Class and the classroom: reproduction and resistance of inequalities in New Zealand education
# Contents

Abstract ................................................................................................................................. 1
Acknowledgements ............................................................................................................... 2
1. Introduction ...................................................................................................................... 3
2. Literature Review ............................................................................................................. 6
   2.1 NZ: a classless society? ............................................................................................. 6
   2.2 Decile-based inequalities in attainment .................................................................. 8
   2.3 Students’ labour market trajectories ....................................................................... 10
   2.4 Class(ification) ......................................................................................................... 12
   2.5 Decile drift ................................................................................................................ 15
3. Methodology .................................................................................................................... 18
   3.1 Sampling strategy ..................................................................................................... 18
   3.2 Research method ....................................................................................................... 20
   3.3 Data analysis .............................................................................................................. 21
   3.4 Researcher positionality ......................................................................................... 22
4. Analysis ............................................................................................................................. 23
   4.1 Decile-based value judgements .............................................................................. 23
   4.2 Parental negotiation of the decile system ............................................................... 27
   4.3 Contrasting values: mobility versus community ...................................................... 31
5. Conclusion ......................................................................................................................... 36
6. Bibliography ......................................................................................................................... 38
7. Appendices ......................................................................................................................... 41
   7.1 Appendix 1 ................................................................................................................. 41
   7.2 Appendix 2 ................................................................................................................. 43
   7.3 Appendix 3 ................................................................................................................. 44
Abstract

Class-based inequalities in educational attainment persist in New Zealand despite twenty-five years of the ‘decile system’, a redistributive model of school funding that seeks to equalise students’ economic disparities. Through analysis of sixteen qualitative interviews, this paper examines how culture has become the driving mechanism for class-based inequalities in New Zealand education. Drawing on Tyler’s theory of class as ‘classificatory struggle’, decile classifications are shown to have effects beyond their intended redistributive function, with pervasive meritocratic discourses fuelling behavioural and cultural explanations for people’s locations within the system’s constructed hierarchy. Analysis of the widespread ‘decile drift’ pattern reveals that whilst middle class parents operationalise stigma in justifying their negotiation of mobility within the decile system, working class parents resist the dominant value systems that the decile system proposes. The way in which stigma is inadvertently produced by middle class parents rather than ‘from above’ by the state has important ramifications for future sociological studies of class and stigma.
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I am grateful to my participants for kindly sharing their experiences and perspectives. To my supervisor, Dr Matthew Sparkes, I dedicate this Māori whakatauki (proverb): ‘Anei au, tō pou whirinaki’ (‘I’m here, I’ll support you’) for his sustained encouragement and support throughout this project.
1. Introduction

New Zealand’s system for funding schools, known as the ‘decile system’, is in essence an attempt to mitigate the effects of economic inequality. The decile system was introduced in 1995 as a more objective and transparent means of distributing funds to schools. Under the decile system, all New Zealand schools are given a 1-10 classification in order to provide more funding to schools that have a higher percentage of children from low socioeconomic families (decile 1 schools have the highest percentage, and decile 10 the lowest). Underpinned by values of fairness and meritocracy, the decile system was operationalised as a redistributive model that tries to quash the class-based advantages that some parents afford their children. Yet despite the redistributive nature of the decile system, since the system’s inception high decile schools have consistently had higher educational attainment than their lower decile counterparts (Education Counts 2017; NZQA 2011; NZQA 2019).

The research focus of this paper is particularly timely given the New Zealand government’s announcement in September 2019 that it would be replacing the decile system with an ‘equity index’. The proposed 'equity index' is a risk-based funding system that takes into account eight socio-economic factors¹ that are known to be associated with the likelihood of a child achieving in education. Whereas the decile system has only ten classifications, the new 'equity index' will have up to two hundred, and, crucially, they will be confidential. In discussing the decision to replace the decile system, Education Minister Chris Hipkins said: “Getting rid of school deciles

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¹ Proportion of time the child has been supported by benefits since birth; Child has a child, Youth and Family notification; Mother's age at child's birth; Father's offending and sentence history; Ethnicity; Youth Justice referral; Mother's and father's average earned income over previous five years; School transience.
will also reduce the stigma associated with them whereby too many of our schools are being judged
on their decile rating, rather than what they achieve for their students.’ (1 News, 2019).

The Education Minister’s announcement demonstrates how decile classifications have taken on a
form and life outside of the funding purposes for which they were designed. Despite government-
level acknowledgement of the stigmatising effects produced by the decile system, little
investigation has been undertaken into the mechanisms underlying these effects. In particular,
there is a dearth of analysis about how the decile system, as a form of classification imbued with
power relations, operates to produce and reproduce inequality in New Zealand. This lacuna is in
part attributable to the widespread belief that New Zealand is a classless, meritocratic society
(Frances and Roberts 2017; Thrupp 2007; Wilkes 2004).

Historically, class-based inequalities have been understood as resulting from the productive sphere
or from different cultural dispositions. Recent approaches to class analysis, however, have sought
to expose and critique how classificatory systems are constructed, what norms and values they
establish, and how individuals struggle against their position within these hierarchies. Utilising
this conceptual framework, it is apparent that the ways in which parents consider, negotiate, and
in some instances circumvent the decile classification system, and its imposed valuation of schools,
are of central importance in understanding how educational inequalities are produced and
reproduced. There is a clear reflexivity in the way parents in New Zealand understand their position
within the decile system. Whilst some parents seek to be mobile within this classificatory system,
others are seen to accept their place and resist the dominant value systems that the decile system
proposes.
Drawing on sixteen qualitative interviews with parents of students at either end of the decile system, this paper will investigate how cultural factors, which are unrecognised in the decile system, have become the driving mechanism for class-based inequalities in educational attainment in New Zealand. In the literature review empirical inequalities in educational attainment in New Zealand are detailed in conjunction with relevant literature on meritocracy, classification, and stigma that offers insights into the mechanisms powering these inequalities. The methodology chapter describes the demographic of the sample recruited and details my methodological choice of qualitative interviews in which I assumed the role of the ‘responsive interviewer’ (Rubin and Rubin 2005). The following analysis of how classification within the education system operates as a form of class in New Zealand offers insights for the implementation of the forthcoming ‘equity index’ to ensure this new funding model does not simply generate the same class effects as the decile system it will replace.
2. Literature Review

2.1 NZ: a classless society?

There is a notable lack of historical analysis into class-based inequalities in New Zealand. Crothers (2013) posits that although there is a ‘‘considerable scatter’’ of studies on social class in New Zealand, these have seen ‘‘little culmination’’ (Crothers 2013, 274). Frances and Roberts (2017) attribute this historical lack of theorising on class in New Zealand to the longstanding misconception in the country’s public imagination that New Zealand is a classless, egalitarian society. This perception stems from a colonial-era goal to build a meritocratic society that supported social mobility enabled by land ownership in reaction to the nineteenth century Britain from which many colonists emigrated (Thrupp 2007; Wilkes 2004).

Thrupp (2007) argues that this perception of egalitarianism in shaping policy and popular thinking about school admissions in New Zealand should not be underestimated, postulating that it may have made New Zealanders more reluctant than the English to ‘‘articulate the seeking-out of a socially advantaged education’’ (Thrupp 2007, 1394). Thrupp identifies how factors including limited population pressure, the blurring of class distinctions by the New Zealand labour market (for example, self-employed tradespeople often have higher incomes than professionals) and the lack of competition for university places of the type that exerts pressure on choices of secondary, primary and even early childhood schools in England mean that class strategising around school admissions is often ‘‘present but hidden’’ in New Zealand. This sentiment echoes Bourdieu’s (1986) argument that whilst schooling is widely perceived as a neutral process, in reality it is not a tool for developing a more meritocratic society but rather a covert mechanism that reproduces
existing class-based inequalities. Yet Thrupp’s (2007) review of the effects of changing school admission policies in New Zealand significantly lacks analysis of the decile system used to fund schools since 1995.

In their analysis of youth and social class in the United Kingdom, Australia and New Zealand, Frances and Roberts seek to correct the perception that class theory’s ‘Britishness’ renders it with ‘limited traction in other national contexts’ (Frances and Roberts 2017, 3). They make a convincing case for the continued salience of class in explaining young people’s life trajectories in the antipodes, expressing frustration at the positions on social class commonly taken by both academics and politicians in Australia and New Zealand. They posit that both of these groups ‘continually deny the value of class analysis in explaining young people’s life trajectories’ (Frances and Roberts 2017, 3), and argue that this has embedded into the psyche of the nation an ‘unsubstantiated' perception that Australia and New Zealand are “'progressive meritocracies” where class and other “social divisions” had been avoided’ (Frances and Roberts 2017, 13). The decile system that is used to fund New Zealand schools is imbued with meritocratic discourses in that it seeks to equalise students’ economic inequalities through school funding. Meritocratic discourses fuel behavioural and cultural explanations for people’s positioning within a classification system, individualising and justifying inequality by rendering the structural conditions of inequality largely invisible (Littler 2013). This paper therefore seeks to rectify the current lack of analysis pertaining to the ramifications of dominant meritocratic discourses within the decile system specifically.
2.2 Decile-based inequalities in attainment

The decile system was introduced in 1995 as a more objective and transparent means of distributing funding to schools with a high proportion of students from disadvantaged socioeconomic backgrounds (New Zealand Education and Science Committee 2003, 4-5). Decile classifications have been recalculated every five years using census data for households with school-aged children for each school’s catchment area. Decile classifications are calculated based on five equally weighted socioeconomic indicators: household income, occupation, household crowding, educational qualification, and income support. Decile 1 schools are the ten per cent of schools nationwide with the highest proportion of students from low socioeconomic communities. Decile 10 schools are the ten percent of schools with the lowest proportion of students from these communities. As a result, decile 1 schools get the most funding and decile 10 the least (Ministry of Education 2020). See Appendix 1 for a full list of which funding deciles determine.

Despite the decile system’s redistribution of economic resources in response to socioeconomic inequalities, annual reports show long term inequalities in attainment between schools of different deciles. These inequalities are observed at both primary school (Education Counts 2017a, 7; Education Counts 2017b, 6; Education Counts 2017c, 7) and secondary school level (NZQA 2011, 36-41; NZQA 2019, 16-18). Figure 1 shows how from 2009 to 2018 higher decile schools consistently outperformed their low and middle decile counterparts in attaining the final level of New Zealand’s official secondary-school qualification, Level 3 of the National Certificate of Educational Achievement (NCEA).
The prevailing perception that New Zealand is a meritocratic, classless society (Frances and Roberts 2017) has meant that understandings of educational inequalities in New Zealand have traditionally been explored through ethnicity\(^2\), serving to side-line discussion of class-based inequalities in attainment. It is important, however, to note that Māori and Pacific Islander students are overrepresented in low-decile schools where the average attainment rate is lower (NZQA 2011, 31). The low attainment rate amongst these ethnic minorities cannot be solely attributed to their ethnicity, as demonstrated by the findings of Marie, Fergusson and Boden (2008) who found disparities in educational attainment between Māori and non-Māori students were, ‘for the most part explained by their exposure to family socioeconomic disadvantage in childhood rather than

\(^2\) I use ‘ethnicity’ rather than ‘race’ as this is the term used in annual reports on educational attainment in New Zealand.
by factors relating to cultural identity’ (Marie, Fergusson and Boden 2008, 192). These findings reveal the importance of utilising intersectionality when analysing how class and ethnicity serve to dually disadvantage working class ethnic minority students in New Zealand.

### 2.3 Students’ labour market trajectories

The aforementioned inequalities in educational attainment mean that fewer low-decile students have the credentials to study at university. Strathdee and Engler (2012) also found that ‘a student from a lower-decile school needs to achieve very highly—be in the top 5% of all students [nation-wide]—to have the same likelihood of progressing on to bachelor-level study as an average student from a higher-decile school’ (Strathdee and Engler 2012, 506). Figure 2 (Education Counts 2019) shows the differing trajectories of school leavers of different deciles one year after having left school. Quintile 1 (decile 1 and 2) has the highest percentage of students not enrolled in tertiary education and the highest percentage of students undertaking the lower level tertiary certificates 1-2, while the converse is true for Quintile 5 (decile 9 and 10).
Median hourly earnings are fifty-five percent higher for New Zealanders with a degree or higher qualification compared with those with no such qualifications (Universities New Zealand 2018). This is more than twice the earnings premium of those with lower-level tertiary qualifications (level 1-7 certificates and diplomas) which, as Figure 2 demonstrates, are predominantly achieved by students from low-decile high schools. In addition, further decile-based disparities can be seen in entry statistics to certain ‘elite’ second-year university courses in medicine, law and engineering that have ‘limited numbers and high entry thresholds’ (Johnston 2018) and that lead to lucrative careers. Admissions data from six New Zealand universities reveals that sixty percent of students accepted into professional law, medicine and engineering courses from 2013 to 2018 came from decile 8-10 schools, while just six percent came from decile 1-3 schools (Johnston 2018).
As demonstrated, there is ample evidence for the influence of decile classifications on educational attainment and on students’ subsequent labour market trajectories. Given that the effects of parents’ economic capital are being minimised by the decile system, it is necessary to consider how culture is operating as a mechanism through which class-based inequalities in New Zealand are reproduced.

**2.4 Class(ification)**

Cultural approaches to class have birthed understandings of class as an ‘individualised process of hierarchical distinction’ whereby class is ‘implicitly encoded in identity through practice’ (Bottero 2004, 991). Some cultural approaches to class, however, fail to go far enough in their analyses of cultural processes. They are limited by the Bourdieusian conception that culture is dispositional, operating below the level of consciousness (Bourdieu 1977; Bourdieu 1986). This passive, sub-reflexive understanding of how culture functions has fuelled the popularity of capital-based frameworks to analyse the link between family background and educational attainment where cultural capital is understood as legitimate education, knowledge and competence which exists in three forms: embodied, objective and institutional (Bourdieu 1986).

In the New Zealand context, in line with Bourdieu’s (1977) theory of practice, Stephen and Gillies (2012) found parents were competing for resources in the field of education. They argue that it is through ‘everyday actions of privilege’ relating to education that wealthy parents advantage their own children, reproducing existing class-based inequalities (Stephen and Gillies 2012, 145). Their findings, however, are limited because they only consider culture through Bourdieu’s concepts of habitus, field and capital. This is not to deny that Bourdieu’s idea that all classificatory systems are relational, struggle-based and have subject-making properties has continued use for
sociologists studying inequalities (Tyler 2015, 500), but rather to acknowledge how more recent analyses of class have revealed how culture is affective when people resist the ‘forms of value, judgements and norms’ (Tyler 2015, 507) classification systems produce. This necessitates a more reflexive conceptualisation of class.

The work of Tyler (2013, 2015, 2018, 2020) is useful in reconceptualising an active affective process. Tyler (2013) conceptualises class as ‘classificatory struggle’, arguing that class identity is best understood through how people negotiate and contest the classifications the hegemonic order places upon them. This approach reveals how classifications are not neutral categories, but rather the way in which we model our understanding of society influences the very subjects that we are trying to understand. Employing a ‘class as hierarchy’ approach gives scope to move beyond formalising class categories to instead examine the consequences of classificatory systems and the ‘forms of value, judgements and norms they establish in human societies’ (Tyler 2015, 507).

Tyler’s (2013) conceptualisation of class as ‘classificatory struggle’, however, has been criticised for operating at too general a level of abstraction (Jeffrey, Thomas and Devine 2019). Jeffrey, Thomas and Devine (2019) sought to create a new typology of classes based on the degree to which people engage in classificatory struggles. They devise four types of identification/disidentitication with the ‘neoliberal order of classifications’ which they place on a continuum from those ‘orientated to a “policing” function, either accepting or internalising dominant discourses or attempting to displace abjection onto others’, to those ‘that tend more towards “politics” in either asserting alternative circuits of value or through the appeal to “the name of the proletariat” as a political claim to radical equality’ (Jeffrey, Thomas and Devine 2019,
1). This typology offers a new level of nuance for investigating exactly how class as ‘classificatory struggle’ emerges in relation to the decile system.

This understanding of culture as an active affective process has similarly been employed by Reay (1998, 2017) in her studies of class and education in the United Kingdom. Reay (2017) argues that whilst privileged families feel ‘a sense of belonging’ within education, working class families lack confidence in their interactions with schooling (Reay 2017, 16), echoing her earlier findings of the powerlessness and anxiousness of the working-class habitus when in confrontation with the education system (Reay 1998). Reay reveals the strength that meritocratic discourses can have in education by arguing that working class children and parents lack recognition both as successful learners and as valuable individuals in education and that this relative educational failure has come to be seen as a ‘personal lack’ (Reay 2017, 75). This ‘personal lack’ felt amongst working class families speaks to the existence of stigma within education.

Recent developments in the sociology of stigma (Tyler and Slater 2018; Tyler 2018; Tyler 2020) reveal how the production of stigma in each society is intimately connected to the classificatory systems specific to that society in that it is formed in relation to the ‘structural and structuring factors’ specific to a society (e.g. time, place, politics and economic conditions) (Tyler and Slater 2018, 731). Understanding stigma as inseparable from power and inequality reveals stigma as ‘a form of classificatory violence “from above” which devalues people, places and communities’ (Tyler 2020, 23). The way in which stigma is understood to be operationalised ‘from above’ has resulted in stigma recently being theorised as a form of neoliberal governance (Tyler 2020) that is not only class-based but also has important ethnic and racial undertones. Indeed, Tyler posits that placing racism at the centre of sociological understandings of stigma enriches the utility of stigma
as an analytic to understand not only racism but also other forms of ‘dehumanisation’, including class-based forms (Tyler 2018, 761). This argument is important for investigating stigma in New Zealand where racialised colonial legacies continue to powerfully shape the lives of indigenous Māori people. In the New Zealand context, however, it is possible to problematise the conception of stigma as ‘a form of classificatory violence “from above”’ given that stigma has been identified as accompanying the decile system, which is in essence a classification system whose equalising objectives would appear to be opposed to the production of stigma. The unique way in which the decile system as a classificatory system leads to the emergence of stigma and the resulting social and political effects of this stigma are yet to be explored.

2.5 Decile drift

In addition to the production of stigma, another example of ‘classificatory struggle’ related to the decile system can be observed in the ‘decile drift’ phenomena. In New Zealand, ‘a school’s decile ranking is often used as a proxy measure for the quality of the school’ (New Zealand Education and Science Committee 2003, 14) resulting in parents steadily moving their children from low to higher decile schools, creating a pattern known as ‘decile drift’. A 2018 report found that ‘many students [were] bypassing their well performing local school based on the assumption that a higher decile school would guarantee higher quality teaching and results’ (Tomorrow’s Schools Independent Taskforce 2018, 69). Consequently, between 1996 and 2017 the number of students at decile 8-10 schools increased by 790,056 whereas the number of students in decile 1-3 schools decreased by 8,160 (Tomorrow’s Schools Independent Taskforce 2018, 69).
Unlike in many other national education systems, students in New Zealand today are not strictly limited to attending a school within their zone. Instead, they can apply for enrolment in many different state schools, with the only restriction being available places (Webber 2020, 2). The ‘decile drift’ pattern contributes to large numbers of students attending schools outside of their zone, estimated to total over 110,000 students in 2016 (Hill 2016, 1).

Theoretical insights into the effects of ‘decile drift’ can be drawn from Reay and Lucey’s (2004) research into a similar pattern of moving children between schools in London. They identify how London schools populated by majority working class children are devalued to the point they are demonised, whilst schools attended by majority privileged children are idealised, arguing that the ways in which schools are imagined by parents are crucial for the construction of local school markets (Reay and Lucey 2004, 48). The strict nature of school zones (catchment areas) in the United Kingdom mean that some of the methods by which British parents seek mobility for their children through school choice, for example moving their residence in order to send their children to more ‘desirable’ schools outside of their current school zone, are not observed to the same extent in New Zealand. In comparison to the United Kingdom, therefore, New Zealand seems more flexible in parents’ capacity to move schools.

The most recent evidence (Webber 2020), however, indicates there is a greater pressure amongst those with higher levels of economic and cultural capital in New Zealand to move their children to high decile schools outside of their local zone. Webber’s quantitative analysis found that ‘students who attend out-of-zone schools are substantially more advantaged than their peers in the same neighbourhoods who attend the local in-zone school’ (Webber 2020, 1). In particular, ‘students who attend out-of-zone schools have parents who earn 8-17 percent more, and are 1.2-
1.7 times more likely to have Bachelor degrees’ (Webber 2020, 1). Webber’s (2020) findings create scope to investigate why, in an education system where parents have a relatively high degree of choice of school, it appears the more privileged parents are fuelling ‘decile drift’.

The aim of this paper is to determine how cultural factors drive class-based inequalities in educational attainment in New Zealand. By conceptualising class as ‘classificatory struggle’ (Tyler 2013) it becomes pertinent to examine how parents relate to the existence of stigma around low decile schools and why this stigma appears to be motivating decile drift amongst some groups of parents but not others. As such, qualitative data is required to explore how parents’ perceptions of the decile system fuel meritocratic and stigmatising discourses that produce and reproduce inequality in New Zealand.
3. Methodology

3.1 Sampling strategy

This study is based on in-depth interviews with sixteen parents from a New Zealand provincial city (population approximately 50,000). Qualitative research has ‘a unique potential for obtaining access to and describing the lived everyday world’ (Kvale and Brinkmann 2009, 29). As my study focuses largely on analysing the ideas and assumptions that parents attach to their everyday experiences of the New Zealand education system, qualitative interviews were the obvious research method to choose.

The interviewees were selected on the basis of the decile classification of the school their child(ren) attended. Seven of the interviewees had children at decile 2-4 schools, nine had children at decile 8-10 schools. The seven parents of children at decile 2-4 schools were of mixed ethnicity, including four Māori, two Pākehā (NZ European), and one African expatriate. The remaining nine interviewees were parents of children at decile 8-10 schools. They were six Pākehā and three expatriates from Britain and North America.

In conceptualising class as inherently relational, it was pertinent to interview two participant groups who exist in relation to one another, as defined by their decile classification. In addition, given that my research was initially motivated by the persistent trend of inequalities in educational attainment between schools of different deciles, it was logical to choose participants who were at either extreme of these inequalities, namely those at either extreme of the decile system. I was limited by the availability of schools in the city in which I undertook my research. There were no decile 1 schools in the area, as such, I adjusted my participant criteria accordingly, instead
interviewing a group of parents from decile 2-4 schools, as well as a group from decile 8-10 schools.

I chose to group schools of different deciles together in this manner because although a school’s decile gives some indication of the average socioeconomic circumstances at the school, it does not necessarily indicate the socioeconomic status of a particular student or their family (NZQA 2011, 18). As such, most low-decile schools will have some students from high socioeconomic backgrounds (and vice versa). To guard against this variability this study employs a similar method to Strathdee and Engler (2012), namely grouping available schools by decile in three groups (2-4, 5-7, 8-10) of which parents from the highest and lowest groups were selected for interview.

Collectively, the participants had children at a diverse range of schools as viewed by both funding type and age group. Parents were interviewed from schools that covered the three conventional types of school by funding model in New Zealand: state, state-integrated and private. Amongst the interviewees there were parents of children attending two contributing primary schools (years 1-6), a full primary school (years 1-8), three intermediate schools (years 7 and 8), three secondary schools (years 9-13), and an area school (years 1-13). One of the decile 2-4 participants was a grandmother who had recently become the primary caregiver for her grandson. For ease I will refer to all of my participants as ‘parents’, however, it is important to acknowledge that this case reflects the role of extended family members in forming a child’s cultural capital.

To gain access to the decile 2-4 participants, I contacted two gatekeepers from two different school communities (one was a member of the school’s Board of Trustees, another was a staff member at a community centre attached to the school). These two gatekeepers proved to be strategically important contacts as they both connected me with more participants who agreed to be interviewed.
To gain access to the decile 8-10 parents, I first used convenience sampling through personal networks to organise the first interviews. Following these, I used snowball sampling whereby participants connected me with other parents who agreed to be interviewed.

### 3.2 Research Method

Fourteen of the sixteen participants were interviewed one-to-one. The final two participants were interviewed together. The fourteen individual interviews ranged between thirty and seventy minutes. The one paired interview lasted ninety-five minutes. The interviewees were interviewed in semi-structured fashion, following a pre-prepared interview guide (see Appendix 2). I employed Rubin and Rubin’s (2005) responsive interviewing approach to qualitative research. By way of this approach, instead of viewing qualitative interviews ‘a set of tools to be applied mechanically’, interviews are instead conceptualised as a ‘dynamic and iterative process’ (Rubin and Rubin 2005, 13). In the role of the ‘responsive interviewer’, I began each interview with my research aims in mind but subsequently modified both my questioning style and the nature of my questions according to the knowledge and interests of the interviewee. In actively acknowledging and responding to what interviewees identified as important to them, the focus of my study emerged directly from my interactions with the participants.

With regards to the one paired interview, the two participants encouraged each other to answer my questions in more depth, probing each other’s answers for more explanation. This enabled an interview process that was ‘more continuous, iterative, interactive, dynamic, holistic, and, above all, synergistic’ (Wilson, Onwuegbuzie & Manning 2016, 1565). In retrospect, doing more paired in depth interviews (with pairs of parents who were friends or in a relationship) could have provided more insights for my research questions.
I took numerous steps to ensure my research process was ethical. Prior to each interview I obtained written consent to audio-record the interview (see Appendix 3). I also clarified to my informants that all data would be anonymised and protected, that they could choose to decline answering any questions, and that they could withdraw at any point the data they provided. The respondents’ names, the names of the schools, and the name of the city have been replaced with pseudonyms.

3.3 Data Analysis

It is crucial that researchers consider their research aims when deciding in what style they will transcribe their interviews (Roulston 2010, 107). I transcribed my audio-recorded interviews verbatim as I wanted to capture not only the New Zealand-specific vocabulary they used, but also, importantly, the complexity of the emotions and opinions held by the participants. I approached my analysis of the verbatim transcripts without a predetermined coding framework. I continued to add new codes as I transcribed more of the interviews, referring back to earlier transcriptions to check if the emerging themes were present throughout. This ‘iterative and recursive process’ enabled me to adjust, collapse and revise codes as necessary through the analytic process (Ibid., 153). From looking at the frequencies of the codes, I was able to inductively identify the dominant themes. My analysis therefore takes into account topics that were initiated by participants rather than being driven solely by testing my research questions (Ibid., 153).

3.4 Researcher Positionality

Reflexive sociology acknowledges that ‘just as there is no separate vantage point from which to view and describe society, so there is no neutral space from which to describe theoretical and conceptual issues’ (Cooper 2008, 19). As such, it is important to note my positionality in
relation to the fieldwork I undertook. I lived in New Zealand until age sixteen during which time I attended schools with classifications spanning decile 4, 7, 9 and 10. This personal dimension greatly influenced and enhanced the material I was able to gather. I was able to draw on my own experiences of the New Zealand education system, as well of those of my mother who is a primary-school teacher, both of which provided me with a depth of knowledge for understanding participants’ references to elements of the New Zealand educational curriculum. Knowing the reputations of local schools also meant I could easily connect with and more quickly gain the trust of my participants in a way which would have been difficult for a non-local.
4. Analysis

4.1 Decile-based value judgements

The meritocratic discourses that circulate as explanations for inequalities in educational attainment in New Zealand were widespread in my participants’ accounts. Education was chiefly conceptualised as a mechanism for the progression and academic success of their individual child, as expressed by Anna (decile 8-10):

It [education] just has a feeling, at times, that you’re responsible just for you, you should do the best you can, make your own way in the world and not worry about other people.

Anna’s sentiment reflects the ‘competitive individualism’ (Littler 2013, 52) essential to the classic meritocratic trope of social mobility as a ‘ladder’ that can only be used individually. This ‘competitive individualism’ serves to legitimise inequality in a hierarchical system (Littler 2013, 54). Counter to the equalising aims of the decile system, the pervasive meritocratic discourses in education in New Zealand retain ‘a commitment to the very notion of hierarchy itself’ (Littler 2013, 54). The existence of a hierarchy in education in New Zealand was not unnoticed by my participants. Several working-class parents attributed the widespread perception that the low decile schools that their children attended were undesirable as a direct effect of the decile system as a classification system which generated a hierarchy amongst schools. Aroha (decile 2-4) encapsulated this when explaining why she thought some parents intentionally chose not to send their children to the decile 2 school her children attended:

It’s the deciles, yeah, definitely, it’s the deciles that’s all it is. Like, we are conditioned to think about this [pauses] hierarchy. What’s happening in this school is exactly what’s happening in that school, but it’s the decile ten that gets [favoured], yeah.
Aroha evidences how the decile system is having effects beyond its intended redistributive function, fuelled by meritocratic discourses. Integral to individualistic meritocracy is a rhetoric of hard work and aspiration, a dominant belief that ‘‘working hard and wanting to get on’ is the way to progress’ (Littler 2013, 67). This rhetoric was espoused by Diane (decile 8-10):

If you have high aspirations, you’re going to have to work to get it. That’s sort of our [family’s] philosophy. If you want something, work for it. I mean, sure, there’s a bit of luck, you might get a break here and there, but take that, take whatever opportunities are given to you and work.

In emphasising that success is a product of hard work the privileged obscure how their initial privilege aids them (Littler 2013, 68), as shown by Diane’s reference to ‘luck’ rather than socioeconomic advantage. This obscurcation is a particular problem in education where schooling is widely perceived as a neutral process (Bourdieu 1986). The pervasiveness of individualistic, meritocratic discourses in New Zealand means that behavioural and cultural explanations for academic success are sidelining structural explanations.

Individualised behavioural and cultural explanations for educational outcomes also reveal how classifications in education are not a passive process. My participants actively engaged with the decile classifications given to their child’s school and other schools in the area. They fuel the pattern known as ‘decile drift’ by constructing a local school market where high decile schools are idealised and low decile schools demonised (Reay and Lucey 2004). Because the decile system’s classifications are premised on the socioeconomic status of parents, negative value judgements about low decile schools reflect an implicit value judgement about the parents and students at that school and reveal how culture is deemed inextricable from socioeconomic status.
Parents of students at decile 8-10 schools made disparaging remarks about a nearby low decile school in Summerton that spanned in nature from the vague ‘I don’t have a good feel on Summerton Intermediate’ (Diane) to the outright derogatory ‘Fucking hate Summerton Intermediate…..you get shitty teachers there, the scum go there’ (Jane). Although the degrading language used when speaking about low decile schools can be understood as part of a long standing demonisation of the working class, it is integral to recognise how their language demonstrate a novel form of stigma production specifically in relation to the decile system as a unique classification system. This speaks to Tyler and Slaters’ (2018) criticism that dominant conceptual understanding of stigma in social sciences, by focusing on micro-interactions and individual relationships, has apoliticised and ahistoricised stigma and consequently failed to expose how stigma is formed in relation to the ‘structural and structuring factors’ specific to a society (Tyler and Slater 2018, 731). The stigma in New Zealand is closely linked to ethnicity, shaped by colonial legacies which have systematically oppressed Māori people. For example Moana (decile 2-4), a Māori parent whose children had attended low decile schools, spoke of the stigma that she perceived her child experienced due to his ethnicity:

My son’s been kicked out of numerous schools, and yeah, I have found that a lot of schools try to get rid of certain children. And I know that this sounds really out there, but it’s mostly Māori students.

This quote reiterates Tyler’s (2018) argument that placing racism at the centre of sociological understandings of stigma can enrich sociologists’ understanding of class-based forms of stigma.

The production of stigma around low decile schools is fuelled by middle class parents working within ‘binaries of good/bad parent which are primarily class constructions’ (Reay 1998, 268). Anna (decile 8-10), for example, described how parents ‘like her’ were always the ones to offer
help to the school, stating that ‘everybody’s busy, but you make time to do things that are important to you’ and by extension implying that parents who don’t offer help do not value education to the same extent. In making this judgement, Anna obscures the reality of structural constraints on time and resources faced by many working class parents, instead employing a moralising discourse to attribute the lack of support that these parents offer to the school to a perceived deficiency in the character of these parents.

Lily (decile 8 parent) similarly provided a heavily class-based description of the effects of two contrasting home environments, reducing a child’s educational success to class-based behavioural and cultural factors:

[You will do well in school] if you have a family that values education, whereas if you’re a family that is really poor, is struggling, doesn’t value education, like they’re not even going to feed you, let alone get you to school. I know families where their kids are just sitting at home, just cruising around, and the parents aren’t doing great things. And whether they aren’t doing great things because they don’t know any better or because they haven’t had opportunities, I don’t know.

By identifying that working-class parents ‘haven’t had opportunities’, Lily shows some awareness of class-based constraints that limit parents’ ability to effectively support their child’s academic progression. This recognition of structural inequalities, however, is subsumed within her reliance on a moralising discourse that assumes the existence of a hierarchy in education that ultimately differentiates people based on their behaviour and culture. Within the same sentence (‘if you’re a family that is really poor, is struggling, doesn’t value education’) she associates being working class with failing to value education, attributing the relatively low educational attainment amongst working class children to a lack of necessary parental support and motivation at home.

These constructed ‘good/bad parent’ binaries fuel the production of stigma in the context of the New Zealand education system and have an important effect on working class parents’ interactions
with the education system. For example, Moana (decile 2-4) described the negative experiences she had regarding her son’s education:

> It’s this vicious cycle. He’s kicked out of school, you apply to go to another school, they decline you, you go back to the Ministry of Education, they apply, they get declined. Then the truancy officers come back at you and say that you’re a bad parent, you’re not getting your child to school, so you reapply again, and the schools decline again.

Moana’s description of being told ‘you’re a bad parent’ by educational authorities despite her repeated efforts to get her son enrolled in a school reflects the powerlessness that many working class parents, particularly mothers, feel in relation to their child’s education (Reay 1998; Reay 2017). This feeling of powerlessness amongst working class parents, fuelled in the New Zealand context by both the dominant belief in meritocracy and by the stigma resulting from decile classifications, evidences how classification systems become new systems of domination and inequality in the societies they categorise.

### 4.2 Parental negotiation of the decile system

When probed about their reasoning for sending their children to a high decile school a recurring theme amongst the middle class participants was a desire to ‘shelter’ their children. Seeking to ‘shelter’ children by placing them in a certain (class) environment reveals the reflexive nature of parents’ class identities, in particular a belief that it is desirable, advantageous even, to limit their child’s interactions with working class children.

Webber’s recent finding that ‘students who attend out-of-zone schools are substantially more advantaged than their peers in the same neighbourhoods who attend the local in-zone school’ (Webber 2020, 1), in particular through parental income and education, reveals the privileged socioeconomic status of parents who seek mobility for their child within the New Zealand
education system. The dominant ‘decile drift’ trend shows parents have an implicit awareness of the differing life trajectories for children who attend low versus high decile schools. Consequently, the argument expressed by my middle class participants that they wish to send their child to a higher decile school in order to ‘shelter’ them reveals an awareness amongst this stratum of privileged parents that by limiting their child’s interactions with less privileged peers their child has an increased likelihood of a more lucrative career trajectory. It also points to an attempt to disconnect or disidentify with working-class cultures. Middle class parents can thus be seen to be making strategic decisions regarding their children’s education in order to protect their cultural advantages, demonstrating how culture is an active process of struggle, even for those at ‘the top’.

The middle-class desire for their children to be brought up in a ‘protected’ cultural environment reflects a concurrent desire to curtail their children’s reflexivity about their class positionality until a certain point where they are deemed to have enough resilience and self-assuredness to engage with ‘the big wide world’ and the diversity of people in it. Lily (decile 8-10 parent) encapsulated this position when she said:

I do want to choose a school that I feel is a bit more sheltered for our kids…. Initially, when I was growing up I thought I’ll throw my kids in somewhere like Rima [a local decile 2 school], because I thought ‘oh, you know, they’ll be well-rounded, and they will meet lots of different kids from lots of different walks of life’. But then, as I got a bit older and I had kids, I started to realise that I wanted them to be a bit more sure of who they were and a bit more resilient in themselves before they went out into the big, wide world.

Diane (decile 8-10) expressed a similar sentiment when she elucidated why she chose to send her children to a small private decile 10 school:

If you’re in with more akin type people and more support, smaller class size and stuff, I think that’s nice, and hopefully they will have a little more confidence in themselves and hold onto themselves and what they believe in and not be too influenced.
Diane is therefore demonstrative of how middle-class parents seek to intentionally inculcate a particular form of embodied cultural capital in their children. This form of embodied cultural capital is only allowed to become reflexive when it is deemed to have fully developed. Middle class parents’ awareness of how high decile schools legitimise their specific form of cultural capital, that happens to be aligned with the middle-class basis of the education system, is a clear indicator of the reflexivity of their class identities. There exists, however, a conceptual tension in middle class parents’ reasoning for sending their children to high decile schools. Lily in particular encapsulates this tension when she speaks of a desire for her children to enter ‘the big wide world’, yet simultaneously expresses a desire to limit her children’s cultural interactions with less privileged children, thus decreasing the diversity of people with whom her children interact.

In essence, what this sentiment reflects is a recognition amongst middle class parents of differing class-based labour market trajectories (Education Counts 2019; Johnston 2018). The views of Lily and Diane are representative of a desire to facilitate a specific life trajectory for their children. These privileged parents seek to protect their children from diverse educational environments where they are likely to encounter peers who are perceived as predisposed to being socially and educationally ‘immobile’. Yet, as we have seen, the dominance of individualistic, meritocratic discourses in New Zealand mean that the perceived ‘immobility’ of the parents and children who attend low decile schools is attributed to the behavioural and cultural characteristics of these families, as opposed to structural inequalities and new forms of inequalities being generated by the decile system. Working class families are conceived as lacking the combination of aspiration and ethic of working hard that is deemed essential for upwards mobility in meritocratic societies (Littler 2013, 67).
This distancing from less privileged families is also evidenced in parental accounts at the higher decile schools, where some middle-class participants distinguished between the cultural capital of children at decile 8 and decile 10 schools. Speaking of her decision to move her daughter from a decile 8 to a decile 10 school, Margaret (decile 8-10) said:

I would have liked my children to have stayed through to the end of intermediate at John’s [decile 8 school], but my elder daughter needed a different social group. She needed children that were slightly more worldly, these [decile 8] kids were just not quite mature enough for her. She didn’t find her people [at the decile 8 school] and we thought she might find her people there [at the decile 10 school].

Not only are distinctions drawn between the culture of students at schools at either extreme of the decile system, but even within the ‘elite’ top bracket (decile 8-10) parents like Margaret can be seen to draw distinctions based upon schools’ classifications within the decile system. Margaret reiterates the belief that children of lower socioeconomic status are more content with remaining in their locale, in other words. they are not ‘worldly’ in that they don’t seek a highly mobile life trajectory. This reveals how ‘decile drift’ is, in essence, akin to a form of mobility, affording children a higher social status and the likelihood of a specific privileged life trajectory.

It is worth noting, however, that the rationale for moving children from a decile 8 to decile 10 school (in other words further isolating children within an already relatively culturally homogenous elite) differed from the arguments made in relation to low decile schools and children. Parents like Margaret deemed decile 8 children immature and unworldly but did not perceive them as a threat that warranted ‘sheltering’ their children from. Instead, a shift in school at this higher level allowed for further refinement of already well-established forms of cultural capital that sought to cultivate a highly mobile life trajectory for children.
The relatively mild nature of this rhetoric against decile 8 children, however, meant that some middle-class parents did not view it as a sufficiently compelling reason to move their child to the local decile 10 school. For example, Lily (decile 8) described deliberating whether to move her children to a decile 10 school but ultimately deciding not to because she did not see a degree of difference between the educational cultures at the two schools that would make the decile 10 school more desirable, and even went so far to criticise the heightened sense of self-importance she observed in children who had moved from decile 8 to decile 10 schools. As discussed prior, earlier in the interview Lily had provided a class-based description of the effects of two contrasting home environments on a child’s educational success, associating being working class with failing to value education (‘if you’re a family that is really poor, is struggling, doesn’t value education’). Yet despite her clear articulation of the divergence in culture between the families at either extreme of the decile system, her later criticism of the heightened self-importance amongst children who had moved from a decile 8 to decile 10 schools reveals that she does not see a more refined difference in school culture between schools of higher decile classifications as she does within the decile system as a whole.

4.3 Contrasting values: mobility versus community

Working class parents can be seen to be reflexive in their class identities in their rejection of the hegemonic middle-class discourse that education’s primary purposes are individualised academic success and the cultivation of a specific ‘wordly’ cultural capital that enables a highly mobile life trajectory.

The parents of children at low decile schools rejected the middle-class argument for ‘sheltering’ children by educating them in culturally homogeneous environments, criticising the effects that
this cultural inculcation could have on children. For example, Manu (decile 2-4 parent) said that he actively desired his daughter to attend a school with a diversity of students, reasoning that this kind of educational experience ‘broadens your mind… we can be quite shallow and narrow-minded if not’. He added that a diverse educational environment helps students to develop a better understanding of ‘difficult people’. The negative effects of such a limited cultural inculcation were illuminated by another decile 2-4 parent, Aroha, who described the wealthy stratum of Summerton as:

That distinct affluent kind of box-living people that just don’t really have a clue on what’s happening in the real world.

Implicit in Aroha’s argument that affluent people in Summerton are ‘box-living people’ is a criticism that the middle-class desire to isolate their children until their middle-class cultural capital has fully solidified results in an inability to relate to people from a different social background. Manu and Aroha’s criticism of the negative effects of ‘sheltering’ children can therefore be understood as part of a wider rejection of the dominant cultural attachment to upwards mobility in New Zealand. The differing perceptions of the long-term impact of being educated in a ‘protected’ cultural environment observable between parents at either end of the decile system are reflexive of the structure of the New Zealand labour market and the differing values that are convertible for working-class versus middle-class career trajectories. When questioned about the characteristics of a ‘good school’, the two groups of participants at either end of the decile system had contrasting responses. Margaret (decile 8-10) said that the key characteristics of a good school were: ’The teaching and learning. Understanding that, regardless of where the children are, you’re moving them forward.’ This emphasis on academic progression is demonstrative of the way in which middle class parents prioritise formal academic success as the outcome of education. Indeed,
children from middle- and upper-class backgrounds inherit cultural wealth in the form of embodied dispositions that are recognized and valued by the institutional procedures in the educational field (examinations and other forms of assessment) (Bourdieu 1986). So, if formal academic success requires middle-class cultural capital and the value it places on individualised aspiration and success, then these children will do better than their working class peers, even with the decile system working to neutralise the economic inequalities children arrive at school with.

Yet formal academic success is not a priority shared by parents of all classes. Working class parents instead celebrated how low decile schools fostered an atmosphere of community. For example, when asked what he thought were the characteristics of a good school Manu (decile 2-4) said ‘relationship building, not just with students, but their whānau [extended family]’. In identifying an atmosphere of community as a key characteristic of a good school, working class parents were observed to be employing an alternative circuit of value to the dominant symbolic, one that did not rely on a commodity logic (in other words school as an investment in a child’s career trajectory) but instead was inherently relational (Skeggs 2011). Working class parents are therefore operating within a value framework that serves as a counter-narrative to the dominant middle-class narrative of individualised success. This provides evidence for the ‘Type 3’ of Jeffery, Thomas and Devine’s (2019) typology of classes, defined by a disidentification with the ‘neoliberal order of classifications’ in the form of ‘asserting alternative circuits of value’ (Jeffrey Thomas and Devine 2019, 1).

Working class parents rely more on the ‘people resources’ offered by a school community, for example the sharing of childcare, whereas middle class parents are more likely to be able to afford to pay for private childcare or to have one parent in a couple who does not work full time and can therefore devote time to childcare. The need for established community ties within a low decile
school is bolstered by the fact that working class communities have historically been less mobile from their locale and as such there often exists long-standing family and community networks within low decile neighbourhoods. The precarity of working class lives means that working class parents place a higher value on schools as sites of community and, as such, may not desire their child to attend a more middle class school where education is seen primarily as a mechanism for individualised academic success instead of a source of support.

Tim (decile 2-4) recounted that sending his children to a low decile school was ‘a decision that wasn’t made lightly’ because the school had ‘a terrible, terrible reputation’. But despite recognising the negative reputation the school had, Tim spoke favourably of deciding to send his children there, saying his children have ‘wonderful thoughts of school…they love everything about it’, countering the prevailing norm that low decile schools are undesirable sites for education. But the most interesting case was that of Aroha (decile 2-4) who, upon moving from Auckland to Summerton, had enrolled her children in a decile 6 school where her sister was a teacher. She subsequently chose to move her children to a decile 2 school, a move directly counter to the widespread ‘decile drift’ trend. She said this decision was dually motivated by the decreasing roll numbers at the decile 2 school and by the cultivation of an attractive ‘school culture’ by the teachers at the decile 2 school:

I knew these people really care about the family, not just what the kid’s doing here [at school], but how he’s held at home. I had ‘time’ with the boys’ teachers at Middlesbrook [decile 6], but they were never present, like this, in this conversation [one on one with the interviewer]. They were like ‘oh yeah yeah, tick the box, oh yeah, that’s it’.

This comment demonstrates how Aroha felt her cultural capital was more in alignment with the teachers at the decile 2 school, whereas at the decile 6 school she felt frustrated by the teachers’ focus on ‘ticking the box’ in other words academic success, as opposed to caring for children’s
wellbeing in a more holistic sense (including concern for their homelife), reiterating the alternative
circuits of value that exist within working class communities. In recounting her decision to move
her children, Aroha reveals how parents are unknowingly reproducing cultures within particular
schools by aligning their children with the school culture that best fits their family culture. When
asked why she thought other parents chose not to send their children to the decile 2 school her
children attended, Aroha said:

I’ve talked to other parents and the decile system is definitely what it is. They’re like ‘oh, why
would you send [your daughter] to Rima, do you know it’s a decile two’ and I’m like ‘that’s why
she’s going there!’ And they’re like ‘I don’t understand’ and I’m like ‘well, I could be like you
and sit outside of it and have some presumptions and assume, or I can get in there and do
something about it’. So that’s why I’m here [at the decile 2 school].

Aroha’s clear rationalisation of why she moved her children to a lower decile school despite other
parents’ protests demonstrates her rejection of the dominant cultural attachment to upwards
mobility within the decile system. She also shows a direct struggle against the ‘forms of value
judgements and norms’ (Tyler 2015, 507) attached to the decile system. As such, Aroha serves as
a pertinent example of how class in contemporary societies is best understood as resistance to
classificatory processes.
5. Conclusion

For the last twenty-five years the decile system has sought to eliminate the economic inequalities that students arrive with at the start of school. Yet despite these redistributive intentions, the decile system has unintended consequences for social processes in New Zealand, in particular the educational and labour market outcomes for students of different socioeconomic classes.

This paper has sought to understand how, in an education system where economic inequalities are mediated, culture has become the driving mechanism for class-based attainment inequalities. Reviewing existing research, I have highlighted the limitations of dispositional conceptualisations of culture for understanding how it is affective, necessitating a more reflexive conceptualisation of class as ‘classificatory struggle’ (Tyler 2013). This understanding of class allowed for analysis of how pervasive meritocratic discourses fuel behavioural and cultural explanations for the levels of educational attainment, creating stigma and serving to obscure the role of structural inequalities in reproducing inequalities.

The pattern of ‘decile drift’ was explored to reveal how middle class parents are reflexive in their class identities in that they consider their position in the constructed hierarchy of the decile system and take action based on how they perceive themselves and others. As such, ‘decile drift’ can be understood as a class-based process of exclusion in the New Zealand context. Importantly, working class parents were found to be similarly reflexive, but instead of accepting the dominant meritocratic discourse, which celebrates upward mobility in a hierarchical system, these parents’ were found to assert an alternative circuit of value to the dominant symbolic (Skeggs 2011; Jeffrey,
Thomas and Devine 2019) through their valuation of school as primarily a site of community rather than a mechanism for individualised success. This prioritising of community over individual mobility explains why the same level of ‘decile drift’ is not observed amongst working class parents.

Whereas in the United Kingdom stigma is mobilised by the state to implement particular economic and political objectives (Tyler 2013; Tyler 2015; Tyler 2020), in New Zealand’s education system stigma is being driven by middle class parents. The decile system has unintentionally forced upon parents mechanisms that they utilise to try to differentiate their children from other students. Stigma then emerges organically as one explanatory tool used by middle class parents to justify their school selection process as they seek a specific cultural environment for their child in order to protect the known advantages that derive from a certain experience of education.

This discovery demonstrates the importance of the New Zealand government being attentive to the possible class effects that might emerge in the forthcoming ‘equity index’, the new classificatory system proposed to replace the decile system. Although the confidential nature of the new 'equity index' classifications will prevent the ‘decile drift’ pattern from merely transferring to the new system, the pervasiveness of individualistic meritocratic discourses amongst middle class parents in New Zealand suggests that with the abolition of decile classifications they will seek alternate means by which to differentiate their children from other students, meaning that stigma is still at risk of emerging.

The discovery of the organic emergence of stigma is also more broadly relevant for the sociology
of stigma in that it reveals how stigma is not only intentionally produced and operationalised by the state, but in fact can be produced by classificatory systems whose equalising intentions are diametrically opposed to the production of stigma. This finding creates scope for further study of classificatory systems where stigma is not the intended objective and yet is produced as an inadvertent by-product of how people perceive, negotiate and resist their given classification.
6. Bibliography


7. Appendices

7.1 Appendix 1: Which funding deciles determine and how they are calculated

Education Counts (2020), Available at: https://www.education.govt.nz/school/funding-and-financials/resourcing/operational-funding/school-decile-ratings/

Which funding deciles determine
Deciles determine some operational funding and a range of resource funding.

Operational funding
Within a school’s operational funding, deciles determine the allocation of:

- Targeted Funding for Educational Achievement
- the Special Education Grant
- the Careers Information Grant.

Resources
Ministry of Education resources determined by a school’s decile include:

- Kura Kaupapa Māori transport (deciles 1-10)
- Priority Teacher Supply Allowance (deciles 1-2)
- National Relocation Grant (deciles 1-4)
- Decile Discretionary Funding for Principals (deciles 1-4)
- Resource Teachers of Learning and Behaviour (RTLBs) Learning Support Funding (deciles 1-10)
- RTLBs for years 11 to 13 (deciles 1-10)
- School Property Financial Assistance scheme (deciles 1-10)
- Study Support Centres (deciles 1-3)
- District Truancy Service (deciles 1-10).

How deciles are calculated
The decile calculation process has 7 stages as follows.

Stage 1
Schools supply their student addresses to the Ministry. We use the addresses to determine the areas from which each school is drawing its students.

Stage 2
We assign student addresses to the smallest Census areas called meshblocks (a meshblock contains around 50 households). Then we calculate the number and percentage of students from each meshblock.

Note: Statistics New Zealand gives us confidential access to Census data, and we only use it to calculate decile ratings. The Ministry cannot identify individuals from Census data relating to decile calculations. We extract information from each meshblock, but only from households with school-aged children.
Stage 3
We examine each meshblock against 5 socio-economic indicators and equally weight them in the calculations.

- Household income — the percentage of households with equivalent income in the lowest 20%, nationally adjusted for the number of adults and children in the household and the age of the children. Households with a member who is unemployed or households supported by a benefit are not usually included in this group.
- Occupation — the percentage of employed parents in occupations that are at skill levels 4 or 5 according to the Australian and New Zealand Standard Classification of Occupations (ANZSCO). These occupations include all labourers, all machine operators and assemblers, and others who work in occupations at these lower skill levels regardless of the sector, type, or profession involved.
- Household crowding — the percentage of households with an equivalised crowding index greater than one. This index measures the proportion of household members per bedroom adjusted for the presence of children under 10, every 2 of whom are assigned to share a bedroom. Couples and others are each assigned their own bedroom.
- Educational qualification — the percentage of parents with no tertiary or school qualifications.
- Income support — the percentage of parents who directly (not as a partner) received Jobseeker Support, Sole Parent Support, or Supported Living Payments (previously known as the Domestic Purposes Benefit, Unemployment Benefit, and Sickness and Invalid’s Benefit) in the previous year.

Stage 4
The 5 indicators are weighted by the number of students from each meshblock. This means that meshblocks where only a few of a school’s students live will have little effect on its decile, while those having more will have a greater effect.

Stage 5
We rank the schools in relation to every other school for each of the 5 indicators and give them a score based on their percentile.

Stage 6
We add the 5 indicator scores for each school together (without any weightings) to get a total. This total gives the overall standing of the school in relation to all other schools in the country.

Stage 7
We divide schools into 10 groups called deciles, based on the total score calculated in stage 6. Each decile group has approximately the same number of schools. We sub-divide deciles 1 to 4 into 3 funding steps (1a, 1b, 1c, and so on) and then allocate about a third of schools to each funding step within the decile.
7.2 Appendix 2: Semi-structured interview questions

Information and consent
- The interview will take between 30 minutes and one hour
- Please read and sign the consent form if you agree with the points. Do you have any questions?
- Reiterate that all personal information will be anonymised and that they can withdraw from the project at any time they wish.
- Reiterate right to interrupt, pause or stop the interview at any time.

Parent’s experience of education (to probe cultural capital)
- Could you tell me a little about your own experience of education?
  - Where did you go to school and at what age did you leave school?
  - What did you do once you had left compulsory education?
- Did you enjoy your time in education? What did or didn't you like about it?
- Follow with relevant questions probing difficulties, interactions with teachers/peers
- How has your own experience of education influenced what you want for your child?
- How did your own parents’ expectations influence your education?

Parent's decisions about child's education
- Could you tell me a little about your child/children's experiences of education? Have they been broadly positive or negative? Why?
- What school(s) has your child(ren) attended?
- What was important for you when you were deciding where to send your child to that school(s)?
- Have you ever considered moving your children to another school?
  - If yes: explore motivations, keeping trend of decile drift and white flight in mind
  - If no: explore why - unawareness of differences between schools? Disidentification with stigma around lower decile schools?
- Do you believe educational attainment is linked to family background?
  - If yes: how so?

Educational success
- What, in your opinion, are the characteristics of a 'good school'?
- What, in your opinion, helps a child do well in school?

The decile system
- Do you think the decile system is a useful way of classifying schools in order to determine funding?
- Are you aware of what decile your child's school is?
- Do you think that the decile classification has any influence on the culture or values at your child’s school?

Stigma
The government has said that they are replacing the decile system because of the unfair stigma that has come to be associated with low decile schools.
They say that parents have started using decile as a proxy for school quality.
- Why do you think there exists this stigma towards low decile schools?
- What sort of actions/words produce this stigma?
- Has there ever been a circumstance where you are aware of this stigma?
Appendix 3: Consent form

Title of Project: Class and the classroom: reproduction and resistance of inequalities in New Zealand education

Name of Researcher: Belle George

As part of a research project on inequalities in education in New Zealand I am conducting interviews. You will be asked questions about your experiences of education, your decisions regarding your child(ren)’s education and your opinions on the decile system used to classify NZ schools for funding. This research is being conducted as part of an undergraduate Sociology course.

The interview will take about 40 minutes.

If you are interested in receiving further information about this project, please write your e-mail address on the extra sheet.

Please tick box

1. I confirm that I have understood these instructions and have had the opportunity to ask questions.

2. I understand that my participation is voluntary and that I am free to withdraw at any time without giving any reason.

3. I understand that my responses will be anonymised and only used for academic research.

4. I understand that my interview may be recorded.

5. I agree to take part in the above project.

Please see Cambridge University information on the protection of research participants data:

https://www.information-compliance.admin.cam.ac.uk/data-protection/research-participant-data

Name of Participant  Date  Signature

Name of Researcher  Date  Signature