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Article

Returning to the heart of teaching: Social pedagogy as phenomenological pedagogy

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Abstract

In many alternative education centres in New Zealand tutors are charged with educating students disenfranchised from their mainstream secondary schools. However, these tutors do not hold teaching qualifications. Rather, they draw their pedagogical approaches from life experiences, cultural knowledge, vocational and relational skills, and passion to work with young people. Tutors' heartfelt ways of engaging with young people has a transformative impact on many of the students' life-courses. This article poetically represents key approaches central to tutor practice. From observations and research interview transcripts, found poems were created from the everyday language of eight tutors. The poems represent phenomenological insights into tutors' lived experiences, and reveal that tutors intentionally place students at the centre of their practice. The article positions tutor pedagogy within a social pedagogical field, while also considering social pedagogy as a phenomenological pedagogy that brings us to the very heart of teaching.

Keywords: alternative education; phenomenological pedagogy; poetic enquiry; social pedagogy; tutors; disenfranchised students; New Zealand education

For many years I worked alongside tutors in alternative education settings. From 2001 to 2014 I was employed as a qualified teacher to provide pedagogical support to tutors who were responsible for caring for and educating secondary school-aged students who were disenfranchised from formal education due to truancy, school suspensions or exclusions. The tutors did not hold teaching qualifications, yet successfully re-engaged these students in learning through their relational approaches in the spirit of the ‘nonprofessional ministrations of a neighbour’ (Illich, 1970, p. 74). I witnessed that tutors possessed an ability to come alongside young people, meet them where they were at, and offer guidance for their next steps in life and learning. However, there is a paucity of education research exploring the role of paraprofessionals in working with children and young people. This article seeks to highlight the experiences and expertise of tutors working in alternative education settings.

Alternative education and tutors

Alternative education centres catering for secondary-aged students were initiated by communities across New Zealand in the wake of neoliberal reforms made to education in the country during the 1990s. A key policy change saw the devolution of school governance from central control to local school boards. While this enabled some greater community voice in decision-making, the new governance structure facilitated a competitive environment, particularly between secondary schools (Tomorrow’s Schools Independent Taskforce, 2018). In a performance-driven school environment, the number of students achieving national qualifications became a type of ‘capital’ that schools strove for. Schools could mine this capital by teaching a narrowed curriculum that was assessment-driven, rather than providing a broad pedagogical approach that would more effectively include a greater number of students. Ultimately, schools that had a lot of capital were rewarded in published league tables, attracting high-performing students, high-performing staff, and a parent and caregiver community that could afford escalating school donations. While this was going on, large numbers of students aged between 13 and 16 years became disenfranchised from their schools due to suspensions, exclusions or truancy. These students did not hold the type of capital that schools sought. Rather, they represented a group of students that made up the so-called long tail of underachievement (Johnston, 2015). In other words, they became a type of collateral damage of the neoliberal reforms (Bauman, 2011). As a result, these students were directed to attend alternative education programmes that were mostly held off-site from the secondary school. Currently there are approximately 120 alternative education providers catering for 3,500 students each year.

Alternative education centres were a grassroots initiative developed by mainly youth organisations, Māori communities and churches. They have been characterised as a ‘secret garden’ (Ogg and Kail, 2010, p. 3), a refuge that was ‘a place to retreat to from the antagonistic relationships at school’ (Nairn and Higgins, 2011, p. 184) and ‘the last safety net that the education system can offer’ (Gerritsen, 1999, p. 1). Rather than employing qualified teachers, many providers sought community workers who had everyday expertise in life skills, cultural knowledge, vocational skills, and sporting and music abilities to provide a holistic education service. However, the presence of unqualified tutors responsible for educating students who are of the compulsory schooling age has met with some resistance and distrust from officials and others. For example, the Youth Justice Independent Advisory Group’s (2009) submission to the review of alternative education stated, ‘It seems extraordinary that any responsible system would place some of its most difficult students in the hands of those who are least trained regardless of how well meaning they might be’ (p. 6). However, the government agency that is responsible for evaluating the quality of education provision in New Zealand 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’ (Education Review Office, 2011, p. 62). As a teacher in the sector, I had become increasingly curious regarding tutor pedagogy. What strategies did tutors employ to engage students? What contribution could tutors working in alternative education centres make to our knowledge of pedagogy? I sought to get to the heart of the matter.

Finding the heart

This article draws data from my completed doctoral studies that focused on understanding the nature of the tutor (Schoone, 2015, 2020a). This was a phenomenological poetic enquiry in which I sought to explore and bring voice to the lived experiences of eight alternative education tutors in Auckland, New Zealand. Having worked alongside tutors for many years, I was intrigued by the manner in which they related to young people, in an accessible discourse comprising humour, informality, and cultural nuances. I reasoned that because tutors had not received initial teacher education, their discourse would more likely contain evocative and poetic elements, bereft of curriculum and pedagogical jargon. Perhaps their speech reflected Bernstein's (1971) observation of the beauty in a public language:

A public language contains its own aesthetic, a simplicity and directness of expression, emotionally virile, pithy and powerful and a metaphoric range of considerable force and appropriateness. Some examples taken from the schools of this country have a beauty which many writers might well envy. It is a language which symbolizes a tradition and a form of social relationship in which the individual is treated as an end, not as a means to a further end. (p. 54)

I imagined that the tutors' evocative speech might have resonated with the very language that the students brought with them to the alternative education centres; sharing a common language may have aided their relationships. Thus, in my research I turned my attention to the everyday discourse of tutors. This discourse was evidence of tutors' poetic dwelling (Heidegger, 1971) and provided an opportunity to listen to fresh articulations of pedagogy. As Strasser (1997) remarked, phenomenological studies in education will be able to reveal pedagogy that 'lies enclosed in our pre-academic knowledge of it' (p. 101). As I outline in more detail shortly, I crafted poetry from tutors' everyday language in their alternative education settings in order to re/present the poetic dwelling of tutors.

A phenomenological poetic enquiry recognises the 'very short step from phenomenology to poetry' (Galvin and Todres, 2009, p. 308). For example, Thwaites (2009) explained that poetry for Heidegger was 'an "essential language" that could speak of "being"' (p. 229). Indeed Heidegger (1971) posited that 'what is spoken purely is the poem' (p. 192). Thwaites (2009) revealed that, for Heidegger, this passage of essential language is privileged above practical language, since language is able to 'establish beings and "keep" them' (p. 229). Researchers and artists alike have highlighted the special nature of poetry. For example, educational researcher Cahnmann (2003) spoke of poetry's ability to capture 'depth of feeling in the original situation' (p. 33). Poet and author Wakoski (1980) wrote that poetry is the 'structured presentation of feeling' (p. 5). Skelton (1978) argued that poetry 'presents a kind of "total" awareness which is not available elsewhere', and involved 'sharing as well as recognising an experience' (p. 76). Moreover, van Manen (1990) argued that a poet can give 'linguistic expression to some aspect of human experience that cannot be paraphrased without losing a sense of the vivid truthfulness that lines of the poems are somehow able to communicate' (p. 71). Throughout my study, I hoped that poetry would capture the total awareness/heart/depth/music of tutors' lived experiences, that it would compel readers' hearts as well as their heads. I aimed to provide an opportunity for the reader to meet the tutor *as if* in person, and also for the tutors to be confronted with themselves in strange yet familiar ways. With phenomenology as my philosophical framework, I turned to poetic enquiry as my method.

Poetic enquiry encompasses a range of approaches to using poetry in research to gather, and/or interpret data, and/or represent findings (Prendergast, Sameshima and Leggo, 2009). A key approach in poetic enquiry is to create found poetry from interview transcripts, using the words and phrases of the research participants (Richardson, 1994; Glesne, 1997). Butler-Kisber (2012) defined 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. (p. 146)

The purpose of creating found poems in research is to represent the voices of research participants and also express the essence of what was spoken. Carroll, Dew and Howden-Chapman (2011) put it like this:

*Poetry captures the essence
of how, the why, the what.
Captures the essence of dreams
Speaks
to the heart of the matter* (p. 624; emphasis original)

The poetic enquiry aspect of my research involved creating over 150 found poems from the research data I collected, largely through interview transcripts and observations of tutor practice. Over the course of six months I visited seven of the eight tutors in their alternative education centres, a few times a week at various periods of the day, noting down words and phrases that tutors spoke to students and to each other (one tutor did not wish to be observed). I was aiming to capture the tutors' language in situ. To reiterate, I was exploring how tutors were dwelling poetically, with the premise that our being is *in* language (Heidegger, 1971). Using the observational notes and research transcripts, I highlighted specific words and phrases that stood out to me as representative of tutors' lived experiences and pedagogy. Through creating a multitude of drafts, I artfully wrote poems using only the words and phrases from each tutor participant. A key aspect of the process was sharing the provisional poems with the tutors and checking on the extent to which the poems resonated with them. Overall, the tutors gave only minor recommendations for changes. One tutor remarked to me, 'These poems represent my best answers', while another said, 'I can see myself in these poems. I really like them' (Schoone, 2015, pp. 160, 173). Notwithstanding their assurances, I acknowledged with the tutors that these poems represented my sense-making of their words and worlds. The found poems were constellations created from the words that shone out to me. The words and phrases I found could be configured into any number of poems, and any number of meanings may have emerged. However, the poems began a conversation of what it means to be a tutor and these conversations continued in a performative workshop where all the tutor participants were brought together to explore their intersubjective understandings of experience (Schoone, 2017).

In this article, I present a series of found poems created solely from the words of the tutor research participants. Each poem is a window into tutor pedagogy. According to van Manen (1982), poetic thinking can 'return us to the origin – remind us as pedagogues of the worth of minding' (p. 283). Accompanying the poems is a reflection of the social education approaches reflected in tutor practices that qualitatively builds on an earlier article in which I have tabled tutors as social pedagogues (Schoone, 2020b).

The tutors in this research are Lincoln, Alice, Rose, Pete, Amosa, Luke, Fetu and Koro:

- Lincoln (male, in his late fifties, English) and Alice (female, early twenties, European New Zealander) work together in one centre. Lincoln has had 10 years' experience as a tutor, and Alice was in her first year;
- Rose (female, late forties, Tongan) and Pete (male, Tongan-Cook Islands, mid-twenties) work together with another tutor who was not in this study. Rose had tutored for six years and Pete, two;
- Amosa (male, mid-thirties, Samoan), Luke (male, Cook Islands, mid-twenties) and Fetu (female, early twenties, Samoan) work in a centre together with another tutor not in the study. Amosa had four years' tutoring experience, Luke, four, and Fetu, two;
- finally Koro, a male Cook Islands tutor in his mid-thirties with 12 years' experience, also participated in the interviewing for this research but did not wish to be observed. Koro's long experience with tutoring resulted in the tutors referring to him with an endearing (and also humorous, due to being only in his mid-thirties) title, 'Koro', which is Māori for 'elderly man'.

What the heart speaks

A tutor's purpose

i. *Lincoln*

teaching 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

ii. *Koro*

I am a signpost pointing them in the right direction
getting them down the road
that's my responsibility
seeing them light up for the first time
that's my reward
the pay packet
it's just a bonus

These poems point to the tutors' purpose of assisting students to help them make sense of their lives, preparing them to 'get on'/'getting them down the road'. The tutors are mindful that their students will need to move on from alternative education when they are 16 years old. Even though tutors are usually responsible for delivering some standard curriculum materials, the tutor in the first poem reported that his curriculum was, 'teaching them those basic things/... that's what we really do'. This was a holistic and pragmatic curriculum where a seamless exchange between what is taught and the lived experiences of students was created. From the second poem, we get a sense that the tutor's pedagogy is one of guidance rather than formal teaching. This resonates with the meanings that lie at root of the word for tutor, *tuteur*, Old French, from Latin *tutorem*, 'guardian, watcher' ([Online Etymology Dictionary, n.d.](#)).

From these two poems, we are introduced to social pedagogy's mandate for education in its broadest sense ([Cameron and Moss, 2011](#)). As [Petrie \(2015\)](#) pointed out, in social pedagogy 'There is a focus on the child as a whole person, and support for the child's overall development' (p. 90). This is a timely reminder. In the context of increasing pressure on students to perform against standard assessments, the gaze of the teacher often narrows to focus on academic achievement rather than well-being. Disengagement in formal learning arises from a disinterest by education professionals in schools. [Mills and McGregor \(2014\)](#) asserted that disengagement 'is an insidious process of disconnection from school, people and processes within it. It signifies a lack of meaningful learning and a relational vacuum that some students simply endure' (p. 23). In alternative education settings, the tutor's foremost focus becomes the students and their needs and aspirations.

Becoming a tutor

i. *Lincoln*

my own family of four boys and a
special needs daughter
coaching soccer teams, cricket teams
i ended up doing the full committee thing
became a referee
that was my training
if you put it that way

i am more of a father
an older male role model who they have not had

i could have easily chucked it away, but
i do love them and
if i didn't – i couldn't be here, but
i would never call myself
a teacher

ii. *Rose*

a com-pli-ca-ted thought: i have to be a teacher
i just felt that these kids need a mother
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

iii. *Pete*

in seventh form, i got chased down Carrington Road by the cops
it helps me relate to the students

they were ramming me to the side
you've been there
i was sitting on the road like this, scared as
i had that mind-set
all i heard from the cop was
'the prodigal son'
'this guy's a good kid'
i finally got it
they let me go
i overcame it
seriously

The expertise of tutors derives from their life experiences rather than teaching qualifications. Lincoln and Rose reflected on how being a parent has equipped them as tutors. For these tutors, knowing, loving and caring as a parent was pedagogical. The idea of being a conventional teacher was a 'complicated thought'. For example, Lincoln stated, he would 'never call myself a teacher'. [van Manen \(1991\)](#) pointed to the connection between the nature of teaching and of pedagogy, 'parenting and teaching derive from the same fundamental experience of pedagogy' (p. 7). Moreover, others in the study reported that being thought of as a teacher was seen as a barrier by students. In Pete's case, at least part of his preparation for being a tutor came from his past experiences as an adolescent who was 'chased . . . by the cops'. This gave Pete empathy and relatability, 'you've been there'.

These poems demonstrate the tensions and possibilities found in the nexus of professional, personal and private aspects of a social pedagogue's role. They highlight the personal contribution of tutors in the pedagogical relationship. 'The personal self is about how we engage with the child in a way that shows them who we are' ([ThemPra, 2020a](#), para. 4). Lincoln and Rose's metaphors of practice derived from their personal lives as parents. Pete negotiated the fine line between what was personal and what should remain private. Having processed his own past challenges with the police, he was able to bring lessons he had learnt to students who found themselves in similar circumstances.

Of the professional/private/personal aspects of social pedagogue identity in this study, the professional aspect was perhaps the most problematic. The tutors consistently eschewed any reference to themselves as being teachers. By association, tutors perceived professionalism in a negative fashion, as being 'distant' from who they were hoping to work with. For example, one tutor found that when students thought he was a qualified teacher, they would be less open with him. Luke remarked, 'he [the student] thought we were mainstream teachers – didn't want to share anything' ([Schoone, 2015](#), p. 189). Luke goes on to explain, 'i don't have any qualifications that says i am a mainstream teacher'. Fetu said that '[she] knows' she is a teacher, but goes by the name of 'tutor' due to, 'the whole academic, qualified, like teachers you know what i mean' ([Schoone, 2015](#), p. 179). Therefore, the lack of qualification contributes to how tutors perceive themselves as professional educators. Even though Pete had commented elsewhere about his 'professional tutor status', this was more of a humorous and ironic observation. At this point in time,

the idea of a professional social pedagogue is only in seed form in New Zealand (see [Schoone, 2016](#)). Nonetheless, tutors work professionally. They have professional accountabilities through secondary schools, meet with families, plan individual education plans with students, write risk management plans for education outside the classroom, attend professional development courses, and are professionally appraised. In essence, tutors face their students as ‘advisors, friends, mentors, and advocates’ ([O’Brien, Thesing and Herbert, 2001](#), p. 44), work to the professional expectations of external bodies, authorities and parents, but have not yet acknowledged themselves as being professional educators.

Relationships

i. *Amosa*

what we have lacked in credit achievement
we have made up in relationships
young ones need some firm, firm guidance
older students kind of give kind help

ii. *Luke*

being a part of the conversation – even if they’re lying or not
they are actually normal kids
i talk about rugby so that we can
talk about education

iii. *Pete*

they have too much walls, those teachers
don’t go there zones. i am a tutor.

whereas me, i never thought that way
engage at any level, passion (we can say that stuff aye?)

attention’s good though. it shows that you honour them
but not crossing the line

when you give them that attention these guys
feel honoured. i am a tutor.

iv. *Fetu*

step foot into their world
just seeing how life is for them
encourage students to see
beyond what they think of themselves
uplift. know how to restrain
love people more

v. *Rose*

i do carry a lot of grace
and i enlarge myself to have a little more grace
the way she acts, i don’t have to re
act
i look at the holistic side
maybe she didn’t have breakfast in the morning
‘what’s going on?’ ‘how’s home life?’
there’s time for:
‘this is what you should do’
but i also operate with a little bit of grace

vi. *Luke*

food, not only nourishes us
but helps us knowing each
other

Developing meaningful and trusting relationships is fundamental to the work of tutors. Amosa declared a type of ‘relational currency’ that made up the shortfall for any lack in students’ academic achievement. The poems provide some insights into how these relationships are nurtured. Luke talked about ‘being part of the conversation’, Pete could ‘engage at any level’, Fetu developed empathy through ‘step[ping] foot into their world’ and Rose operated with ‘grace’; she looked at the ‘holistic side’. Luke pointed out that the sharing of food helped bond the community. The ‘centrality of relationship, and allied to this the importance of listening and community’ (Petrie, 2015, p. 94) is what marks these tutors as social pedagogues.

Pivotal to all these relational approaches is the measure of respect the tutors afford students. Pete talked about honouring the students. In Māori, this equates to respecting the *mana*, or the inherent god-given dignity of each person. This is cited as a culturally safe approach, whereby ‘Teachers with mana (integrity and dignity) possess a demeanour of dignity and respect, and recognise and develop the mana of the child, particularly in the way they interact with them’ (Macfarlane, Glynn, Cavanagh and Bateman, 2007, p. 67). Thus, ‘Children and staff are seen as inhabiting the same life space, not as existing in separate hierarchical domains’ (Petrie, 2015, p. 94). This environment nurtures reciprocity, permeating tutors’ pedagogical approaches.

Pedagogy

i. *Alice*

wisdom in the morning talk
you ask the questions – they provide
you are just adding to
ideas
discussion
kids just coming up with life questions
curious questions
repaint the picture for them

The pedagogy of tutors is dialogic in nature, a characteristic of the child-centred approach of social pedagogues (Hygum, 2014). Alice highlighted the co-constructive nature of the conversations, ‘you are just adding to/ideas’. The conversation is moulded by ‘kids just coming up with life questions’. The conversations help make sense of the world, ‘repaint the picture for them’.

i. *Lincoln*

you’ve gotta work out what works for them
we go with what we’ve got
you don’t just go: ‘bang’, rip into them what they’ve done wrong
that’s for Tuesday’s training or Thursday’s training
on the day of the game you’re always encouraging them
it’s just little keys with each different student
the ones who can put the ball at the back of the net two times, they’re your striker
slower ones are your defenders
mid-fielders
plenty of strength
so they keep going

and also another thing
get teams to encourage one another *within*

you got it!

they don't care how much you know until they know how much you care

Lincoln leant on the coaching metaphor to inform his pedagogical approach that took account of the individual needs of each student. This strengths-based approach ('you've got to work out what works for them') enabled Lincoln to see the best in each student. It required Lincoln to know his students in order to give them 'little keys'. Significantly, the metaphor imagined a way the class could build their relationships with each other through being a team that encouraged one another. Lincoln acknowledged the importance of the class not relying on his encouragement alone, but that they would encourage one another '*within*'. He also pointed to the necessity of positive relationships as the foundation for all teaching: 'they don't care how much you know until they know how much you care'.

iii. *Amosa, A classmate teaching:*

one of their own up there

the other students
didn't think it was going to work

i said:

'just give him a chance'

it's good for me just to sit down
and he delivered it well

In this poem, Amosa gave a student the opportunity to deliver a lesson. In the context of this alternative education centre 'delivering' a lesson refers to the formal education aspects of the programme, such as learning mathematics or English. The tutor's positioning was agile, responding to the changing context of the task at hand. As Hygum (2014) pointed out, this may look like the pedagogue walking 'in front of the child', 'alongside the child' or 'behind the child' (p. 17). Amosa recognised the expertise of a student, and happily took a back seat, despite the other students' uncertainties as to whether it would work.

iv. *Pete*

it's little things, like student drop
offs
like, Paul
he had a tough
day
a tough
day with us
he is sitting in the front and just talking, you know what i mean

i dropped him off last
what's up man?

his attitude just switched, it was a random conversation for him, but for me i thought about it
before
i actually thought
about that
cause i'm
in-
ten-
tion-
al

The students were transported by van to and from the alternative education centre each day. For tutors the van became a pedagogical device. In Pete's case, he had identified a student who he wanted to have a mentoring conversation with, 'he had a tough/day'. The student sat in the front of the van, and was strategically the last student to be dropped off at home. This allowed some private time for Pete to connect with the student, 'what's up man?' Pete recalled 'his attitude just switched'.

Firstly, this poem exemplified a professional approach to tutoring, in that it was a thought-out (intentional) pedagogical intervention. The 'random conversation' for the student, was not random for the tutor. 'Pedagogic competence manifests itself . . . where the parent or professional educator reflectively brings to speech the meaning of the pedagogic thought and actions' (van Manen, 1982, pp. 293–4). This was despite the student perceiving the tutor to be a friend, guide, or mentor. Secondly, driving somewhere together can be viewed as a common third approach. 'The Common Third is about creating a commonly shared situation that becomes a symbol of the relationship between us as the professional and the child, something third that brings the two of us together' (ThemPra, 2020b, para. 1). Driving together, when the gaze of each person was generally faced towards the road and/or landmarks along the way, lacked the intensity of a face-to-face conversation in an office. In Pete's case, he broached the topic of Paul's 'tough day' casually. Thus, a transformative moment occurred in the shared activity of driving.

v. *Koro*

qualified teacher
them knowing the planning side, teaching side
taught me heaps
working alongside a qualified teacher
they provide me with quite a lot of experience
but i've gotta change that experience into the culture of our class

What would happen if all the tutors suddenly disappeared and were replaced by teachers?

i pray that would never happen
they hated their teachers
(not trying to bag them or anything like that)
it's all about the curriculum and them doing their teaching
they throw it out
whenever they can the kids will just absorb it
this is what i've seen
i was at school, that happened to me

i don't want to be formalised
lose the essence of the tutor
essence of a tutor
down to passion, desire to change, turn these kids around
i don't want to lose the tutor
this is just me speaking honestly
i don't want to be formalised
just saying

In this final poem of Koro's, the dis/connection between the tutor and the teacher was observed. Koro had worked with a qualified teacher and had gained a lot of knowledge of curriculum planning. However, he recalled 'i've gotta change that experience into the culture of our class'. In other words, Koro needed to translate the formal curriculum so it would 'speak' within his more informal education setting. Koro also relayed that the students 'hated' their teachers because the students felt that the teachers were only concerned about the curriculum and profession, rather than their students' needs. This sentiment was reflected in a striking finding from a report on students in New Zealand's alternative education. It found that *despite* the personal challenges these students faced, they reported their disengagement from

secondary school was *because* of ‘teachers . . . not knowing them or developing effective relationships with them’ and a ‘mismatch between their levels of achievement and teaching levels’ (Brooking, Gardiner and Calvert, 2009, p. 8).

More than once Koro pleaded, ‘i don’t want to be formalised’. He felt that formalisation would result in him losing the essence of a tutor: ‘down to passion, desire to change, turn these kids around’. Koro saw the benefits of working in concert with teachers, but did not want to become a conventional teacher as such. In this respect, he saw formalisation as becoming a teacher. In New Zealand, there is no route to becoming a social pedagogue, or a ‘professional tutor’.

Re/turning to a phenomenological pedagogy

In this article, I have presented the tutor as a social pedagogue. The tutors, drawing from wisdom gained through their own life experiences, inadvertently adopted social pedagogical approaches to meet the individual and collective needs of vulnerable young people who become disenfranchised from mainstream education. Next, I consider how social pedagogy provides insight into phenomenological pedagogy, the very heart of teaching. Are social pedagogues returning us to what it really means to be a teacher?

In the main, phenomenological research in education suggests that something important has been lost in the way that pedagogy is discussed, and that phenomenology offers the chance to bring back to our attention key elements such as compassion, intuition and embodiment. This is particularly pertinent to my study in which I aim to describe and understand pedagogies of tutors, which may or may not reflect ‘best evidence’ pedagogies for teachers. For example, van Manen (1982) contended that a teaching certificate does not necessarily make a teacher. ‘We may choose a job. But do we choose the vocation, the calling of pedagogy?’ (p. 289). van Manen (1982) explained: ‘The pedagogic calling is that which calls, summons us to listen to the child’s needs’ (p. 286). Positivist education theory, purveyors of ‘best evidence’ approaches, teaching standards, and such like, can effectively mask what is truly pedagogic in a situation. For example, this occurs when teachers become ‘more interested in the scholarly development of the knowledge . . . than in the education developments of the children for whom teaching was intended’ (van Manen, 1982, p. 284). Furthermore, the commodification of knowledge into learning ‘credits’ in New Zealand’s secondary school system encourages a utilitarian curriculum with assessment-driven teaching. In the neoliberal context, ‘education has lost the paradise of pure instinctiveness’ (Buber, 2002, p. 106).

The tutors in this study, and thus social pedagogues, return us to a sense of pedagogical call, ‘down to passion, desire to change, turn these kids around’ (Koro). Away from the conventional education institutions, social pedagogues provide us with an opportunity to view pedagogy enacted in a phenomenological sense in the lived-word. Not reliant on teacher certification, the pedagogue ‘is the adult who shows the child the way into a world’ (van Manen, 1982, p. 285). The pedagogy is based on ‘a relationship of practical actions between an adult and a young person who is on the way to adulthood’ (van Manen, 1982, p. 284). To paraphrase from the tutor poems, pedagogy becomes a conversation in the van, a student who takes the lead role in teaching his peers and his tutor, having a conversation about rugby in order to have a conversation about learning, building on those conversations to repaint pictures, providing little keys for each student, and translating the formal curriculum through the informal situation. The pedagogue delights in the growth and the potential he or she sees in their students. As Lincoln put it:

now i look at these students
i look at the mess they’re in, and i look, and think
whoa
what will they become?

In my own work of teaching alongside tutors, I was gifted with their insights that drew me to understand more deeply that teaching is never simply delivering a curriculum. Rather, learning is mediated through relationships with students, the relationships between the students themselves, the circumstances the students find themselves in, their prior knowledge, their culture, their first languages, their motivation, their emotions. The list goes on. I have witnessed tutors deftly connect a learning activity to where the student is, drawing from their thorough knowledge of students in their care. By tutors understanding the students in their everyday context, there was a hermeneutic sensibility to their approach.

Henriksson (2012) argued that it is time to ‘recapitulate the connection between hermeneutic phenomenology as research method and pedagogical practice’ (p. 134). She suggested that such an approach would be like a ‘reality check’ that gives us the ‘tools to discover what goes on, moment-by-moment, in different corners of the classroom’. Henriksson (2012) stated, ‘Hermeneutic phenomenology lets researchers and teachers alike see the unique person as a living, breathing object . . . It can silence the rush and roar in our everyday environment, and allow us to suddenly see our students and ourselves with new eyes’ (pp. 134–5). With calls for social pedagogues to work in cooperation with conventional teachers (Hygum, 2014; see also Thingstrup, Schmidt and Andersen, 2018), the expertise that pedagogues bring is their insight from the students’ life-worlds. Given a chance to coalesce with the more standard teaching approaches in schools, a phenomenological pedagogy could potentially bring vitality to education enterprise at large.

Conclusion

In this article I brought to the page the voices of eight alternative education tutors in New Zealand. The tutors are social pedagogues who draw wisdom from their own lived experiences to offer students who are disenfranchised from formal schooling an alternative education. The tutors’ ability to understand their students holistically is a rare gift in this age of specialisation. Moreover, tutors and others who work in social pedagogical ways point us to a phenomenological pedagogy that returns us to the heart of teaching. Perhaps this is best expressed in the following Māori proverb (whakataukī) with which I conclude:

He aha te mea nui o te ao.

He tāngata, he tāngata, he tāngata.

What is the most important thing in the world?

It is people, it is people, it is people.

Declarations and conflict of interests

The author declares no conflict of interests with this work.

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