

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

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Abstract:	<p>Following the 2010/2011 Canterbury earthquakes in New Zealand, the Ministry of Education produced a plan to permanently close or merge 38 schools. The author followed one school through its closure and the early stages of its merger with a neighbouring school. Although the two schools came together to create a new entity with a new name, one school was designated the 'continuing' school and the other the 'closing' school. In the interviews with the closing school, participants reported acts of thoughtlessness, careless disregard, humiliation and even vindictiveness by the continuing school. In this article, I use Bourdieu's concepts symbolic power and symbolic violence to describe what happened and field, capital and habitus to posit an explanation for why the continuing school acted in the way that it did and why the closing school capitulated.</p>

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

Following the 2010/2011 Canterbury earthquakes in New Zealand, the Ministry of Education produced a plan to permanently close or merge 38 schools. The author followed one school through its closure and the early stages of its merger with a neighbouring school. Although the two schools came together to create a new entity with a new name, one school was designated the 'continuing' school and the other the 'closing' school. In the interviews with the closing school, participants reported acts of thoughtlessness, careless disregard, humiliation and even vindictiveness by the continuing school. In this article, I use Bourdieu's concepts *symbolic power* and *symbolic violence* to describe what happened and *field*, *capital* and *habitus* to posit an explanation for why the continuing school acted in the way that it did and why the closing school capitulated.

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

Introduction

In 2013 and 2014, I conducted interviews with a school that was being closed in a post-disaster school reorganisation plan for the city of Christchurch, New Zealand, which had been hit by catastrophic earthquakes in 2010 and 2011. My original research purpose was to document the role that five schools had played in disaster response and recovery (see, Author [removed for review purposes], 2014, 2015a). One school subsequently became impacted by the school reorganisation plan and asked if I would tell the story of their closure and merger with a neighbouring school. I have done this in more detail elsewhere (Author, 2017) but for several years, I puzzled over the attitude and actions of the neighbouring school – that is, the 'continuing school' towards the 'closing school'. In this article, I have no wish to pit one school against another as 'good school' versus 'bad school' but rather I wish to explore, theoretically and conceptually, what led the continuing school to act in the way that it did and why the

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3 closing school capitulated. To do so, I am drawing, initially, on Bourdieu's (1979,
4
5 1989) notions of symbolic power and symbolic violence and complementing these with
6
7 the concepts of field, capital and habitus (Bourdieu, 1993a; Bourdieu & Passeron,
8
9 1977).

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11
12 Bourdieu (1979, p. 80) states that *symbolic power* is recognised as the 'power to
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14 constitute the given by stating it.' I argue that rather than this being a merger of equals,
15
16 labelling one school as 'closing' and the other as 'continuing', created a hierarchical
17
18 system of symbolic power, which in turn, legitimated on-going symbolic violence.
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20 *Symbolic violence* is, 'defined in and by a determinate relationship between those who
21
22 exercise power and those who undergo it' (Bourdieu (1979, p. 83) whereby the victims
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24 appear complicit in their treatment. The power of the continuing school over the closing
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26 school appeared as taken-for-granted, even though the closing school had done nothing
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28 more than be subject to the random forces of nature, and the closing school appeared
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30 powerless to challenge their domination.
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35 I begin this article by summarising the literature on school closures before setting
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37 the research in its post-earthquake context. I then synthesise relevant concepts from
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39 Bourdieu's theories. Relevant data from my study are shared in two parts: the first part
40
41 tells the story of the school's closure; and the second part, the school's experience of the
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43 merger. In the discussion section, I re-engage with Bourdieu's concepts to provide an
44
45 explanation of the way in which the Government, through the Minister of Education and
46
47 her Ministry, used symbolic power to implement their post-earthquake school
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49 reorganisation plan. This power was subsequently delegated to the continuing school,
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51 who used symbolic violence to dominate the closing school throughout the merger
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53 process.
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Literature review: school closures

There is limited research on school closures but a literature review (Author, 2017) revealed common themes across several different countries. The findings from research on permanent closures show that the impacts on students, school staff and communities are mostly negative and long-lasting (Autti & Hyry-Beihammer, 2014; De Witte and Van Klaveren, 2014; Kirshner, Gaertner & Pozzoboni, 2010; Valencia, 1984; Witten, Kearns, Lewis, Coster & McCreanor, 2003).

The most common reason for school closures is population loss, for example, due to the industrialisation of farming, globalisation of industry or drift to the cities. As the population in an area diminishes, it is inevitable that a school might no longer be viable. This is especially so in rural areas. In New Zealand, the closure of small rural schools has been linked to the closure of rural post offices, banks and hospitals from the late 1980s. Analysis revealed that many of the schools were in areas of high deprivation and that school closure and relocation of students only exacerbated the difficulties faced by these communities (Witten et al., 2003). Over the past two decades, two thirds of small rural schools in Finland closed. Decisions were made without consultation and enacted swiftly, leaving communities feeling powerless (Autti & Hyry-Beihammer, 2014). Another study of systematic closure of small rural schools in Denmark concluded that school closures do not necessarily cause social dislocation, rather they are the sign that the community is in its final phase of decline (Egelund & Lautsen, 2006). Witten, McCreanor, Kearns, and Ramasubramanian (2001) argue, however, that keeping schools open is important for intergenerational investment and population retention.

Research also reports on school closures for ideological reasons (stemming from the influence of neoliberalism on educational decision making), for example, closing poor performing schools or setting up public-private partnerships such as charter

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2
3 schools. Much of the literature on ideologically-motivated closures comes from the
4
5 United States. Where schools have been closed because of poor educational
6
7 achievement, those most affected are already marginalised, such as African-American,
8
9 Latino and low-socio-economic communities. Some closures are linked to urban decay
10
11 and the consequential gentrification of neighbourhoods. When students are relocated or
12
13 families are forced to move, they struggle to feel connected to the new schools and
14
15 parents struggle to meet the increased costs associated with the move (Buras, 2011;
16
17 Johnson, 2006; Lipman, 2011; Means, 2008; Valencia, 1984).
18
19

20 School closures are emotionally volatile events. While some communities accept
21
22 their fate as inevitable, others challenge the decision. Challenges might be through
23
24 protests, legal interventions or via the media. In Canada, writers of letters-to-the-editor
25
26 protesting school closures presented a range of arguments for non-closure, including
27
28 personal experiences, the role of schools in communities and the importance of public
29
30 education (Phipps, 2000). When one school in New Zealand was set to close, the
31
32 community used a range of strategies, including engaging local and national media,
33
34 street protests and community meetings. Someone even used weed killer to paint a
35
36 protest message on the school's grass playground (Witten et al., 2003). Between 1994
37
38 and 2012, over 2000 schools were closed across Chile. In Santiago, parents of three
39
40 public schools took over the running of the schools as an act of defiance against the
41
42 proposed closures. They kept up this resistance for seven months and finally succeeded
43
44 in having their schools officially re-opened (Pino-Yancovic, 2015).
45
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48 Closures can have varying impacts – on individuals, schools and their
49
50 communities. When schools in Amsterdam were closed because of poor performance,
51
52 De Witte and Van Klaveren (2014) were interested in whether students' achievement
53
54 improved when they were moved to higher achieving schools. They found that there
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3 was no evidence of improvement, yet nor was there dramatic evidence of decline. In
4
5 contrast, in the US, Kirshner, Gaertner & Pozzoboni (2010) examined a range of data
6
7 relating to Latino and African American students, who transitioned to new schools after
8
9 their schools closed, and found that their academic performance did decline.
10
11 Standardised test scores were lower, dropout rates increased and graduation rates
12
13 decreased.
14

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16 Two UK studies, (Kyriacou & Harriman, 1993; and Riseborough, 1994) discussed
17
18 the impact on teachers when their schools closed. Teachers reported feeling
19
20 disempowered and de-professionalised. Although teachers had tried to halt the closures
21
22 through appeals or protests, they were powerless. They were made redundant and had to
23
24 apply for new teaching positions. They faced high levels of stress and reported
25
26 difficulty in adjusting to or being accepted in their new settings.
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29 Parents are also impacted. When schools closed in New Zealand in the 1990s-
30
31 2000s, parents lost their social networks and connections. Researchers argued that
32
33 schools are often the biggest, most-well-resourced spaces for communities to gather
34
35 and, in closing them, communities are losing more than just an educational facility.
36
37 Schools are sites of accumulated goodwill over many generations (Kearns, Lewis,
38
39 McCreanor & Witten., 2009; Witten et al., 2001).
40

41
42 In summary, the literature emphasises the central place that schools have in the
43
44 fabric of their communities and the fierce emotions that arise when schools are forced to
45
46 close. Closures appear to have most impact on already vulnerable communities,
47
48 especially where these closures are ideologically motivated. School closures do not
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50 appear to necessarily improve student outcomes and can even decrease the performance
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52 of disadvantaged and marginalised groups. Communities can draw on a range of
53
54 strategies to overturn closure decisions but their efforts are not always effective in
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3 gaining a reprieve. Negative emotions remain long after closures have been
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5 implemented and communities often become dispirited. School closures might even
6
7 signal the decline of some communities.
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10 **The research context**

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12 At 4.35am on September 5, 2010, a 7.2 magnitude earthquake struck 40 kilometres west
13
14 of the city of Christchurch in the South Island of New Zealand. The city and
15
16 surrounding districts of Canterbury faced major destruction of roads, rail, water supply
17
18 and waste removal along with structural damage to homes, business and public
19
20 buildings. For several weeks, the city came to a standstill as the streets were cleared of
21
22 liquefaction (silt), rubble was taken away and essential services were restored. Schools
23
24 were often temporary community shelters for those who had lost their homes. Once
25
26 schools were assessed and repaired or alternative provision was arranged, they were
27
28 reopened to provide a sense of normalcy to families and communities (Author, 2015a;
29
30 Aydan, Ulusay, Hamada, & Beetham, 2012; Education Review Office, 2013).
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36 Despite continuing aftershocks, there was a sense of hope as the city appeared to
37
38 have survived all that nature could throw at it. In 2011, however, there were a further
39
40 three major aftershocks (over 6 on the Richter scale) amid the thousands of smaller
41
42 ones. The most damaging was in the middle of a school day on February 22, located
43
44 much closer to the city centre. Over 1200 inner city buildings were damaged beyond
45
46 repair, several hundred thousand homes and business sustained further damage, 185
47
48 people died with thousands more injured, and the city's infrastructure sustained billions
49
50 of dollars of damage. School children were having lunch or playing in the playgrounds
51
52 at the time of the February quake. Principals and teachers became first responders as
53
54 they rescued, calmed and cared for children until their parents came (Author, 2015b, c;
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3 Canterbury Earthquakes Commission, 2012; Education Review Office, 2013; Potter,
4
5 Becker, Johnston & Rossiter, 2015).

6
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8 Early in 2012, the Ministry of Education began consultation on their plan,
9
10 *Education Renewal for Greater Christchurch* (Ministry of Education [MoE], 2012). The
11
12 Minister of Education took the opportunity provided by the earthquakes to promote the
13
14 idea of 21st century schools as part of the rebuild. At the time, schools felt that the
15
16 Minister and Ministry were genuinely engaging ‘in blue skies thinking on how they
17
18 would reform the current schooling system to something better’ (Principal, cited in
19
20 Duncan, 2016, p. 31).

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22
23
24 In September, 2012, armed with Government and Treasury backing, the Minister
25
26 and leading Ministry officials invited Christchurch principals to meet them at the
27
28 Lincoln Events Centre. Principals were given coloured name tags – green, yellow or
29
30 red. Unbeknown to the principals, the colours indicated whether their schools would be
31
32 ‘restored’, ‘consolidated’ or ‘rejuvenated’ – words designed to soften the fact that they
33
34 were about to be told whether their schools would continue, merge or close. The
35
36 meeting caused considerable distress. One principal described it as ‘vile’: ‘[It] began a
37
38 cycle of anxiety and helplessness for many. It was a time of winners and losers. Then
39
40 the ludicrous coloured card system at the meeting added to the farce’ (Principal cited in
41
42 Duncan, 2016, p.28).

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47 The proposal was to close or merge 38 schools. Although the Ministry had criteria
48
49 by which they insisted that closure decisions were made, reports have shown that the
50
51 decisions were based on inaccurate data (Direen, 2016; Duncan, 2016). One school
52
53 shared its view of the Ministry’s decision making:
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3 The whole rationale for our closure given by the MoE, [was] based on three points:
4 a non-viable roll (was 340); all 15 buildings earthquake damaged (had a report
5 stating damage minor and superficial); and that our land was substantially damaged
6 (we took away 2 car trailer loads of liquefaction). [It] was, at best, errors of fact, at
7 worst, a political decision. (Principal cited in Duncan, 2016, p.16).
8
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10
11 Direen (2016, p. 51) notes the stress caused by the ‘speed of decision making, variation
12 in quality of communication and information overload.’ The Ministry was even accused
13 of manipulating or withholding information. When such concerns reached the
14 Ombudsman’s Office in 2012, an investigation was conducted into claims that (a) the
15 Ministry withheld information, (b) instructed the Christchurch City Council to withhold
16 information, and (c) and instructed principals to cease seeking information. The
17 Ombudsman confirmed the Ministry had acted wrongly on all three counts. He
18 concluded:
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30 Schools and parents should not have to ferret out information by making official
31 information requests. They should be presented with the relevant information in a
32 comprehensive and comprehensible form so that they can participate effectively in
33 the consultation process. (Office of the Ombudsman, 2012, p. 15)
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37 Consultation also appeared to be an *ad hoc* process. It often happened after the fact, was
38 presented as *fait accompli* or did not take place at all. The Ombudsman commented in
39 his report: ‘School closures and mergers are decisions that have a major impact not just
40 on the affected staff, pupils and parents, but on the whole communities in which the
41 schools are based. Therefore, effective consultation is of utmost importance’ (Office of
42 the Ombudsman, 2012, p. 15).
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51 Little consideration was given for the way in which these decisions came on top
52 of many other issues facing Christchurch schools at that time. A review for the Human
53 Rights Commission stated, ‘Communities were already coping with the aftermath of the
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3 earthquakes. Schools provide a much-needed community focal point. It is almost
4
5 beyond comprehension that this process was initiated at such a stressful and uncertain
6
7 time.’ (Baird, 2014, p. 8)
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9

10 The post-earthquake school reorganisation process came in for much criticism
11
12 from a range of sources, including principals and their associations, teachers and their
13
14 unions, and other organisations, such as the Human Rights Commission and the Child
15
16 Poverty Action Group. The process was variously described as deceptive, poorly
17
18 thought out, based on limited consultation, using inaccurate data, rushed, unfair and
19
20 insensitive (Author, 2017; Baird, 2013; Direen, 2016; Duncan, 2016; Post Primary
21
22 Teachers Association, 2013; Shirlaw, 2014).
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26 Vindication finally came for schools in 2017, when the Office of the Ombudsman
27
28 released a further report into the handling of the school reorganisation process. The
29
30 investigation found that the Ministry treated schools with mistrust and defensiveness.
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32 The report notes:
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36 What followed was an exercise where schools were being consulted on preliminary
37
38 conceptual issues at the same time that detailed proposals concerning individual
39
40 schools were being developed in secret. It did not seem to occur to the Ministry
41
42 that this would be perceived as a major breach of trust when full details were
43
44 announced, seemingly out of nowhere, in September 2012. (Office of the
45
46 Ombudsman, 2017, p. 21)
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48

49 The report concluded that the school reorganisation process was mismanaged, lacked
50
51 transparency and caused stress to already traumatised communities. The Ombudsman
52
53 recommended that the Ministry make a public apology to all 38 schools involved. The
54
55 apology duly appeared in an advertisement in Christchurch’s daily newspaper, *The*
56
57 *Press*, on June 22, 2017 but, by then, the damage was done.
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The research process

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Symbolic power is formed by symbolic instruments. Bourdieu (1979) outlines three types of symbolic instruments. First, are *structuring structures* (subjective instruments) that construct a view of the world through symbolic forms. Second, are

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3 *structured structures* (objective instruments) that have become symbolic objects. Third,
4
5 are *structures of domination* (ideological instruments) that construct power hierarchies.
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7 Symbolic power draws on other forms of power but it is less tangible, in that it is an
8
9 unchallenged status or position that is used to confirm the holder's place in the social
10
11 hierarchy and to reinforce domination over those of lesser status (Bourdieu, 1979, 1989;
12
13 Moon, 2011). Bourdieu explains, 'It is as structured and structuring instruments of
14
15 communication and knowledge that 'symbolic systems' fulfil their political functions of
16
17 instruments of domination (or, more precisely, of legitimation of domination)' (1979, p.
18
19 80). Bourdieu also explains that while symbolic forms take on new social functions that
20
21 transform the field of play, they also impose a social reality that is quite *arbitrary*:
22
23 'Symbolic power... is only exerted insofar as it is recognised (i.e., insofar as its
24
25 arbitrariness is misrecognised)' (1979, p. 83).
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31 When holders of symbolic power use their influence to create unconscious
32
33 structures, meanings or actions that can cause harm to someone with less power or
34
35 status, such as through discrimination, they are exercising *symbolic violence*. These
36
37 unconscious structures become taken-for-granted truths that go unchallenged and are
38
39 continually perpetuated. Moon (2011) describes symbolic violence as 'the practices of
40
41 social exclusion and inferiorisation of the other' in the 'form of domination and
42
43 oppression' (p. 195). It is a type of 'silent' violence that is less obvious than physical
44
45 violence but no less real (Moon, 2011).
46
47

48
49 Symbolic violence depends on the complicity of both the perpetrator and the
50
51 victim in a reciprocal relationship (Bourdieu, 1979, 1989; Kitalong, 1998). As Moon
52
53 (2011, p. 195) explains, 'Far from resisting, oppressed groups are understood to
54
55 legitimate their subordinate position and are found to become complicit to dominant
56
57 regulatory regimes by internalizing the practices of the dominant group.'
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3 Before discussing how these concepts help us understand the post-earthquake
4 context, the next section presents two sets of interview data from the author's study.
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6 The first part ('the closure') outlines how the closing school coped with the closure
7 decision. The second part ('the merger') tells the story of the merger from the closing
8 school's perspective. Data are presented in an anonymised manner, where the schools
9 are called the closing or continuing school and participants are called Teacher 1 or
10 Student 2 and so on.
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19 **The closure: 'In military terms, we are just collateral damage!'**

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21 Prior to the earthquakes, the closing school held a significant place in its community.
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23 During the earthquake, teachers and parents put their lives in danger to rescue, evacuate,
24 calm and look after children. During the recovery period, teachers put their own
25 concerns aside to focus on students and their families (see Author, 2017 for more
26 detail). Their care and compassion did not go unnoticed. One parent commented:
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33 All these teachers are quiet heroes. I know there are teachers here that have lost
34 their homes and some of them are living in the same situation as we are and they
35 come to work and they get on with it. They do their job as best they can and they
36 never ever show their frustration to the kids. (Parent 2)
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41 The closure announcement was badly handled. Once the school's name was mentioned
42 at the Lincoln meeting, the news travelled quickly. One parent recalled, 'I heard it on
43 the radio on the news as I was coming to pick up the kids from school' (Parent 1). A
44 teacher heard by text message:
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50 Unfortunately, the media leaked it before [we were told]. People were texting me.
51 They texted me at work. Friends said 'Oh, the school is closing'. But we hadn't
52 heard that as a school, as staff. (Teacher 1)
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56 The leaked information was premature. Little was clear as to when, where, how, and
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3 even if, the school would be closed or merged. The school was left feeling uncertain
4
5 about its future. Another teacher, who also had a child at the school, recalls how she felt
6
7 on hearing the news:
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10 [I was] worried. I was just sick in my stomach thinking, okay, what is it saying
11 about jobs? What is it saying my child's school...? There wasn't enough
12 information given out at the time, for you not to think about what does this mean
13 for you, for your future. I mean, we're already living in house waiting to be
14 repaired, and we're going to lose my job now and my child's going to lose their
15 school. (Teacher 2)
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20 Students were upset: 'I was pretty sad, because I have been in that school for 5 years,
21 and then as my last year at the school proceeds, the school would finish when I leave.'
22
23 (Student 19). One student decided to take matters into his own hands:
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26

27 My younger son had even written a letter to the Queen. He was not going to go just
28 to John Key [Prime Minister] who he blamed for the whole merger. He was going
29 to the top. He thought, well the Queen is in charge of the countries of the
30 Commonwealth, so he wrote to her to ask if she could help. And, of course, she
31 wrote back and said that she couldn't interfere. (Parent 1)
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36 The school's Board of Trustees prepared a submission against the school's closure but
37 was unsuccessful. At the end of 2013, the school would close. Staff and students would
38 be merged with a nearby school. Closing a school with such a strong sense of
39 community did not seem to make sense:
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45 It's like a village here; there's so many people and it's the history of the school. It goes
46 back so far – to wipe that out, it's just shocking – no account was taken of the
47 community. It was all just financial. It was short-sighted decision making because,
48 surprisingly, our roll hasn't dropped as far as what they thought it would. (Support Staff
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54 1)
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3 Teachers had to support each other, their students and the wider community. It did not
4
5 go unnoticed by parents:

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8 They were so positive. I mean the teachers were going through more themselves about
9
10 the whole merger and how it was going to work. They all had to apply for their jobs and
11
12 all the rest of it. And yet they were so positive with the children. ... So, I take my hat
13
14 off to the teachers because they were going through so much too... – the earthquake, the
15
16 merger, the uncertainty (Parent 1)

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18
19 The recently appointed acting principal was shocked by the lack of humanity and
20
21 empathy in the process. He commented:

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24 How does that affect the staff? The emotional ties and the relationships are torn apart;
25
26 families that have been associated with the school for decades have gone. That kind of
27
28 link and historical connection, and knowledge of the community and the school and its
29
30 involvement goes as well. History goes; it travels with the people. (Acting Principal)

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33 At the end of 2013, the school had a celebration to mark the end of its 140-year history.
34
35 A visual and written history of the school was compiled, old pupils were invited back
36
37 and fun activities were arranged for children and their families. Everyone could take a
38
39 turn at ringing the school bell and reflect on what the school had meant to them: “We all
40
41 got to ring this old bell that had been there since the school started about 140 years
42
43 ago.” (Student 7); “To clear the memories ... to get them all out and make new ones”
44
45 (Student 5).

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49 Despite the fact that many students had returned to the closing school and the roll
50
51 had not dropped as far as the Ministry of Education had predicted; despite the fact that
52
53 most classrooms were able to be used or repaired; despite the significant role the school
54
55 played in the community’s history and identity, especially during the earthquakes;

1
2
3 despite submissions against the closure, the school closed. Reflecting on the process, the
4 acting principal commented, 'In military terms, we are just collateral damage!'

5
6
7
8 **The merger: 'Small fish going into the big pond.'**
9

10 Although the reorganisation of these two schools was technically a 'merger', labelling
11 one the 'closing school' and the other the 'continuing school' changed the nature of the
12 relationship. The closing school was left feeling disenfranchised. The school
13 community was concerned that the process was less like a merger and more like a
14 takeover:
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23 There was a lot of concern over the fact that we felt like the small fish going into the big
24 pond, because [the continuing school] was the larger school with the bigger community
25 and our concern was that we would feel swallowed up ... it's meant to be a merger, but
26 in some ways, it does feel as if ... we, our children, now, are in [the continuing school].
27
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29
30
31 (Parent 1)
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34 Not only did the closing school need to come to terms with the final decision, teachers
35 needed to reapply for positions in the merged school:
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37
38

39 It was horrible. And it's like, you know, you were a teacher, you were an existing
40 person. Now you have to suddenly establish who you are again. You have to convince
41 them that you know how to teach. And I was quite shocked by that; we are qualified, we
42 have been teaching; we've been having appraisal.... We are qualified! (Teacher 2)
43
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45
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47

48 The continuing school did not feel any more pleased about the merger decision and
49 some parents from that school set up a Facebook page to share their frustration. The
50 page was closed down when comments about the closing school became unprofessional
51 and spiteful.
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3 As the countdown to the merger took place, the closing school expected that there
4
5 would be meetings to discuss how the two schools could come together:
6
7

8 I mean, it's a bit like marriage when you put two people together, you talk to each
9
10 other, you find out what's really important to you and what things might not be
11
12 important as much. ... And this is two schools together, and so you need to have not
13
14 just one way. (Teacher 2)
15
16

17 Instead, the continuing school took charge of the process. One example was the
18
19 continuing school arriving to do an inventory of resources while the closing school was
20
21 still operating:
22
23

24 They had people from [the continuing school] coming in sorting out our resource room
25
26 and actually throwing away all our social studies resources and what they didn't want.
27
28 ... No consultation really. It was just laid down like that. This was what was going to
29
30 happen. (Teacher 3)
31
32

33 While opportunities were put in place for the students to get to know each other before
34
35 the merger, little was done by the continuing school to help the teachers get to know
36
37 each other. The continuing principal was appointed as principal of the newly merged
38
39 entity. The new Board of Trustees contained more continuing school than closing
40
41 school members, tipping the balance of decision making in the continuing school's
42
43 favour. Teacher 3 described it as a 'cultural clash' and said, 'they didn't ask how things
44
45 operated on our side.' Teacher 2 suggested that teachers from both school should have
46
47 talked more:
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51
52 I think that teachers should've got together, and they should have talked about the
53
54 children and talked about ... the things they had in place to deal with things. Then from
55
56 those two different ways, created one great way that worked for both sets of children.
57
58
59

1
2
3 Many of the concerns about the reorganisation process that were raised across the city
4
5 were reflected in this merger process. The compressed timeframe was one. More time
6
7 was required to absorb each other's culture and systems to produce the best way
8
9 forward:

10
11
12 The time frame has to be a lot longer. I think there has to be a lot more integrating with
13
14 the schools... longer time frames would have more discussion... I just think the whole
15
16 thing is, if we were given more time by the government... It's important that both
17
18 schools have teachers at the senior management level, so you can bring the two cultures
19
20 and systems and procedures together. (Teacher 3)
21
22

23
24 More time and better planning was also needed to ensure that the continuing school had
25
26 the facilities to take on a large number of new students. This was not the case, and late
27
28 in 2013, the two schools were told by the Ministry that the newly merged school would
29
30 be split across two sites – the current continuing school site and the disestablished
31
32 closing school site. The idea of split sites took both schools by surprise. The decision
33
34 had been made without the participation of the schools or parents and was rushed
35
36 through. In 2014, the newly merged entity opened across the two sites. It was a strange
37
38 feeling for some of the teachers and students from the closing school to find themselves
39
40 back on their old site but with a new identity, as with this teacher who also had a child
41
42 at the school:
43
44

45
46 I had to keep my job and my position separate from my child's school – this is his
47
48 school. And I had to make this really good for him, because he was staying on the [old]
49
50 site, but it was not going to be the old school anymore. ... I was keeping back from him
51
52 anything I might be feeling. And so, it was quite hard actually as dual role, very
53
54 difficult. (Teacher 2)
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56
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3 The policies, procedures, curriculum resources and teaching approaches from the
4
5 continuing school took precedence. The closing school teachers were struggling to
6
7 preserve something of their old school's identity and uniqueness in the merged school
8
9 environment but they were expected to adapt to the continuing school's ways of doing
10
11 things:

12
13 ... it would be more balanced if the other teachers had to learn a new process for
14
15 teaching... especially for the [closing school] community, if something of [the closing
16
17 school] had stayed. I feel strongly about that, because [the closing school] was
18
19 achieving, it wasn't not achieving. (Teacher 1)
20
21

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

23
24 Because I feel otherwise you get one group of children that know all the processes; they
25
26 know all the testing... whereas you get another group of kids and everything is new to
27
28 them. Every single thing, learning-wise... they have to learn the homework structure,
29
30 everything is different. (Teacher 1)
31
32

33
34 Parents noticed, as well:

35
36 I mean it's little things like notices came out and instead of having [the new name of the
37
38 merged school], [the continuing] school's on it. [Our] children come to school and they
39
40 are wearing their plain navy polo shirts, and the [continuing school] children still have
41
42 got their logos on theirs... It's not a merged identity.... (Parent 1)
43
44

45
46 This quote identifies the concern highlighted by most study participants. Until new
47
48 uniforms were designed, the closing school wanted to keep their original uniforms,
49
50 which not only would remind them of their former identity but would save unnecessary
51
52 expenditure. The Board of Trustees of the merged school would not allow the closing
53
54 school students to wear their old uniforms but allowed the continuing school to do so.
55
56

1
2
3 Closing school parents had to buy new plain uniforms:

4
5 Ours had to change. We had pale blue, so our parents had to all go and buy new [navy]
6 polo shirts On the other hand, [continuing school children] were allowed to wear
7 their original uniforms with the [continuing school] logo. Totally their uniform!
8
9
10
11 (Teacher 3).
12

13
14 This new rule was also applied to sports uniforms but in a less conciliatory manner:

15
16 And the same thing has happened with sports team uniforms... They've got [our old
17 name] on them We had to turn them inside out and put the number in vivid
18 (permanent marker) on the shirt ... But they were allowed to go with [their old school
19 name] written across their polo shirts! (Teacher 3)
20
21
22
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24
25 These examples illustrate how the continuing school took their rights as 'given' and set
26 up a new hierarchy in the merged environment. They assumed control of the transition
27 process, leaving the closing school bewildered and frustrated. The following discussion
28 section draws first on Bourdieu's notions of symbolic power and symbolic violence to
29 explain what was happening, and then field, capital and habitus to provide insights into
30 how this situation came about.
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39 **Discussion**

40
41 When the earthquakes struck Canterbury in 2010 and 2011, the Government enacted
42 legislation to set up a government department to manage the response and recovery
43 process. The Canterbury Earthquake Recovery Authority (CERA) was created on 29
44 March 2011 and a Minister for Earthquake Recovery was established. CERA was not
45 disestablished until five years later when the responsibility was returned to local
46 authorities and agencies. Given the size of the damage, the length of time recovery
47 would take and the enormity of the cost (it was put at \$40 billion dollars), this is not
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1
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3 surprising. What it did, however, was to take away, not just power from those affected,
4
5 but also a voice in decision making. The citizens of Canterbury were traumatised but
6
7 they were not passive victims; they displayed many examples of creative problem-
8
9 solving, active engagement and locally-based solutions (see, for example, Author,
10
11 2013b). By centralising decisions at the macro-level with the government and its
12
13 agencies in Wellington, symbolic power was firmly established. It then became taken
14
15 for granted by those who held and wielded it. This symbolic power, exemplified in
16
17 CERA and legitimised in law, was difficult to challenge and led to much confusion
18
19 between central government and local authorities. There is not space in this article to
20
21 discuss the way in which the citizens of Christchurch had symbolic violence enacted
22
23 upon them throughout the earthquake recovery process – what is important is that it
24
25 modelled how decisions would be made on their behalf by those who deemed
26
27 themselves to know best. When decisions were made about post-disaster schooling in
28
29 the region, it also appeared as taken-for-granted that the Minister and Ministry in
30
31 Wellington would also know best for the people of Christchurch. Thus, the mantle of
32
33 symbolic power over earthquake recovery was passed to decision making in the
34
35 schooling sector.
36
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40
41 What the findings from this study and the other reports on the school
42
43 reorganisation process show, in detail, is how the Minister and Ministry took this mantle
44
45 of symbolic power as their right and acted without thought or compassion as they
46
47 implemented their plan. The evidence is quite stark. The 2012 Ombudsman's report, for
48
49 example, confirmed that the Ministry withheld vital information from schools,
50
51 instructed the Christchurch City Council to do the same, and forbade schools from using
52
53 legal means to access information that was their right. Five years later, the 2017
54
55 Ombudsman's report stated that the Ministry acted with unnecessary secrecy, without
56
57
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1
2
3 transparency and treated the schools with distrust. And this was done without
4
5 consideration for what schools had been through and the further trauma that the closures
6
7 and mergers might cause. Symbolic violence, while not *physically* violent, compounded
8
9 the psychological and emotional trauma schools were already facing and had the same
10
11 effect.
12

13
14 When the Ministry put labels on the schools in the reorganisation process, they set
15
16 up a hierarchical power structure between schools, with, in this case, the continuing
17
18 school taking up the mantle of symbolic power. The continuing school accepted this
19
20 power as given – as their unchallengeable right – and went on to act accordingly.
21
22

23
24 To further understand why the continuing school behaved in this way, it is
25
26 necessary to return to Bourdieu's notions of field, capital and habitus. While a field is
27
28 often discussed at the macro-level, I take my lead from Bourdieu (1993b, p. 271) who
29
30 states, 'one cannot grasp the most profound logic of the social world unless one
31
32 becomes immersed in the specificity of an empirical reality' and instead set it at the
33
34 micro level.
35
36

37
38 The field is the merger process; the two key actors are the closing school and the
39
40 continuing school. At stake is symbolic control of the newly merged school. As
41
42 Bourdieu notes, social actors 'are engaged specifically in a struggle to impose the
43
44 definition of the social world that is most consistent with their interests' (1979, p. 80).
45
46 The winning actors, in this case, will imprint their school's identity and culture on the
47
48 new entity.
49
50

51
52 The forms of capital that the actors bring to this struggle are economic, social,
53
54 political and symbolic. The closing school is deemed to have fewer economic assets. Its
55
56 buildings are damaged, its land unstable and its student population decreasing. The
57
58

1
2
3 continuing school has undamaged buildings and land, along with greater student and
4
5 staff numbers. Socially, the closing school sits in a 'red zone', where houses are flagged
6
7 for demolition, so its once stable and cohesive community is fragmented. The
8
9 continuing school sits in a higher socio-economic neighbourhood with its school
10
11 community intact. Politically, the closing school has been given a label of low value
12
13 ('closing'). On the other hand, the continuing school has been given a prestigious label
14
15 ('continuing'), which places it in a more powerful position. As Bourdieu (1989, p. 17)
16
17 explains:

20
21 Thus agents are distributed in the overall space, in the first dimension, according to the
22
23 overall volume of capital they possess, and, in the second dimension, according to the
24
25 structure of their capital, that is, the relative weight of the different species of their capital
26
27 ... in the total volume of their assets.

28
29
30 The continuing school's political power is strengthened when the principal selected to
31
32 lead the new school comes from within their ranks. The Board of Trustees is also
33
34 stacked in the continuing school's favour. While the closing school recognises the
35
36 unfairness of the contest, the continuing school assumes the right to imprint their
37
38 identity and culture on the new school. The closing school capitulates.

39
40
41 With their dominance established, the continuing school sets about establishing a
42
43 new habitus – a new set of dispositions and new ways of operating. Through their
44
45 actions and interactions, they reinforce their symbolic superiority – and they use a
46
47 *symbolic form* to do so. Like the conch held aloft in William Golding's *Lord of the Flies*
48
49 (1954), the school logo becomes a symbolic form – a *structuring* and *structured*
50
51 instrument of domination (Bourdieu, 1979). By capitulating, the closing school loses
52
53 their right to use their old school logo. The continuing school's logo is retained on
54
55
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1
2
3 newsletters and school uniforms. The closing school's logo is removed from sight –
4
5 even if this means subjecting the closing school to the indignity of turning their sports
6
7 uniforms inside out. This is an act of pure symbolic violence. It does not hurt physically
8
9 but it clearly hurts psychologically and emotionally – yet the closing school is
10
11 powerless to stop it. Morgan and Björkert, (2006, p. 448) suggest:

14 The power of symbolic violence rests precisely in its lack of visibility – in the fact that
15
16 for those exposed to it the doubts and fear engendered by it cause them to question
17
18 themselves. The victims are therefore left uncertain and confused as to what, exactly, is
19
20 happening and unable to articulate to themselves or others what they are going through.
21

22
23 The closing school has become subjugated to the continuing school's symbolic power.
24
25 Such symbolic acts set the tone for future interactions. The continuing school's policies,
26
27 procedures, curriculum and resources become the accepted and unchallenged habitus as
28
29 'both a system of schemes of production of practices and a system of perception and
30
31 appreciation of practices' (Bourdieu, 1989, p. 19).
32
33

34
35 Yet, the systems at the continuing school were not necessarily any better than
36
37 those of the closing school – in the findings section, one of the teachers exclaimed her
38
39 puzzlement at being made to feel as if the closing school was failing when it was not.
40
41 Had she known about symbolic power she might have seen what was happening around
42
43 her. The selection of the continuing school's way of doing things was not based on any
44
45 evaluative criteria, it was to all intents and purposes, arbitrary. The most significant
46
47 event that confirms the arbitrariness of the continuing school's symbolic power is when
48
49 the Ministry splits the new school in two and half the students and staff return to the
50
51 closing school's former site. Even on familiar ground, the closing school staff and
52
53 students conform to the habitus of the continuing school without protest. As Samuel
54
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3 (2013, p .401) states, ‘Symbolic power exists whenever the arbitrary nature of the
4 field’s structure and rules is forgotten, misrecognized as natural and therefore
5 preconsciously accepted.’
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10 What played out in the field of the merger was a microcosm of bigger forces at
11 play. The symbolic power that had its beginnings at the macro-level with the
12 Government’s Canterbury Earthquake Recovery Authority was carried through to the
13 meso-level of the Ministry’s post-earthquake school reorganisation and, from there, to
14 the micro-level field of the merger. In each case, the more powerful actor assumed
15 symbolic control, imposing their order as natural and legitimate, while the more
16 vulnerable actor acquiesced.
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25

26 **Conclusion**

27
28 After researching schools in post-earthquake Christchurch, I was left puzzled by the
29 actions of one school as they assumed control in what should have been a genuine
30 merger between two schools. It has taken several years of thinking and reading to find a
31 way of explaining this behaviour. I found the answer by thinking conceptually and
32 theoretically.
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41 Conceptually, I had to move beyond the immediate field of action and see this in a
42 broader context – from the macro-level, to the meso-level, to the micro-level. When the
43 New Zealand Government assumed control of the earthquake recovery, they set in
44 motion a power hierarchy that was played out at the macro-level by the Canterbury
45 Earthquake Recovery Authority (CERA). CERA stripped the people of Christchurch of
46 their right to be involved in post-earthquake decision making. When decisions needed to
47 be made at the meso-level about the future of schooling in Christchurch, the Ministry of
48 Education, followed the Government’s lead and acted in a similarly heavy-handed way.
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3 The Ministry set the tone for school mergers by delegating symbolic authority to the
4
5 ‘continuing’ school, thus setting up the same power hierarchy at the micro-level.
6
7

8 Theoretically, notions of symbolic power and symbolic violence (Bourdieu, 1979,
9
10 1989, 1993a) provided an insight as to what was happening when the two schools
11
12 behaved as they did, that is, the continuing school assuming control and treating the
13
14 closing school thoughtlessly, and the closing school submitting to this treatment. Field,
15
16 capital and habitus (Bourdieu, 1989, 1993a; Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977) helped explain
17
18 how this situation came to be – the continuing school came to the field with more
19
20 capital and stronger assets, used symbolic power to take control, and went on to develop
21
22 a new habitus which stamped their identity on the merger.
23
24
25

26 In conclusion, this case study provides an in-depth examination the ‘specificity of
27
28 an empirical reality’ (Bourdieu, 1993, p. 271) which illuminates the everyday struggles
29
30 in the social and political world. In the context of post-earthquake Christchurch, the
31
32 world was a constant power play between social actors at different levels. Bourdieu’s
33
34 theories enable us to step back and recognise the arbitrariness of symbolic power – but
35
36 to change the situation is more difficult. As Bourdieu asserts, ‘To change the world, one
37
38 has to change the ways of world making, that is, the vision of the world’ (Bourdieu,
39
40 1989, p. 23).
41
42
43

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