and academic achievements are both highly recognised at Kanuka Intermediate. That some students attempt to tease or denigrate peers for academic achievement, while others respond similarly to sporting achievements, implies students interpret accomplishments and acknowledgements differently to the formal system.

Achieving a balance in school incentive and reward systems to support recognition of differential accomplishments seems increasingly offset by an educational climate steered by government policy towards norm-referenced performativity (Thrupp & Easter, 2012). As members of the first cohort of students to participate in National Standards, the students in this study were aware of standardised assessments, but scarcely mentioned the process. The students’ apparent ease with accepting national standards as a feature of school life may testify to how their teachers adapted to and implemented changes, and/or the insignificance of standards to their learning. Furthermore, the groups’ advice to future students achieving excellence ignored performative outcomes and placed emphasis instead on getting involved in school life and making the most of opportunities.
Students’ valuing opportunity highlights how important it is for schools to provide a rich learning experience. A major implication of education systems adopting hierarchical standardised approaches to measuring achievement has been the narrowing of curricula provision in schools (Tsoldis, 2006). Thrupp and Easter (2012) note this practice emerging in some New Zealand primary schools. I did not fully explore the types of opportunities the students had in mind, however, Van Avermaet et al. (2011) reflect that interpretation of opportunity requires attention. While enrichment opportunities are increasingly offered to gifted students, their under-achieving peers often encounter remedial opportunities to raise their attainment in core subjects. Remedial activities can reinforce the position of failure, and potentially offer more of the same teaching practices that were unproductive for students in the first place (Van Avermaet et al., 2011). Opportunity, along with excellence, is therefore likely to be experienced differentially.

The relevance of opportunity to excellence in achievement for all was prominent in the production of an idealised scholastic subject. To achieve all-round success, by implication, requires access to multiple opportunities. While some students struggled with the challenges of all-round accomplishment, opportunity represented a common sense discourse in this study. The following section reflects on the third research question concerning the discursive resources at students’ disposal to make sense of excellence.

**Discursive resources and excellence**

Of the multiple discursive resources that students applied to their crafting of scholastic identities and leaning, three stood out as dominant: opportunity, meritocracy, and individual responsibility. From the reflections of students in this study, I propose that these three discourses overlap to produce an idealised, can-do scholastic subject. In the current educational context, I would argue that the reciprocity operating between opportunity, meritocracy, and individual responsibility contributes to what counts as accomplishment. The student who demonstrates these can-do dispositions may be best placed to engage with discourses of excellence.

The endeavours of the study participants to perform and maintain these discursive resources presented various challenges and tensions. Students constructed
meritocracy variously as effort, talent, passion, responsibility, and attitude, illustrating how particular discourses operate and gain momentum in relation to complementary ideas. The entrenchment of meritocracy within students’ understandings of excellence meant that the discourse could sustain a number of contradictions, such as the expounded benefits of innate ability or the potential barriers created by social disadvantage, and still remain intact as excellence for all.

Meritocracy, as the students in this study constructed it, seemed framed within discourses of opportunity and individual responsibility. Making the right choices from opportunities available to students, and subsequently taking responsibility for those choices were perceived by the study’s participants as integral to achieving excellence. The reluctance of some in school to take up opportunities was a situation that could be resolved, according to the participant group, by demonstrating the “right attitude” (4).

The right attitude at this school involves a can-do approach to learning. Having acknowledged the place for opportunities and personal effort in shaping can-do attitudes, the students reflected on taking responsibility for their actions and choices. Anticipating their growing autonomy and independence as emerging adolescents, the students positioned themselves as architects of their own learning trajectories. This responsibilisation of the can-do subject has the potential to marginalise those students who do not identify with an individualistic or independent position.

The study participants managed their own engagements with the can-do subject position with differing degrees of ease. All students expressed affirmation of their place in school, referring to relationships with teachers or allegiance with school values. According to publicity materials, these features of school life provide the foundation of a can-do approach to learning at Kanuka Intermediate. The hard-working, motivated, and self-directed learner construct already seems like quite an accomplishment, yet falls short of the idealised, can-do, all-rounder if lacking in multi-accomplishments.

The can-do learner is an all-rounder subject with a scholastic portfolio that celebrates both school and extra-curricular successes. Student responses constructed their engagement with all-round accomplishment in different ways. Three students drew upon defensive repertoires to down play their accomplishments, often appearing modest
in their responses. One student attempted to rationalise the advantages of specialising in an area of personal strength, countering multi-accomplishment. Having the capacity to apply can-do attitudes across multiple fields became a site of anxiety, and the students in this study, each successful in different ways, grappled with their successes.

The emotional labour of achieving excellence did not simply manifest in the effort required to excel, or be seen as successful. Finding her exceptional achievements insufficiently recognised became a source of frustration and disappointment for one student, when human error meant an achievement was inappropriately recognised. This situation illustrates the emotional consequences for students when they feel that they have complied with all of the scholastic expectations placed upon them, but are let down by the very practices that espouse excellence in the first place. The work of achieving excellence is highlighted as a shared enterprise, where learners and schools are rendered mutually vulnerable and reliant on each other for validating excellence.

The internal lives of students, their place within school, and perhaps more significantly amongst their peers, intersect with the personal and cultural resources students bring to school, thereby complicating the aim of excellence. If the study participants, already capable of high achievement, struggled with excellence, the question arises as to how schools might operationalise excellence for all?

**Excellence within the broader field of study**

This thesis responds to Reay’s (2010) call to focus research on the processes of young people’s identity work in school. The research builds on Youdell’s (2006) contention that young people’s identities as students and learners are constituted within the minutiae of everyday school life. By offering an exploration of how excellence as a value espoused by the *New Zealand Curriculum* (2007) impacts on students’ understanding of their learning and achievement, this thesis contributes to the established body of New Zealand research that investigates children’s and young people’s identities. The point of difference for my research is how excellence in intermediate schools functions in discursively emotive and moralistic ways to impact on students’ sense of self. An underlying assumption of excellence is that it is borne readily and with ease. The students in this study not only engaged considerable
academic effort to achieve in and out of school, but also invested considerable emotional labour.

For the most part, my research is iteratively informed by other research, and rather than necessarily seeking to generate new knowledge, I contend that my findings complement and build on existing understandings of identity. Alton-Lee (2008) advocates that iterative research in education continues to create a stronger evidence base to inform positive changes for diverse learners. As the performative climate of primary and intermediate school education in New Zealand changes to accommodate national standards, the prevalence of an idealised, can-do all-rounder who reflects the celebratory discourses of educational excellence may come to feature in the identity work of more students. Schools’ efforts to provide rich and varied learning opportunities could acquire greater significance if students are to be shielded from discourses of failure that appear to accompany excellence in performative educational cultures. The next section will consider implications for learning and teaching within the oxymoronic discourse of excellence for all, and reflects on the question of whether aiming for equity in education is compatible with striving for excellence.

**Implications**

A substantial body of research points to teachers as a significant source of variance in making a difference to students’ achievement (Alton-Lee, 2008; Bishop et al., 2009; Dinham & Rowe, 2007). The role of teachers, and the relationships that form between teachers and students have been shown to exercise critical influence on students’ engagement with schooling, learning and achievement. Reflecting on New Zealand research into differential achievement, Dinham and Rowe (2007) note that in New Zealand variance in achievement is more likely to occur within schools, between teacher/class groups, than between schools. The findings of my thesis reinforce existing educational imperatives to ensure that the quality of teaching is consistent within schools.

**High quality teaching**

In terms of students experiencing equitable opportunities to achieve, Bishop et al. (2009) advocate a discursive classroom, a space where the diverse knowledge and
understandings that students bring to school are respected and incorporated into flexible teaching and learning. Such an approach recognises a sense of self as a starting point for learning, and indeed for teaching, as teachers are required to adopt reflexive strategies that “treasure” (student 1) students’ uniqueness. The heterogeneity of students becomes an asset for teaching and learning. In accepting and valuing diversity, the discursive classroom calls into question the need for a can-do subject, which risks imposing cultural homogeneity on the student body (Bishop et al., 2009). Avermaet et al. (2011) identify a further risk; compelling all students to demonstrate the same ambitious, self-driven identities sets in place a “perverse mechanism” (p. 11), where the education system caters to excellence, while students take on the responsibility for assuring equity. Defining excellence in simplistic terms of meritocratic effort and endeavour ignores the nuanced circumstances of individual students’ lives and cultures. Such a situation reflects Gillie’s (2007) assertion that governments lack the will to address inequalities in education, and turn instead to rhetorical excellence. Addressing disparities in educational achievement and defining differential excellence could begin with considering what counts as achievement.

Redefining excellence in achievement

Ironically, performative academic discourses that position excellence in relation to failure may provide underachieving students with a 'get-out clause'. If students believe their failure to achieve is the result of a system that allows only an elite few to excel, they can rationalise their performance in terms of an ineffective and unequal system (Covington, 2000). Indeed, there are many educationalists who argue that policies informing competition between schools have generated inequalities within educational systems, thereby contributing to differential achievement (see for example, Lauder et al., 1999). Alternatively, students’ avoidance of the implications of failure represents a defensive repertoire insulating them from the fear of failure. Defensive repertoires act in opposition to excellence for all, signalling a fear and subsequent disengagement with discourses of excellence. The challenge to schools is to redefine achievement in ways that operate inclusively of different achievements.

Recognising differential or differentiated achievements between students is not the same as lowering expectations, rather collaborating with students to co-construct
learning trajectories that recognise students’ differing competencies, motivations and ambitions. A similar system, for example, operates in Finland with apparent success. Drawing on students’ motivations can create the conditions in schools to engage students in setting learning goals that are meaningful. The experience of students at Kanuka Intermediate, where a form of this strategy is in place, suggests the process of setting challenging personal goals, however, can be tenuous. Covington (2000) advises that enabling learning goals requires schools to make explicit to students what personal excellence looks like, since students benefit from being aware of the relationship between goal attainment and ‘payoff’, a term used by student 2 and Covington. Employing incentive systems that embody competitive ‘ability games’ will invariably lead some students to strive for goals only as long as success is assured (Covington, 2000). Incentive systems could, therefore, more effectively facilitate students’ capacity to engage with their learning.

Engaging students in high aspirations for their learning takes an approach that rejects individualised responsibility in favour of shared responsibility for students’ progression and achievement. In effect, the reciprocity of student/teacher/home relations indicated by Bishop et al. (2009) would ideally underpin moves towards establishing greater equity in achievement by valuing the contextual features of a child’s life as an asset that informs and diversifies learning.

Despite Kanuka Intermediate’s endeavours to recognise diverse achievements, students’ perceptions of the reward system demonstrated the primacy of elite excellence. The implication is that schools could create a discursive environment where the educational capital attributed to different achievements is seen by students as having some equivalence. Unless students regard excellence as having a broad and more equitable application, excellent accomplishments may remain exceptional and elusive for all but a few students.

The implications considered here reflect the competing tensions between elite and differential excellence. That excellence and equity are present as values in the New Zealand Curriculum (2007) presents schools with a dilemma of how to maintain both. The most striking implication from this thesis is that dominant discourses of excellence in the forms suggested by my findings render excellence and equity as incompatible.
Ethical reflexivity and investigating excellence

I now move to consider the ethical decisions that have contributed to my own learning as a researcher. A number of “ethically important moments” (Guillemin & Gillam, 2004, p. 265) occurred during the course of this research project, moments that called for reflexive responses or decisions. I learned that while procedural ethics aim to prepare the researcher for eventualities, the contingent and unpredictable effects of working with schools and young people can require a considerable amount of adaptability on the part of the researcher. In this section, I will present some key ethically important moments that have both informed my research practice in this project, and contributed methodological insights for future research.

The first key ethical dilemma I faced concerned gaining access to the school to meet with my student participants once all had returned their consent forms. The school principal was acting as my point of liaison for arranging visits, yet, as the most in-demand member of a school community, principals can be difficult to make contact with. Valentine (1999) warns of the structural complexities of gaining access to schools and how chains of communication can be time-consuming. As time passed, I was unable to confirm dates to meet with participants. I felt the pressures of maintaining momentum in my research process, and building on the initial enthusiasm and willingness of the students. I faced the added challenge that three of my four participants were due to leave the school at the end of the school year. Asking a supervisor to intervene was not a step I had wanted to take, but I felt that I had exhausted all other options.

The situation I faced highlighted the importance of having a relationship with those involved at the site of research, both for the ethical reasons discussed in Chapter 4 and to resolve logistical issues. That one of my supervisors facilitated my subsequent access to the school suggests I had not sufficiently established a relationship. The consequences of the delay impacted on my research design and how I chose to proceed with the research activities in light of the remaining time available and the imminent end of the school year. The outcome was to withdraw the fourth research question intended for research with teachers.
My original research design included the sub-question: *Which discourses do teachers/pedagogical leaders draw upon in their endeavours towards excellence for all?* The decision to focus on students’ voices in one respect was an ethically proactive position in my research. Adults can treat children’s voices in research as requiring authentication, therefore, privileging children’s voices resolves this (Christensen & James, 2006; Thomson, 2008). Yet, the Board of Trustees and principal had agreed to involvement in the research project on the basis of the information provided to them, which included the investigation of leadership and teaching staff perspectives. Removing the possibility for staff voice had the potential to reduce the role of adults and the pedagogical perspective in the research.

In the end, I believe I have maintained an ethical commitment to the school. Throughout the analysis and writing process, I have remained aware that perspectives offered by the student participants are situated in and informed by their school lives. Indeed, I proposed in Chapter 2 that using a poststructural frame would facilitate an acceptance of the contingent nature of students’ perspectives and experiences (Youdell, 2006). Where I have referenced materials in the public domain, these are materials that the school has ownership of and has approved for public interaction, although admittedly perhaps not for research purposes. Mindful of this, I have used a codename for the school, and have paraphrased all publicly sourced data. In the last section, I will suggest future research into students’ understanding of excellence that includes teachers’ perspectives. With a responsibility for developing children as learners and future citizens, the discursive resources of teachers and educational leaders have the potential to contribute much to understanding excellence.

Thomson (2013) refers to the *construction* of data in the research process, an idea that evokes the power of the researcher, but also suggests collaboration with research participants. While it was clear that the students demonstrated different levels of openness in their interviews and during the focus group activity, I also interpreted hesitation in their decisions to share, at times, deeply personal information about their lives. The challenge, therefore, was to balance students’ agentic capacity to manage the information they chose to share whilst deciding which quotes and accompanying analysis to include in this research thesis. This tension was heightened by there being
only four students and one school, presenting issues with protecting participants’ anonymity. Having a single research setting need not necessarily exacerbate ethical decision-making, however, in the case of this research project I believe it played a significant role. Reflecting on Christensen and Prout’s (2002) proposal that researchers should aim to develop a set of strategic ethical values to flexibly meet the diverse circumstances of research, I will review three further ethical challenges that I encountered.

Removing key aspects of information provided me with one strategy to present findings that might otherwise identify a particular participant. For example, one student spoke of an achievement that enabled making a meaningful connection with ancestors, yet the student’s family history presented unique details. By restricting the amount of identifiable details included in the analysis, I was able to present what I considered to be an important finding on how family values can define what counts as excellence. In other instances, however, I felt aspects of the personal information discussed by the students were too distinctive to assure anonymity, potentially leaving the students identifiable from the data. In these cases, I elected to leave out data, which I felt were highly relevant to the thesis.

Aspects of students’ relationships with members of the wider school community presented situations demanding particular consideration for inclusion in my findings. The emotional labour of excellence has the potential to locate students in conflict with their peers, as was the case with student 3 being called a ‘teacher’s pet’, or dealing with tensions created by school systems, as described by student 1. Phelan and Kinsella (2013) suggest that for young people to give assent in the research process, they should be aware of what will happen specifically with their input. Having made assurances to the students that their wellbeing and safety were paramount concerns, the ethical responsibility fell on me to be mindful and uphold their dignity, rather than privilege the research findings (Phelan & Kinsella, 2013). Again, I excluded data, or paid particular attention to how I framed data within my analysis in order to respect students’ dignity in school and in the thesis.

Providing students with different platforms to critically reflect upon their identity work, learning, and achievement hopefully contributed to affirming students’
wellbeing in the research. The platforms of independent presentations, individual interviews and a focus group facilitate participation in a variety of ways. Three of the four students discussed personal experiences through their presentations or during the individual interviews that were not elaborated upon in the focus group. A fourth student, who had been unable to produce a presentation, appeared more at ease in the focus group, and able to offer critical reflections to the discussion, or in response to peers.

I felt my original plans for an identity portfolio and route map to excellence could respond to children’s creative productivity and culture more than solely interviewing (Christensen & James, 2006; Thomson, 2008). I had drawn upon an established body of research to support my research design (see Bragg & Buckingham, 2008; Higgins et al., 2009). The theoretical principle of the visual as an elicitation tool underpinning my research design would ideally facilitate students’ reflections on their identity work, however, neither activity eventuated in the manner planned. Enabling a culture of communication with children in the research setting may entail the sharing of ownership of the research process. I found Guillemin and Gillam’s (2004) definition of the ethical tension between being subject of and participating in research a useful distinction. In this regard, adapting research activities, where the students decided upon their own media for presentation each time, may have facilitated the students’ voices more effectively.

Ethical reflexivity, as Davies (2006) describes it, can render both the participants and the researcher mutually vulnerable. As a novice researcher, recognising a clash of interests and accepting that activities should change, or that data should not be incorporated into findings is a form of vulnerability. Yet this process enhanced my exploration of the students’ synthesis of culture, structure and agency (Davis et al., 2006), by forcing me to reflect on my own assumptions and revisit data to investigate ‘unheard’ narratives and constructs. As a result, I gained a deep familiarity with the data.

The decisions involved in analysing and representing students’ identity work and engagement with excellence were informed by the ethically reflexive position I undertook. I found that by being prepared to be adaptable and ‘listen’ more closely in
order to hear my student participants’ voices enabled some ethical challenges to be transformed into strategic ethical values (Christensen & Prout, 2002). My hope is that by endeavouring to maintain ethical reflexivity throughout the research process, I have established an ‘anchor’ for my practice as a researcher (Christensen & Prout, 2002).

The final section considers how the findings from this research could be further developed or explored in future research. I focus on broadening the study to anticipate diverse cultural and social communities of learning.

**Further research possibilities**

My study explored excellence at one school, in one location. Four students volunteered to participate, all of whom described themselves as being academic. Despite being a small group, these four individuals shared a wealth of insights that I have attempted to convey in a manner that respects the integrity of their experiences. Nevertheless, a greater number of participants might have offered a broader understanding of how students make sense of their identities within discourses of excellence, particularly hearing the perceptions and experiences of students who do not identify as academic. Greater diversity within a student research population suggests a second possibility for future research.

Originally, I had intended to interview members of the school leadership team and a class teacher. These voices are absent from this thesis, a decision I explained in the last section, but not a decision I regret. Teachers’ perspectives could add a further dimension to research into students’ engagement with discourses of excellence. Surely, if students wrestle with the contradictions and complexity of excellence, then it is likely that teachers and school leaders will too.

A further contribution that school leaders and teachers could make to the investigation of excellence is why excellence? My own children attend a school whose vision aspires to the ‘best’ for all children. In some respects there appears little difference between excellence and the best; both concepts demonstrate emotive properties, each has the potential to be adaptive or malleable, each could be considered rhetorical. My student participants have themselves drawn parallels between the two ideas in this project. Yet, the discursive primacy of excellence seems to bring into play
an additional dimension to accomplishment due to its links with broader educational discourses of performativity and attainment. With a values education entrenched within the New Zealand Curriculum (2007), I advocate for further research into the processes schools and their communities adopt in terms of how they prioritise which values to promote in their localised curricula.

Conclusion

Excellence for all will always be complicated by conflicting demands. Students are a heterogeneous group with situated lives, and being enabled to follow individual learning trajectories that develop their unique potential will present schools with challenges to universalise excellence. Simply making the ‘right’ choices and working hard, as was suggested by students in this study, will unlikely be sufficient for most students to achieve personal excellence while opportunities are not universally available to all. The drive for excellence is a choice that schools make, however, and some schools have chosen to pursue alternative goals and values. Those schools deciding to invest in excellence for all have a responsibility to create learning environments and cultures commensurate with the challenges of equality implied by ‘for all’, and the strategies of equity required to achieve this goal.

While the value of excellence is new to the New Zealand Curriculum (2007), excellence in education is not. Thus far, excellence in education has failed to adequately address the disparities of achievement that exist in New Zealand, and internationally (Bishop et al., 2009; Duru-Bellat & Mingat, 2011). This ongoing challenge should sound a warning to schools that some educationalists explain as excellence offering little more than government rhetoric to educational policy (Gillies, 2007; Ng, 2008).

Illustrating how Bourdieu’s (2010) theory of cultural capital operates within discourses of excellence, Lucy and Reay (2002) comment, “like ‘taste’, excellence is a mechanism for attributing intrinsic worth and intellectual capacity to some individuals and lesser worth to others” (p. 334). In this thesis I have argued that for schools to avoid the entrenchment of educational capital in performative academic achievement, alternative ways of valuing what counts as accomplishment need to be considered. Van Avermaet et al. (2011) offer differential excellence as an alternative to excellence for
all. I suspect the major hurdle to achieving any form of excellence, however, is the concept of excellence itself.

Educational discourses of excellence appear to sustain social and cultural inequalities in schools, producing can-do and, implicitly, can’t do subjects. In terms of identity work, students not only make sense of their own identities within discourses of excellence, they make sense of those of their peers. Discourses of excellence, therefore, have the potential to contribute to a culture of deficit theorising, positioning students in terms of their capacity to achieve excellence while, in likelihood, diminishing their potential since excellence remains narrowly defined and hierarchical. In this way, excellence appears to operate as a mismatch to equity. For students’ identity work to embrace understandings of inclusion and fairness at school, students need to encounter discursive resources that contribute to perceptions of equity.

Excellence in achievement for all might represent a laudable aim, but I wonder if it is the ‘right’ aim? Transformative educational policies and pedagogies that enable schools to achieve effective equity in teaching and learning, and education systems that privilege equitable measures of worth have the potential to render as irrelevant rhetorical values that aspire to excellence in achievement for all.
References


Codd, J. (2005). Education policy and the challenges of globalisation: Commercialism or citizenship. In J. Codd, & K. Sullivan (Eds.), *Education policy directions in Aotearoa New Zealand* (pp. 3-17). Southbank, Australia: Thomson Learning

Cole, M. (2003). Might it be in the practice that it fails to succeed? A Marxist critique of Claims for postmodernism and poststructuralism as forces for social change


Thomson, P. (2008). Children and young people: Voices in visual research. In P. Thomson (Ed.), *Doing visual research with children and young people* (pp. 1-
REFERENCES


Thomson, P. (2013). Do we 'collect' data? or - Beware the ontological slip ... Retrieved from http://pathomson.wordpress.com/2013/03/11/do-we-collect-data-or-is-your-ontological-slip-showing/


doi:10.1080/00131910701427231
REFERENCES


Appendix A: Letter to Schools

Postgraduate Students Mail
University of Otago College of Education
145 Union St East
PO Box 56
Dunedin

The Principal
School

Dear,

My name is Kim Brown and I am undertaking research towards a Master of Arts (Education) at the University of Otago College of Education. I am a qualified primary teacher having completed my own teacher education in the UK in 1994. Since that time I have taught in primary schools in the UK and worked as a member of the primary schools’ advisory team in two municipal education authorities. In this role I worked closely with the whole school community; children, class teachers, support staff, the school leadership team and parents. Upon moving to New Zealand, I taught in an intermediate school in Auckland, where I was a HoD for maths and a senior teacher. Having two young children I no longer teach and have instead taken the opportunity to work on my Masters.

Within the context of recent changes and initiatives in the education system, I am particularly interested in values, practices and policies engaging with excellence in achievement for all. The term excellence is drawn upon in multiple ways in current educational discourses, with some scholars critiquing how application of the idea can involve a lack of clarity and substance. The complexities involved with the notion of excellence raise questions regarding how schools interpret and endeavour to make tangible this value and aim. For this thesis, I have chosen to focus on how students make sense of excellence in achievement for all. John Codd (2005), commenting on the New Zealand context, expressed concerns that excellence has the potential to strike disharmony with aims of equity, I am keen to hear how this perception resonates with teachers?
I am seeking permission to approach the student body and members of staff at your school to ask if they wish to be a part of this project. My research question asks: **When schools strive to achieve excellence for all, how do students make sense of their learning and their identities as learners?**

For the purpose of this study I would ask to work with up to eight volunteer students, two or three volunteer teachers and a member of the school leadership team. The research design takes the following structure:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Student research activities</th>
<th>Purpose</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Portfolio – create a portfolio of ideas that illustrate</strong></td>
<td>Investigate the ideas and understandings students apply to themselves.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1. How you see yourself as a student at your school?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. How you think others see you as a student at your school?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Individual interviews – using the portfolios as a tool to prompt discussion</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Route map to excellence – group activity</strong></td>
<td>Investigate general ideas regarding excellence and how it is achieved. This activity does not focus on the students’ own achievements or ability levels.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1. Discuss understandings of how students achieve excellence</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Working in pairs to create a route map or signposts to excellence</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Staff research activity</strong></td>
<td><strong>Purpose</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Focus group interview – how can schools achieve excellence for all?</strong></td>
<td>Generate contextual data to support analysis of students’ ideas.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Investigate how teaching and leadership staff make sense of excellence in their professional roles.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

I appreciate the study will demand a time commitment on the part of members of your school community. I would ask of the students that they complete the portfolios over a two-week period in their own time. From my previous experience of interviewing young people I have found that interviews seldom last longer than 30
minutes, some being considerably shorter. The route map to excellence may require 1–1.5 hours with the students being out of class. The focus group interview with teaching staff may take 45-60 minutes. I would hope the research could take place during term 3, with the schedule being agreed at the school’s convenience.

Confidentiality will be maintained throughout the study and no child, staff member nor the school will be identified in the final report. Pseudonyms will be used at all times and any identifying details in the students’ work will be obscured or removed during the copying process. The originals will be returned to the owners.

The ethics approval for this research project is currently underway; at this stage I am simply seeking to ascertain whether particular schools may be interested. Should you have any questions or wish to clarify points raised by this letter, please do not hesitate to contact either:

Kim Brown (researcher)          Dr Karen Nairn (supervisor)
University of Otago College of Education  University of Otago College of Education
Tel: 03 479 4212              Tel: 03 479 8619
Email: kim.brown@otago.ac.nz Email: karen.nairn@otago.ac.nz

I would like to thank-you for your time in considering this request and will follow up the letter with a telephone call to your school in one week’s time.

Sincerely,

Kim Brown
EXCELLENT ME!

INFORMATION SHEET FOR STUDENT PARTICIPANTS

What is this project about?
What does being excellent at something mean and how does a student get to achieve excellence? I would like to hear how young people think about their learning and what they achieve as students at your school.

Who are you looking for?
I am looking for 8 volunteers who would like to take part in this study. It would be great to have a mixture of girls and boys.

What will I have to do if I volunteer?
If you are interested in taking part in this study, there are three activities you will be asked to join:

1. Portfolio – you will be asked to create a portfolio of ideas that show how you see yourself at school, and also how you think others might see you. You are welcome to use different ways to represent your ideas, e.g., presentation programs, collage, graphics, jottings, and doodles. This activity is about your personal views and is an independent task in your own time;

2. Individual interviews – I will ask you to share your portfolio with me and explain the choices you made about what to include. During the interview we would also talk about what it is like to be a student at your school. This interview would be a one–to-one meeting and will be recorded as an Mp3 file;

3. How to get to excellence – this activity starts with a group discussion about what excellence means and how students achieve excellence at your school. The discussion is a chance for you to share your thoughts and ideas. After the group discussion, I will ask you to work in pairs to produce a presentation that gives directions on how to achieve excellence at your school. You will make your presentation to the group for questions or further discussion. This activity will also be recorded as an Mp3 file.
You will receive a small gift as a token of thanks for participating in the project.

What data or information will you collect and how will you use it?

You will keep the portfolio and presentation but I will take copies and ask you for your permission to use parts of the final products.

The interviews will be more like a conversation than set questions. At first I will ask you to talk about your portfolio and if you don’t want to answer any particular questions, you don’t have to. What you say during an interview will be recorded. I will then type up the recording and offer it to you to check and make comments. After that I will analyse it and write up the project. You can choose your own fake name to be used in any written work from the study. This is to make sure no-one can pick who you are from my writing.

Only I will use the paper and computer files from your interview, although I may share these with the two people who supervise me at university. Paper copies will be stored in a locked file at the university and in an electronic file on a computer accessed by password. The university will keep the computer and paper files safely stored for at least five years after this project is finished. After this time the files will be carefully destroyed. You are most welcome to ask for a copy of the results of the project if you are interested.

Can I change my mind and pull out from the project?

It is fine for you to stop taking part in this project at any time and without any consequences.

I’m interested, what do I do next?

You will need to pass on some contact details to me; this should include your name, your class teacher, and an email address if you choose. I will provide you with the consent form for you to sign (and one for your parents or carers since you are under the age of 17 yrs). If you have any questions about our project, either now or in the future, please feel free to contact either:-

Kim Brown  
University of Otago College of Education  
Tel no’: - 03 479 4212;  
Cell phone no’: - 021 1056372  
Email address: kim.brown@otago.ac.nz

Dr Karen Nairn  
University of Otago College of Education  
Tel no’: - 03 479 8619  
Email address: karen.nairn@otago.ac.nz
EXCELLENT ME!

INFORMATION SHEET FOR PARENTS / GUARDIANS

My name is Kim Brown, and I have approached your child’s school to carry out a research project. Your child has expressed an interest in taking part in this study. The following information will clarify what will be asked of your child to support you in deciding whether or not to give your consent. If you decide your child will not take part there will be no disadvantage to you or your child and I thank you for considering this request.

What is the aim of the project?

Many schools define their educational vision in terms of excellence in achievement for all. The term ‘excellence’ appears throughout educational policy and is accepted as a worthy and unquestionable aim. Yet a body of research discusses a lack of definition in the use of excellence. At any one time excellence can refer to the unique potential of each individual, the achievements of a select few and is used to describe the leadership and teaching environment of a school. As the thesis component of a Master of Arts, the ‘Excellent Me!’ study seeks to investigate what excellence can mean to students. By examining how individual students in one New Zealand school build an idea of themselves as learners, I aim to gain greater understanding of how young people make sense of excellence in achievement for all.

What type of participant is being sought?

The project seeks eight students from the same school. As a token of thanks for their involvement, volunteers who take part throughout the project will receive a small gift.

What will participants be asked to do?

Should you give consent for your child to take part in this project, your child will be involved in three research activities described to the children as follows:
1. **Portfolio** – create a portfolio of ideas that illustrate how you see yourself at school, and also how you think others might perceive you. You are welcome to use different ways to represent your ideas, e.g., presentation programs, collage, graphics, jottings, doodles. This activity is about your personal views and is an independent task in your own time;

2. **Individual interviews** – I will ask you to share your portfolio with me and explain the choices you made about what to include. During the interview we would also talk about what it is like to be a student at your school. This interview would be a one-to-one meeting and will be recorded as an Mp3 file;

3. **How to get to excellence** – this activity starts with a group discussion about what excellence means and how students achieve excellence at your school. The discussion is an opportunity for you to share your thoughts and ideas. After the group discussion I will ask you to work in pairs to produce a presentation that gives directions on how to achieve excellence at your school. You will make your presentation to the group for questions or further discussion. This activity will also be recorded as an Mp3 file.

Whilst your child will be asked to work on the portfolio in their own time, interviews and the group activity will take place during the school day at a time agreed by the school.

**What data or information will be collected and what use will be made of it?**

Prior to starting the research activities, all participants will meet with me to discuss being aware of including identifiable information in their work. The group will compile and agree upon a set of ground rules to support confidentiality.

The individual interviews will start with your child talking through the decisions made to produce the portfolio. I will ask why certain items and ideas were included, and why others were left out. An indication of the questions is attached on the last page. However other questions may arise depending on how the conversation develops, this is called an open-questioning technique. Although the University of Otago Human Ethics Committee is aware of the general areas to be explored in the interview, the Committee has not been able to review the precise questions to be used. At any time your child can refuse to answer a particular question or can ask to stop the interview.

The interviews will be recorded as an Mp3 file and will be typed to produce a transcript of what has been said. The transcript will be available to your child to check and comment on before it is analysed and written up. Each participant will choose or be given a fake name to ensure their anonymity is protected. The school will also have a code name.
I will take copies of the portfolios and presentations. Any feature of the work that offers identifiable information will be removed or covered in the copying process. Data from the visual work and the interviews will be analysed to identify how a group of children in this particular school make sense of excellence in achievement for all.

I will have access to the interview transcripts and copied visual work, although I may show this data to my supervisors, Dr Karen Nairn and Dr Susan Sandretto. The data will be securely stored at the University of Otago College of Education for at least five years after the project is completed. Any personal information, such as contact details, will be deleted at the end of the project.

The results of the project may be published or presented at conferences. The completed study will be available in the University of Otago Library (Dunedin, New Zealand) but every attempt will be made to preserve your child’s anonymity. You are most welcome to request a copy of the results of the project should you wish.

Can participants change their mind and withdraw from the project?

Your child can withdraw from the project at any stage without disadvantage of any kind and without needing to give a reason. Please be aware that you may also decide not to agree to your child taking part in the project without any disadvantage to him/her of any kind.

What if participants have any questions?

If you have any questions about our project, either now or in the future, please feel free to contact either:

Kim Brown and/or Dr Karen Nairn
University of Otago College of Education
University of Otago College of Education
Tel no’: 03 479 4212; Tel no’: 03 479 8619
Cell phone no’: 021 1056372
Email address: kim.brown@otago.ac.nz Email: address:
Email: karen.nairn@otago.ac.nz
EXCELLENT ME!

CONSENT FORM FOR PARTICIPANTS

I have been told about this study and have read the Information Sheet; I understand what it is about. All my questions have been answered in a way that makes sense to me.

I know that:

1. participation in the project is voluntary, which means that I can pull out at any time without giving a reason and without it being a problem;
2. any worries I have or any other questions I might have, then I can talk about these with Kim Brown, the researcher;
3. copies will be taken of the portfolio and presentation, and the originals will be returned to me at the end of the project. Kim may include parts of these works in her writing;
4. interviews will involve talking about how I see myself at school. The group discussion will focus on how students achieve excellence. These activities will be like conversations, if at any time I do not want to answer a question or make a contribution to the discussion I can choose not to and this is fine;
5. Kim will record my interview as an Mp3 file so that she can remember what I say;
6. Kim and her supervisors at university will see the paper and computer files from my interview and the group discussion. They will keep whatever I say private while it is being used for research. After at least five years, the files will be carefully destroyed;
7. Results of the project will be written up and may be published in a journal or talked about at conferences. The finished study will be available in the University of Otago Library. My name will not be on anything Kim writes up about this study;
8. I will receive a small gift as a ‘thank you’ for taking part in the research.

I agree to take part in this project.

.................................................. .......................... ............................
(Signature of participant)  (Date)
EXCELLENT ME!

CONSENT FORM FOR PARENTS/GUARDIANS

I have read the Information Sheet concerning this project and understand what it is about. All my questions have been answered to my satisfaction. I understand that I am free to request further information at any stage.

I know that:

1. my child’s participation in the project is entirely voluntary;

2. I am free to withdraw my child from the project at any time without any disadvantage.

3. personal identifying information, such as contact details, will be destroyed at the conclusion of the project but data from the interview, portfolio and presentation activity will be kept in secure storage for at least five years, after which time it will be carefully destroyed;

4. I understand this project involves an open-questioning technique and a group discussion and presentation. The general line of questioning includes how my child perceives herself/himself as a learner. The group discussion investigates how students achieve excellence. The precise nature of some questions which will be asked have not been determined in advance, but will depend on the way in which the interview develops. Should any line of questioning develop in such a way that my child feels hesitant or uncomfortable she/he may decline to answer and/or may withdraw from the project without any disadvantage of any kind;

5. I acknowledge that my child will be offered a small gift in appreciation for participating in this project;

6. the results of the project may be published and presented at conferences. The completed study will be available in the University of Otago Library (Dunedin, New Zealand) but every attempt will be made to preserve my child’s anonymity.

I agree for my child to take part in this project.

.............................................................................
(Signature of parent/guardian) ............................................
.............................................................................
.............................................................................
(Date)

.............................................................................
(Name of child)
Appendix C: Activity Brief

**Q&A**

What if I have any questions?
You can email me, Kim, on: kim.brown@otago.ac.nz
or call me on:
Office: 03 479 4212
or Cell: 021 105 6572

What if I'd like to pull out of the project or can no longer take part?
That is fine. You can withdraw from the project at any time, without having to give a reason and without consequence.

---

**EXCELLENT ME! Research Brief**

**The research job**

There are 3 parts to this investigation.

- Your presentation will cover the research ideas in parts 1, 2 and 3.
- Fit the information in your own way.
- Don’t worry if you miss something out, we can talk about the research ideas in our interview.
- If you include other people in your presentation, try not to use their name or check with them if you include their picture.
- The presentation can be brief...

**What kind of presentation?**

Choose a media you are happy to work with.
Possibilities include:
- PowerPoint, SlideRocket or other presentation tools
- Poster
- Montage of images and text
- Graphic novel style or cartoon
- Short video
- Scrapbook

Have fun!
**Part 1**

**How do you see yourself?**
- Share some details about yourself that tells me about who you are.
- Think about the things you’d like to say or keep to yourself.

**Part 2**

**Thinking about learning.**
- How do you see yourself as a student at your school?
- How would you describe yourself as a learner?
- What do you think about your own learning?

**Part 3**

**Thinking about my school and achievement.**
- How do you think others see you at school?
- How do other people at school might describe your learning and achievements?
Appendix D: Interview Questions

INTERVIEW SCHEDULE FOR STUDENTS – IDENTITY PORTFOLIO

- Talk me through your portfolio.
- What were the reasons behind including this particular piece of information?
- Were there any ideas that you thought about and then decided not to include? Why?
- What was the most difficult aspect of creating an identity portfolio?
- Thinking about how other people see students at your school, do any particular groups stand out? Why?
- What do you think makes a successful student? What indicators do you use to make that judgement?
- Is this the same as the general view at your school?
- If students don’t demonstrate the characteristics that make a person successful, what can the school do to help?
- Who else can help make students successful learners?
- In what ways are student achievements celebrated at your school?
- Do you think the school could use any other ways of measuring or acknowledging achievements?
- Do some students never get recognised for their achievements? (How could this be changed?)
- What is your greatest achievement at school?
Appendix E: Contact Summary Form

**CONTACT SUMMARY FORM** (Miles & Huberman, 1994)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Contact type:</th>
<th>Site:</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Visit:</td>
<td>Today's date:</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Contact details:**

| Written by: | Also involved: |

**What were the main issues or themes that struck you in this contact?**

**Summarize the information you got (or failed to get) on each of the target questions you had for this contact.**

**Anything else that struck you as salient, interesting, illuminating or important in this contact?**

**What new (or remaining) target questions do you have in considering the next contact with this site?**

**Concerns?**