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Imagining social pedagogy in/for New Zealand

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Abstract

On the face of it, social pedagogy has no recognised presence in New Zealand. The education workforce, and society, are generally unfamiliar with the term 'pedagogue' and what that role entails. Despite this, a range of vocations in New Zealand reflect social pedagogical practices. In this article I explore one of those vocations: tutors who work in alternative education centres. Charged with caring for and educating students who become disenfranchised from conventional secondary schools, these tutors draw from their life experiences, cultural knowledges, sporting and arts skills and vocational skills to provide a holistic education. Based on the findings of a poetic inquiry in which I re/presented the experiences of tutors through creating found poetry, I present 21 attributes of tutors' identity. In describing tutor character, tutor pedagogy and tutor achievement, I imagine these tutors as social pedagogues in New Zealand. I conclude by suggesting that these tutors play a vital role in helping students to navigate through education and life. In addition, tutors in New Zealand contribute to our global understanding of social pedagogical practice.

Keywords: social pedagogy; alternative education; tutors; poetic inquiry; New Zealand

A Polish woman on a working visa to New Zealand contacted me. I heard a measure of desperation in her voice over the phone: 'I'm a pedagogue and I can't find a job in New Zealand; nobody knows what a pedagogue is.' A visiting pedagogue from Denmark who arrived as an intern for an Auckland school was given the title 'International teacher-aide'. Subsequently, he was responsible for carrying out menial tasks supporting teachers. These two experiences reveal how New Zealand's education workforce, and society, are generally unfamiliar with the term 'pedagogue' and what that role entails. Nonetheless, New Zealand has a number of vocations imbued with social pedagogical imagination and approaches, yet these workforces are often underqualified, under-professionalised and poorly paid.

In this article, I present the findings from researching one of these New Zealand workforces, alternative education tutors. I include a framework of tutor practices, outlining 21 ways tutors re/engage young people in learning. The framework demonstrates tutors' holistic pedagogical approaches. I conclude by arguing it is vital that tutors, and those in similar para-professional roles in New Zealand, be understood as social pedagogues for purposes of furthering their skills, advancing with their career, professional recognition and international and inter-cultural collaborations in terms of research and sharing good practice.

Alternative education

Unbeknown to me at the time, I was introduced to social pedagogical approaches through my work with tutors in alternative education settings, although not until later into my studies was I able to join the dots to understand their labour as reflective of social pedagogy. Unlike the majority of the alternative education workforce, I entered the sector with a teaching qualification and experience working in conventional mainstream primary schools. I had initially made plans to spend two years 'helping out' in alternative education before returning to teach in conventional primary schooling. Those two years turned into fourteen. In that time I became the manager of the alternative education provider and chairperson of New Zealand's Alternative Education National Body, and completed doctoral studies regarding the work. The depth of insight gained from these experiences positioned me as a 'connoisseur' of alternative education, in [Barone and Eisner's](#) (2006, p. 289) terms: '... connoisseurship is developed when an individual has so refined his or her understanding of a domain that the meanings the individual is able to secure are both complex and subtle'. I acknowledge how my experiences deeply inform my discussion on alternative education and social pedagogy.

In New Zealand, alternative education programmes were developed by community groups responding to growing numbers of students arriving on their doorsteps rather than going to schools. They catered for secondary school-aged students, aged 13 to 16 years, disenfranchised from their mainstream secondary schools because of multiple suspensions, truancy and school exclusions ([Gerritsen, 1999](#)). These initiatives grew in the wake of neoliberal reforms to New Zealand's education system in the 1990s, which saw the introduction of market-based policies that fostered competition between schools fuelled by high-stakes testing ([O'Connor and Holland, 2013](#)). [McGregor and Mills](#) (2012, p. 8) argued, 'Credentialing and rank-ordering of students demand regimes of comparability and uniformity of assessment that takes little account of the life circumstances of marginalized youth'. An emphasis on academic subjects largely eclipsed concerns for the wellbeing of vulnerable students within secondary schools. Ultimately, vulnerable students became collateral damage to the neoliberal reforms ([Bauman, 2011](#)). Students have reported they ended up in alternative education because their teachers did not care for them, or provide work for them at their level ([Brooking et al., 2009](#)).

Currently, there are approximately 120 alternative education programmes across New Zealand, catering for 1,888 students at any given time. Alternative education is provided either by private community-based organisations or by schools that operate an alternative education centre on their premises. There are low teacher to student ratios, usually of 1:7. The curriculum usually comprises proficiency in literacy and numeracy, life skills, career development, the arts and physical education. The goal is for students to return to mainstream school or continue with vocational training programmes. The sector has, at best, been tolerated by the Ministry of Education, preferring that schools focus on eliminating student exclusions, rather than sending students to alternative education. However, a recent government-initiated

independent task force reviewing New Zealand's education system at large found that 'Alternative education can vary in quality, but may be the best short-term option for a number of students' ([Tomorrow's Schools Independent Taskforce, 2018](#), p. 63).

Tutors

Alternative education tutors are a key workforce that many providers employ to meet the educational and pastoral needs of students. These tutors do not base their practice on any specific qualification, but rather draw their approaches from life experiences, cultural knowledges, sporting and arts skills, vocational skills and a passion to work with young people. My role as a teacher was to assist tutors with the academic programme, with an emphasis on meeting the literacy and numeracy needs of students. This entailed instructing tutors on lesson planning and assessing. Essentially, I was charged with transforming these tutors into mainstream teachers 'on the job'. However, it was not long before I became frustrated with tutors who did not act like professional teachers. For example, tutors did not structure their days according to timetables, but rather took the students out for rides in the centre van (often getting ice-creams on the journey) and had long lunch times preparing food and talking with students as they sat around the table to eat. Tutors were more easily found playing basketball with students rather than teaching a lesson in the classroom, reflecting a description of tutors found in an early alternative education report as 'hanging out' with young people ([O'Brien et al., 2001](#)). What soon became clear to me was that these tutors were not conventional teachers at heart, but held skills that engaged students through creating safe environments where students felt loved and cared for. Academic attainment was not their focus; rather they aimed to facilitate a type of inner transformation that saw students' self-esteem and character develop in the midst of challenging personal issues they often faced. The tutors' approach has led to students developing their confidence in learning again ([Brooking et al., 2009](#)). To complement the skills of tutors, in 2011, the government provided funding for qualified teachers to itinerate across alternative education settings, providing academic guidance and support for tutors and students. In addition, many providers access the Te Kura, the national correspondence school, so students can gain the necessary academic qualifications to progress with their studies.

The [Education Review Office \(2011, p. 62\)](#), the New Zealand government agency mandated with evaluating the quality of education provision, found that 'despite the complex educational and social issues that arise in connection with Alternative Education students, these passionate tutors often have greater successes than teachers in the mainstream who have previously been unable to support these students'. However, the workforce remains marginalised due to lack of awareness regarding the unique contribution tutors make to the well-being of students, and the importance this affords in providing the foundation of further learning. There are no qualifications linked to their area of practice, and this leads to poor remuneration, a lack of career pathways and ultimately a high staff turnover. Moreover, due to having a large unqualified workforce, there is a perception that the quality of alternative education is poor and its workers merely 'well meaning' ([Langley, 2009, p. 6](#)).

Thus, in 2011 I embarked on doctoral studies to explore the lived experiences of tutors in order to understand and make visible the contribution of tutors and their pedagogies to the field of education.

Researching with tutors

My research asked 'What are the lived experiences of alternative education tutors?' ([Schoone, 2015](#)). This phenomenological research sought to understand the individual and shared experiences of tutors who worked across three alternative education sites in Auckland. Eight tutors volunteered to participate. These participants were drawn from the organisation where I was also an employee at the time; therefore, I was careful navigating ethical considerations that could potentially arise from insider research ([Schoone, 2015](#)). For example, a neutral party assisted with recruiting tutors to safeguard staff from potentially feeling obligated or coerced to participate. Notwithstanding the limitations of insider research, my experience of the sector provided me with a depth of perception whereby I could notice nuances that an outsider researchers might not. [Table 1](#) provides details regarding the tutors in my study.

Table 1. Research participants.

	Ethnicities	Gender	Age	Years of experience as a tutor
1	Samoan	Male	Mid 30s	7
2	Samoan	Female	Early 20s	2
3	Cook Islands	Male	Mid 20s	4
4	Cook Islands	Male	Early 30s	12
5	Tongan-Cook Islands	Male	Mid 20s	2
6	Tongan	Female	Late 40s	6
7	English	Male	Late 50s	10
8	New Zealand European	Female	Early 20s	1

The tutors' background skills included roles as a chef, youth worker, creative arts graduate, community worker, construction worker and Bible College graduate. Only one tutor in my study had an undergraduate degree (in Science). Most tutors had sporting and creative arts abilities. A common feature of all successful tutors is that they relate to young people with empathy and ease. This may be due to many tutors having had similar educational experiences to their students (Brooking et al., 2009) with challenges fitting into conventional schooling.

Knowing in alternative ways

Initially, I was planning to undertake research that comprised of:

statistical aggressions (!)
triangulations
extrapolations, falsifications, effect sizes,
collating, comparisons and
charts demonstrating computations of tutor effectiveness ratings.

(Schoone, 2014, p. 203)

However, I soon realised that in order to know about alternative things, I needed to explore knowing through alternative ways. Moreover, I decided against conducting a study that would pit tutors against professional teachers. Instead, I desired to understand who tutors were in their unique vitality of being. In preparing for my study I visited an alternative education centre, and was caught by the poetic manner in which one tutor introduced himself at a professional development meeting. Note, CLS refers to Creative Learning Scheme, the alternative education provider, and Panmure is a suburb in the east of Auckland.

cls panmure university
seeing gangsters
turn
in
to
soft young males and
soft young females

From this tutor's introduction I discerned a world of insight regarding tutor pedagogy. For example, humour was evident when comparing an alternative education provider to a university. I gained a sense that tutors work with their students towards personal transformation when 'gangsters turn into'... and that transformation is something visible to tutors, who 'see'. The poem implies that when the heart is softened students can become themselves. Finding this poem became a methodological turning point in my study. Instead of inquiring about the effectiveness of tutors, I set to study tutors' lived experiences as represented through the poetic voices of tutors' everyday language. As Heidegger (1971) contends, we all dwell poetically.

Central to my method was carefully listening to how tutors interacted with young people and among themselves. Thus, I designed a study where I observed tutors working with students in their centres over the course of three months, taking note of the words and phrases they spoke to young people in multiple visits to the centres where the eight tutors were employed. I observed in all the environments where tutors worked, including in classrooms, common areas and the van that is used to transport students to and from the centre. In addition I interviewed each tutor, inviting them to reflect on their roles. I also brought the tutor participants together for a performative workshop where the tutors explored the intersubjective understanding of tutor identity through creating a tutor robot, which they named Maximus (see Schoone, 2017). These data generating activities resulted in screeds of written material, from which I created found poems. Butler-Kisber (2012, p. 146) described found poetry as ‘the rearrangement of words, phrases and sometimes whole passages that are taken from other sources and reframed as poetry by changes in spaces and/or lines (and consequently meaning), or by altering the text by additions and/or deletions’. Taking my interview transcripts, observational notes and material gathered at the workshop, I highlighted key words and phrases that shone out to me. I was searching for a poetic ‘snapshot’ of a moment or concept, as in the way Dewey (1934, p. 241) wrote about: ‘a poem presents material so that it becomes a universe in itself. . . self-enclosed and self-limiting. . . self-sufficient’. Although my poems enclosed an idea in a short length, importantly it was my intention that they provided just enough words from which to launch the imagination. As part of my research and creative process, I presented the poems to the tutors for their feedback and to check that the poems resonated with their lived experiences. In total, I created over 150 found poems, using the words and phrases tutors spoke, arranging them artfully on the page. For example, one tutor described his role this way:

you’re their educator
you’re their driver
you’re their shoulder to cry on
you’re their emotional punching bag
the list goes on

Another tutor reflected on the transformational journey of one of his students with these words:

hard to pin her down
hard to keep her at school
she suddenly turned up in a pink blouse
the one that was into all the black arts

This tutor grapples with her identity as tutor:

i just felt that these kids need a mother
i want to protect them, you know, from what’s going on
i want to protect these girls
what would i do with my own kids?
i ask her if she worries
she sleeps in parks if stuff goes down at home
i see the girl’s long face, as she sits on a park bench under shadowy trees
back in the day i wanted to be a policewoman, that was my dream
i am not a teacher, as such
i learnt that these kids need more than *this* teaching
just care for them
full-time
going on six years now

Through a process in which I synthesised the responses by reading all 150 poems many times, I identified 21 insights into tutor practice. These were themes that arose from the found poems. With these themes I created 21 visual (concrete) poems, ‘21 constellations’, to artfully present the essences of their lived experiences (see Schoone, 2015). These 21 insights are not an exhaustive list, but are an insight into how I made sense of the data from my tutor observations and interviews.

Tutor practice framework

In this article, the research findings are laid bare. Bereft of the poetic nuances in my wider research I offer the findings in tables of tutor practices. I have chosen this approach here, so the reader can more easily make explicit links between the tutor practices I found, and their experiences of social pedagogy in practice. I am looking for the phenomenological nod: ‘... a good phenomenological description is something that we can nod to, recognizing as an experience that we have had or could have had’ (van Manen, 1990, p. 27). Presenting a framework with indicators potentially invites a wider discussion about how we can identify good practice within the profession, although we should not be naïve and must consider how such lists can be used against people. Dispositions are notoriously difficult to quantify, but if we do not offer some descriptive language regarding tutor practices, it becomes even more difficult to call out their role as distinct. Bringing tutor practices into the light enables tutors to engage critically with their practices, and opens the possibility of tutors naming themselves (Freire, 1970) *as* tutors. I have grouped the 21 insights into Tables 2–4 below, covering tutor character, tutor pedagogy and tutor achievement.

Tutor character: Authentic ways of being with young people

In this first table, I present the attributes of tutor character I found across my poetic data. Rousseau (1956, p. 17), in his work describing an imagined tutor for Emile, declared ‘A tutor! What a noble soul!’ Rousseau’s romantic notion of the tutor as a hero, in some ways, persists to the present. However, in the context of greater managerialism within education (Codd, 2005), tutors remind us that the teaching enterprise is inherently vocational. Within this, the personal integrity of each staff member becomes just as important as their acquisition of cerebral knowledge and pedagogical skills. As Buber (2002, p. 107) remarked, ‘there is a hidden influence which proceeds from the teacher’s integrity, and this has an integrating force’. In the case of tutors, they are role models for students. The sense of vocation and integrity are reflected across the following nine attributes of tutor character.

Tutors’ authentic ways of being with young people are reflected in the notion of *Haltung*, a German word meaning ‘ethos, mindset or attitude’ (Eichsteller, 2010, para. 4.). Eichsteller (2010, para. 7) argues that this concept is fundamental to social pedagogy, rooted in an ‘unconditional positive regard’ for children. As with *Haltung*, this table of tutor characteristics reflects not methods of practice, but is ‘the way we think about others – and our relationship with them’ (Eichsteller, 2010, para. 5).

Tutor pedagogy: Holistic and relational teaching approaches

Tutors are surprised when they are made aware their teaching approaches have solid historical traditions, largely echoing the progressive philosophy of student-centred learning. There is a strong relational basis to their approaches. For example, one report on alternative education found that tutors work with students as people first, and learners second (Brooking et al., 2009). In addition, tutors are an encouraging presence for students, watching over them and guiding them. Often tutors positioned themselves next to the students, rather than standing in front of students. In a sense, tutors bring us back to the root meaning of the Old French word *tuteur*, ‘guardian, private teacher’ (Harper, 2015). A significant portion of the curriculum knowledge derives from the tutors’ own interests, skills and experiences.

In terms of tutors’ practices connected to social pedagogy, a further German term is instructive here: *Bildung*. Moss and Petrie (2019, p. 400) note that the concept of *Bildung* conveys a conception that views ‘the potential of a human being... as an entity that builds or creates herself or himself in a way that is not pre-ordained, a process of self-development or self-formation’. We get a sense of how the notion of *Bildung* resonates with tutors’ holistic and dialogic approaches that aim to create a space for their students to flourish. This is education in the broadest sense.

Table 2. Tutor character (Schoone, 2016, pp. 127–129).

	Description	Indicators
Call	Passion to make a difference to young people forms the necessary foundation of tutor practice.	Tutors respond to a felt sense of wanting to equip young people. Tutors have a vision for working with young people. Tutors are in their element working with young people. Tutors are directed by their call.
Joy	Approaching young people with ease, joy and humour helps tutors create an attractive learning atmosphere.	Tutors use humour to develop warm relationships. Tutors are playful, keeping their engagement with young people fun. Tutors use humour artfully for de-escalation and distancing in challenging situations.
Care	Tutors develop caring and trusting relationships that draw young people to ongoing engagement with learning.	Tutors care practically for young people. Tutors individualise their care for each young person. Tutors inspire young people to care for others.
Empathy	Tutors understand that context in which young people live – and share from their past experiences.	Tutors inspire young people by sharing from their past personal experiences. Tutors show compassion. Tutors ‘step foot’ inside young people’s lives, literally and metaphorically.
Critical thinking	Thinking critically of both self and the world in order to transform their tutoring practices.	Tutors continually reflect on their practices. Tutors are mindful to create learning spaces different from conventional school forms. Tutors encourage young people to take ownership of their learning.
Grace	Grace is a restorative approach that seeks all ways to keep young people included and engaged.	Tutors work with young people from a strengths-based approach. Tutors know to wait patiently for young people to respond. Tutors seek the win-win – offering many chances.
<i>Mana</i> [Māori: Inner worth]	Tutors respect and esteem young people as <i>taonga</i> [Māori: treasure].	Tutors respect young people for who they are and who they are becoming. Tutors maintain high expectations of young people. Tutors view their role as a privilege. Tutors respect their own <i>mana</i> .
Commitment	Continuity of tutor presence, long-term commitment and predictability provide young people with a safe space.	Tutors are continually present with their students. Tutors establish routines and repeat instructions. After students graduate, tutors often continue as significant people for them.
Team	Tutors work co-operatively with parents, teachers and other professions.	Tutors provide expert advice to others on students’ welfare, engagement in learning and future aspirations. Tutors refer students to supporting agencies. When tutors work together, they complement each other’s strengths.

Tutor achievement: Success in its broadest sense

The final table outlines three insights into how student achievement is imagined and experienced by tutors. Unlike teachers, whose main concerns largely revolve around students achieving the academic curriculum, the tutors’ curriculum, in the words of one tutor:

... is about life
teaching them those basic things when I was brought up, you know, life skills, that’s what we really do
how to deal with life and get on

Change can be manifest through ‘the head, the heart and the hands’, a concept central to social pedagogy. The tutors may notice students’ knowledge increases on certain topics (head), they may notice shifts in attitudes and dispositions (heart), or that students have developed a new skill (hands). In any case, tutors aim that students undertake measures of personal transformation. Before a student had eloquently presented it, I had not seen before that the word ‘alter’, to change, is embedded in the word ‘alternative’.

To alter is to change
To change is to transform
It’s like putting fresh clothes on

(Pulu, 2012, September)

This made me ponder on the transformational nature of alternative education; however, as shown in the table below, how individuals transform can be mysterious. Transformation is slow and episodic, rather than a linear upward progression.

Table 3. Tutor pedagogy (Schoone, 2016, pp. 129–130).

Holistic	Tutors place themselves in the wholeness of their students' lives and attend to the whole person.	Tutors address emotional, physical, spiritual, cultural and familial needs. At times tutors work with students beyond regular hours. Tutors invite students to participate in real-life activities beyond the alternative education centre.
Watching-over	Broadly watching over and watching out for students is a protective and pedagogical tutor stance.	Tutors keep a watchful and protective eye on students. Tutors 'hang out' with students. Tutors imagine the best for their students.
Guiding	Tutors help students navigate to meet their current needs and future career and life aspirations.	Tutors provide students with practical day-to-day advice. Tutors help students gain a sense of personal vision. Tutors assist students to transition to their next step in education and life.
<i>Talanoa</i> [Tongan: Conversation]	Conversation is central to how tutors relate, teach and open discussion regarding greater issues.	Tutors inspire students through story telling. Tutors engage students through informal conversations. Tutors structure intentional heart-to-heart conversations.
Experiential learning	Tutors' personal experiences and skills provide them with teaching metaphors and a unique curriculum to share with others.	Tutors create personal metaphors for their teaching practice. Tutor teach from their own skills and knowledge gained from personal experiences.
Speaking possibility	Tutors speaking possibility to students in limiting situations provides a transformative discourse.	Tutors relentlessly affirm their students. Tutors speak specific words of encouragement. Tutors offer considered views regarding future pathways for their students.
Thoughtful pedagogy	An intentional way of teaching that is caring, intuitive and responsive.	Tutors are students of their students. Tutors teach lessons mindful of students' backgrounds and preferred learning styles. Tutors carefully listen. Moment-to-moment, tutors respond intuitively.
Inspiring pedagogy	Keeping learning alive through creativity, the integration of the arts and being led by students' curiosities.	Tutors keep lessons alive through surprise. Tutors work with their students to craft lessons. Tutors provide opportunities for young people to develop their creativity. Tutors integrate the arts into their lessons.
Moving	Keeping learning active, embodied and connected to real-life experiences.	Tutors keep students moving. Tutors find learning opportunities on the move in the real world. Tutors require students to live out their knowledge.

Table 4. Tutor achievement (Schoone, 2016, p, 131).

Mystery	Tutors acknowledge that learning, change and transformation often occur in secret and through unexpected ways.	Never giving up hope, tutors persevere in working with their students. Tutors acknowledge the unexpected and unexplainable in their work.
Epiphany	Tutors catch small steps of progress that become visible periodically in the students' 'aha' moments.	Tutors recognise students' small steps of progress. Tutors celebrate small wins. Tutors nurture sparks of learning to inspire deeper engagement.
Transformation	Tutors work towards students' holistic transformation, to see them on a positive path forwards.	Tutors support students' presence and engagement in learning. Tutors assist students to improve their well-being. Tutors champion students to achieve with academic learning. Tutors assist students with transition.

Discussion and conclusion

The attributes of alternative education tutors outlined in the three tables provide a tangible representation of social pedagogy in practice in New Zealand. The work of tutors clearly demonstrates the confluence of 'care' and 'education' traditions (Cameron and Moss, 2011). The tutors' role is ideally not to provide an academic curriculum, but to focus on teaching students life skills. Education in this sense is not contained within the perimeter of a school, but is relevant to the multiple contexts that students traverse in the community. The tutors' focus on personal growth is seen in Petrie's (2015, p. 90) description of social pedagogy as aiming to 'provide nurturing conditions that support human growth in two opposite directions, towards independence and towards interdependence'.

Tutors are a key workforce teaching students the key competencies from the New Zealand curriculum: 'thinking, using language, symbols and text, managing self, relating to others and participating and

contributing' (Ministry of Education, 2007, p. 12). Therefore, it is timely to consider the role of tutors, as social pedagogues, working alongside teachers within conventional schools. The increasing complexities many youth face in twenty-first-century life (te Riele, 2009), including an escalating mental health crisis among young people in New Zealand (Government Inquiry into Mental Health and Addiction, 2018), require schools to go further to provide social and emotional supports. This is potentially where tutors can come into their own, providing care and guidance to students. While there are difficulties navigating professional boundaries when teachers work with social pedagogues within a school context (Thingstrup et al., 2018), tutors have the potential to relieve teachers of their growing workload pressures by taking a lead role in providing students with holistic support to keep them engaged in learning.

As it stands, in New Zealand the divide between youth and/or social work and teaching is institutionally entrenched. It was only by happenstance that I stumbled upon the notion of social pedagogy. This began my journey of imagining social pedagogy for New Zealand. I imagine that New Zealand could contribute to the international discourse on social pedagogy through the unique lens of Māori and Pasifika worldviews. I imagine social pedagogy could be an avenue to develop the knowledge, skills and attitudes of tutors in alternative education, and those in similar roles. I imagine global exchanges of best practices. This awareness of tutors as social pedagogues in New Zealand is only the beginning of a greater project of naming what is socially pedagogic in our midst.

Declarations and conflict of interests

The author declares no conflicts of interest with this work.

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