Book Review

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Alternative Education Tutors: A Poetic Inquiry

Adrian Schoone

neoliberal educational policies

exacerbating struggles for freedom and wisdom

power
           privilege

                    marginalization

                                        ongoing colonization
            uneven relations

                         classifications
            justifications

ranking criterion

all transforming landscapes of learning.

in this era

teacher identities become bound to

qualifications   degrees

traditional pedagogies

but

what of the essences of a tutor?

Adrian Schoone is a lecturer at the Auckland University of Technology teaching and researching in the arts, creativity, alternative education and inclusive education. His masterful poetic inquiry on alternative education tutors, Constellations of Alternative Education Tutors, is birthed from his experiences working in a managerial position for an alternative education program. Rather than engaging in traditional forms of social-educational research, Schoone embarks on a phenomenological poetic inquiry into the lived experiences of eight alternative education tutors. He presents his findings as constellations of found poetry created from interview transcripts, observation notes, and a performative participant workshop. In doing so, Schoone pushes the boundaries of traditional educational research methods and unearths a generative, reciprocal and ethically responsible way to highlight the complex and often misunderstood identities (essences) of alternative education tutors in New Zealand. Moreover, Schoone's research brilliantly demonstrates poetic inquiry's power to expand and provoke new understandings about what it means to artistically engage in phenomenological research.

Constellations of Alternative Education Tutors is written in three parts. In **Part One**, Schoone explains the historical, social, and political context for his research. He situates the rise of alternative education within the shifting learning landscape of the 1990s, where neoliberal reforms created a decentralized educational system in New Zealand that fostered intense competition between schools for funding and resources. This transformation left little room for students who did not perform well on standardized tests or had difficulties fitting into traditional school settings. During this time, Creative Learning Scheme, the alternative education program Schoone worked at as a manager, was created.

In alternative learning contexts, tutors specialize in working with youth who do not fit well or have antagonistic relationships with traditional school settings. These youth, more often than not, come from marginalized communities. Despite their unique and valuable skill set, Schoone explains that alternative education tutors are often viewed as unqualified and undertrained teaching professionals. They do not require university degrees or certified teaching credentials. Schoone's job at Creative Learning Scheme was to "teach" tutors.

Schoone learns that these tutors offer rich and nuanced pedagogical contributions to teaching marginalized students: "These tutors drew from life experiences, passion to work with youth, vocational skills and cultural knowledge to provide a holistic education (p.2)." The eight tutors Schoone works with as research participants for his inquiry range in age from their early twenties to late fifties, and have diverse educational, genders and cultural backgrounds. Importantly, his engagement working with these tutors reveals a deeper understanding of his positionality as a pakeha (Maori: A New Zealander of European descent) and the tensions and injustices towards BIPOC communities in New Zealand arising from traditional schooling and ongoing processes of colonization.

In Part One, Schoone also carefully outlines his reasoning for a phenomenological-poetic inquiry: "In my study, the relationship between poetry and phenomenology is very close as I sought to understand how tutors were dwelling poetically (a phenomenological exercise) through the art of found poetry (a poetic inquiry method) (p.4)." He engages with Heidegger's (1971) notions of becoming and also applies Sartre's (1946) idea of 'essence' to emphasize tutor identities as contextual, embodied, unfixed, and emergent: "These are not external forms but are concepts of being-a-tutor that are discerned and re/discerned democratically and hermeneutically (p.3)." Importantly, Schoone emphasizes the plurality of 'essences' to highlight the multitude of identities that tutors embody. Finally, he introduces constellations as an overarching metaphor for the book to explore a galaxy of tutor essences.

In Part Two, Schoone unpacks his methodology. He first situates found poetry as a playful and artful approach to bring marginalized voices to the forefront, referencing important studies that have used similar poetic methods. For his data collection, Schoone engages in open-ended discussions about tutoring with his research participants. He reveals how this interview approach aligns with the traditional Pasifika methodology of talanoa: a discussion with pure and authentic personal stories (p.14). Incorporating talanoa is important as six out of eight research participants are of Pasifika ancestry, and alternative education settings in New Zealand have high proportions of Pasifika students. Schoone describes the raw and reciprocal nature of the interview process by illuminating tutor stories of struggle, breakthrough and resilience while also helping tutors clarify their own pedagogies and teaching practices. The found poetry was also inspired and informed by Schoone's fieldwork journals, where he recorded classroom observations and everyday tutor practices.

Schoone also sought to uncover intersubjective understandings about the essences of tutors by engaging his research participants in a collaborative and performative tutor-robot making workshop. In the workshop, Schoone uses Boal's (1995) notion of metaxis to help tutors reflect on their own identities and self-worth while constructing a cardboard robot named Maximus (p.28). Asking the tutors to choose words (ex. confidence, hope, restore, caring, ready and ripple) to physically imprint onto Maximus gave space for tutors to reflect on their teaching practices, "lending insight into their pedagogy which values embodied learning experiences, humour, and encouraging language (p.29)."

From these data collection practices, Schoone created over 150 lyrical poems from between two to twenty-four lines. He created some of the poems by cutting up interview transcripts and arranging words into couplets. He also constructed lino and cardboard printing blocks from the interviews to meditate on single words and phrases: "At times, I felt the ease of writing a single word was too effortless for the gravity of meaning it conveyed to me about tutors' experiences (p.18)." He added complexity to the poems by intentionally incorporating his reflections: "I explicitly implicated myself in the practice of meaning-making (p.22)."

In Part Three, Schoone expands on the galaxy metaphor that has guided his inquiry: "Creating poetry constellations was my ultimate research act, bringing together shining fragments from across all the poems that were created in the research thus far (p.30)." He presents his final research findings as twenty-one constellations of tutor essences. Each constellation performed one of the essences of the lived experiences of alternatives education tutors (ex. essences of call, essences of empathy, essences of poiesis). A lyrical found poem accompanied each constellation.

The constellations were created in three-dimension, with Schoone fixing each found word to polystyrene balls, hung using nylon string suspended across the protective netting of his backyard trampoline. Each arrangement of stars (constellations) was photographed (p.41). What appears are words floating in white, round stars surrounded by vast darkness. Of the final photographed constellations, Schoone writes:

> I argue that by keeping the dark spaces visible the metaphor allowed me to acknowledge the uncertainties and ambiguities in my research findings. The spaces that surround the research poems acknowledged the mauri (Maori: the life source), spirit, and the inexhaustibility of knowledge. Thus, the constellation metaphor enabled space for the spirit that kept the research breathing and therefore 'alive,' eschewing any attempt to turn the poem into an It (p.40).

Schoone concludes his book by arranging all of the constellations and forming a poetic galaxy of essences. He

reminds us that tutor identities are in a constant state of becoming. They are emergent and unfixed. This insight not only lets the reader better understand the landscape of alternative education in New Zealand but also invites the reader to look inward, pause, and reflect on their own teaching practices and identities. To honour Schoone's innovative and unique methodological form and the beautiful sharing of lived experiences of alternative education tutors, I end with a found poem taken from insights from the book.

what are the essences of a tutor?
it's little steps of epiphany all the time
turning and transforming
everyday language into the sacred
a galaxy of tutor pedagogy
attempts at making sense of the stars
the shining comes from within
found by the poems of tutors
I re/found the poetry within