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**An exploration of teacher engagement practices with families  
of primary aged students categorised as at risk of educational  
underachievement**

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Christine Marie McNeil

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## **Abstract**

Current education policy in Aotearoa New Zealand signals that parents of students who are 'at risk' of educational underachievement should be drawn into the educational field to assist those children to reach the outcomes specified by the normative National Standards framework. An 'educationally powerful relationship' is advanced as being the optimum way to link home and school.

Framed in this way, the home/school relationship emerges as an instrument of governance. The re-calibration of education-as-governance represents an emergence of teacher/parent relations as a means to address at-risk sub populations. Caught up with the administration of 'at-risk' families, the work of the teacher reflects capital(ism) in its tendency towards a crisis in social reproduction more generally. Identified by Nancy Fraser, this crisis refers to both the undermining and the overuse of the capacity of actors to establish emotional bonds, and of the contradictions that consequently emerge. Similarly, in the field of education, the emotional capacities of teachers are put to work to meet bio-political ends of producing productive populations.

This research asks teachers to talk about their experiences of engaging parents of 'at risk' children. Using an inductive methodology, underpinned by a Foucaultian theoretical framework, data was generated by conducting semi-structured open-ended interviews in the Marlborough region. Findings point to a series of further contradictions at the site of the school. The following contradictions speak of the discontinuities inherent in the work of the teacher.

Constituted to provide universal education, schools have established corrective mechanisms with which to address student underachievement. Accommodating the effects of adverse home conditions, teachers predominantly rely on in-school learning. Teachers try to be approachable yet may find themselves acting in ways that are

inconsistent with their knowledge of family systems because of administrative requirements associated with the operation of National Standards. School management systems may disrupt tentative relationships with parents amplifying the tendency for parental involvement to diminish as children advance through the school years. It transpires that institutional practices work against the establishment of an effective home/school relationship, thereby illustrating the contradictions within Fraser's crisis of social reproduction.

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