

Challenging Neoliberal Tertiary Education Systems in Aotearoa New Zealand Through Pacific-Centred Pedagogical Strategies

Jason Hallie

jhallie@unitec.ac.nz, MIT and Unitec

Craig Tunncliffe

ctunncliffe@unitec.ac.nz, MIT and Unitec

Helen Gremillion

hgremillion@unitec.ac.nz, MIT and Unitec

Abstract

This article explores the contours and constraints of Aotearoa New Zealand's neoliberal tertiary education system and presents Pacific-centred strategies for teaching social work which contradict, and yet can be deployed within, this system. A critical analysis of neoliberal ideology, discourse, and managerial practice as it plays out in the tertiary education space is followed by an articulation of Pacific values and worldviews which sit uneasily in this context. Drawing primarily on their experiences teaching social work at the bachelor's level within a large Polytechnic in Tāmaki Makaurau/Auckland (MIT and Unitec), the authors of this article identify pedagogical strategies which are not only culturally appropriate for a student body that includes a significant number of Indigenous students, but also aligned with social work principles and values. The authors argue that teaching approaches aligned with Pacific ways of being can serve as a counterbalance to the larger economic and social policy contexts which structure contemporary educational settings in Aotearoa, and act as a form of counter hegemony in relation to pervasive neoliberal discourses.

Keywords: neoliberalism, higher education, Pacific people, social work education, relational pedagogy

Introduction

Tertiary education in Aotearoa New Zealand has undergone a significant transformation since the mid-1980s, shifting from a publicly funded system grounded in the principle of education as a social good to one that is increasingly structured around market logics, user pays funding and institutional competition (Kelsey, 2015; Roberts, 2009). These changes reflect the broader rise of neoliberalism globally as a dominant political and economic framework that has shaped and reshaped state institutions, social policy, and public services across many Western nations (Davies & Bansel, 2007; Harvey, 2005).

Accordingly, tertiary education has been reconfigured and reconstructed from a social good to a business, and from a collective right to an individual investment and privilege. Students have increasingly been positioned as consumers responsible for financing their own learning. Educational institutions have thus become market-based actors, competing for enrolments, demonstrating performance and economic viability and aligning their programmes with market demands (Peters, 1999; Sakhiyya & Rata, 2019). Accordingly, educators are positioned as service providers, and knowledge is often viewed as a commodity with an exchange value (Ruth, 2018).

These transformations have been simultaneously structural, ideological and discursive. They impact not only how education is funded and delivered but also how it is understood. They also impact how student success is achieved and defined, how education is discussed, and what words and ideas fall outside of its now market-based logic (Jones & Ball, 2023).

For Pacific learners, these shifts have produced significant tension. While neoliberal education systems emphasise individual achievement, competition, and measurable outcomes, Pacific worldviews centre on the seemingly diametrically opposed values of relationality, reciprocity, family, community, and collective wellbeing (Airini et al., 2010; Samu, 2006). For Pacific learners, education is not simply a personal achievement; it is a collective endeavour tied to family, community, and intergenerational aspirations.

This tension is particularly evident within social work education. The social work profession is grounded in values of social justice, collective wellbeing, and relational practice. While these values align closely with Pacific perspectives, social work education is delivered within neoliberal institutional frameworks that prioritise efficiency, accountability, and performance measurement (McMaster, 2013). This scenario creates a complex and often contradictory environment for Pacific learners in the social work field who will make up an important part of the workforce; many of these learners will eventually be qualified to work with an increasingly diverse group of people, a significant portion of which identify as Pacific people (Social Work Alliance, 2025).

This article begins with a critical analysis of the complex and often contested ways that neoliberalism has risen to be the dominant hegemonic force in Aotearoa's tertiary education space. Next, the authors discuss how Pacific values and worldviews sit uneasily in this context. They then draw on their direct experiences with Pacific-centred pedagogy within the Bachelor of Social Practice (BSP) programme at MIT and Unitec (on the Unitec campus) – one of Aotearoa New Zealand's largest social work education programs – to offer insights around the value and effects of such pedagogy. Unitec¹ is situated in Tāmaki Makaurau/Auckland, which has been identified as the largest Polynesian city in the world (Blakey & Clews, 2020); there are more Pacific students in the BSP than there are students of any other ethnicity. Teaching strategies within the BSP that create space for Pacific worldviews and ways of knowing are shown to operate as counter-hegemonic influences within the narrow view of education promoted by neoliberal orthodoxy. The BSP offers a unique paper, titled *Talanoa Pasifika*, which highlights the potential for counter-hegemonic pedagogy of this kind.

A brief description of authors' roles in the BSP, and their respective contributions to this article, is in order. Jason and Craig, Senior Lecturers who teach into the BSP, co-authored the majority of this article's content. Jason has been a lecturer for the *Talanoa Pasifika* paper, and is currently the Social Practice Academic Programme Manager. Craig's teaching focus is on Sociology and critical approaches to social work education. Helen, a Professor of Social Practice and Unitec's Social Practice Research Leader, assisted with this article's structure and argumentation.

Neoliberalism and the shaping of tertiary education in Aotearoa New Zealand

An effective analysis of neoliberalism and its impact in the tertiary education sector acknowledges that it operates across several interconnected levels of sociopolitical life. Neoliberalism functions not only as an economic and policy framework that structures institutions, but also as an ideology and a set of practices that shape how education is spoken about and how it is understood. It also functions as a set of managerial practices that embed these principles within everyday institutional life (Harvey, 2005; Springer, 2018). Considered collectively, these dimensions of the neoliberal project create a new hegemonic 'common sense' (Hall, 1988) that shapes how education is operationalised and understood.

¹ Hereafter the shorthand 'Unitec' will be used to refer to the institution where the BSP is delivered. Formerly part of Te Pūkenga, or the New Zealand Institute of Skills and Technology, Unitec has recently combined forces with MIT to become part of 'MIT and Unitec'. The BSP curriculum is currently under revision to become part of a combined social work degree delivered across the formerly separate institutions of Unitec and MIT (the *Talanoa Pasifika* paper will continue to be offered in the new degree).

As Hall (1988, p. 8) notes, “common sense has become one of the most effective ideological forms” for supporting a given power structure. Through policy reforms, managerial practices, and associated dominant discourses, neoliberal assumptions have become normalised within tertiary education and are increasingly accepted as self-evident rather than ideological. Thus, it is difficult to criticise this ideology as the commentator can be characterised as holding views which are naive, utopian, and devoid of practical knowledge of the modern world.

On the other hand, a thorough understanding of how neoliberalism operates provides an effective foundation for implementing alternative pedagogies. An important part of such a project is a critical positioning of learner needs and aspirations, such as those of Pacific students, to aid in the identification of teaching strategies that support student success. We return to this topic towards the latter part of this article.

Neoliberalism as economic and policy transformation

Neoliberalism emerged in the late twentieth century as a response to the perceived failures of Keynesian economic policy which had emphasised state intervention, welfare provision, and economic regulation as a response to the perceived cyclical nature of boom-and-bust market economies (Jahan et al., 2014). Neoliberal theory rejects many Keynesian ideas, instead positioning the market as the most efficient mechanism for allocating resources. Furthermore, it assumes that unregulated self-interest leads to optimal social outcomes (Navarro, 2007; Taylor-Gooby & Leruth, 2018).

Harvey (2005) defines neoliberalism as a theory of political economic practises that seeks to advance human well-being through the expansion of market relations, individual entrepreneurial freedoms, and strong private property rights. Importantly, this framework does not eliminate the state but reconfigures its role. The state becomes responsible for creating and maintaining the conditions necessary for markets to function, including extending market logic into areas that were previously considered public goods.

In Aotearoa New Zealand, neoliberal reform was introduced rapidly from 1984 under the Fourth Labour Government through a comprehensive programme of structural adjustment. This programme included financial deregulation, privatisation of state assets, trade liberalisation, and labour market restructuring (Kelsey, 1997; Small, 2009). Treasury and the Business Round Table played influential roles in shaping this agenda and promoting market-based solutions as well as reduced state intervention. As Kelsey (1997) notes, these reforms aligned closely with the principles of the Washington Consensus² and represented one of the most intensive applications of neoliberal

² The *Washington Consensus* refers to a set of economic policies promoted in the late 1980s and 1990s by institutions such as the International Monetary Fund, the World Bank, and the U.S. Treasury. It outlines ten core reforms including fiscal discipline, trade liberalisation, deregulation, privatisation, and reduced public spending aimed at stabilising and restructuring economies. The framework is widely associated with the global

restructuring in an advanced capitalist democracy. The speed and scope of these reforms were unprecedented and were enabled by New Zealand's centralised political system, reinforced by a 'First Past the Post' electoral method where a political party can create significant change with limited institutional resistance (Kelsey, 1997).

Importantly these neoliberal reforms were not inevitable as is often posited (Séville, 2017). As Kelsey (1997) demonstrates, alternative policy pathways existed yet successive governments chose to pursue a particularly aggressive neoliberal agenda. The narrative that there was no alternative functioned ideologically to frame political decisions as economic necessity rather than contested choice. The slogan 'There is no alternative' (TINA) became something of a mantra for those responsible for decision making and policy direction to argue for radical and rapid economic and institutional restructuring (Séville, 2017).

Within tertiary education these reforms fundamentally altered the structure and purpose of the education system. Institutions were required to compete for students and funding, install corporate governance and managerial structures, and align their programmes with labour market demands. Public funding was reduced, tuition fees were introduced, and student support shifted from grants to loans. These changes reinforced a user-pays model and were presented as a new type of 'common sense' (Roberts, 2009).

Education was thus newly framed as a private investment in individual human capital, with success measured through employability and economic return. This process has been described as the marketisation of education, reflecting a broader shift where education is reconstructed as a commodity rather than a public good (Apple, 2007; Peters, 1999). Peters (1999, p. 2) comments critically that as such, within a neoliberal ideological perspective, there is "nothing distinctive or special about education or health; they are services and products like any other, to be traded in the marketplace."

Neoliberalism as ideology, discourse and hegemony

A structural analysis of neoliberalism such as the one articulated above explains how markets, funding systems, and institutional power reshape tertiary education, but it does not fully explain how neoliberalism becomes normalised within educational institutions or taken up by individuals. Understanding the latter requires an understanding of how ideology becomes practice and also how it hides within practices.

Springer's (2016, p. 35) framing of neoliberalism as "a mutable, inconsistent and variegated process that circulates through the discourse it constructs, justifies and

spread of neoliberalism and has been criticized for prioritising market efficiency over social welfare, social justice and equity.

defends” allows it to be understood not only as policy imposed from above, but also as a discourse that circulates through institutions, practices, and identities. This discourse does not simply reflect neoliberalism, but rather actively embeds it into consciousness. Consistent with Gramsci’s conceptualisation of hegemony, “the supremacy of a social group manifests itself in two ways, as ‘domination’ and as ‘intellectual and moral leadership’” (Gramsci, 1971, p. 57). Neoliberal assumptions thus become embedded within institutional culture and everyday practice, positioning market-based approaches as common sense and, in the process, marginalising alternative values and priorities. As Hall (1998) notes, seemingly common-sense knowledge is thus never neutral but is, rather, shaped by underlying relations of power.

Neoliberalism thereby hides its ideological foundations, shaping discourse in ways that make market-based assumptions appear natural, practical and unavoidable. Such shaping often operates in the following way: ideas such as competition, efficiency, accountability, individual responsibility, employability, innovation, and excellence are repeated through institutional language until they are experienced as ‘truth statements’ (or common sense), rather than ideology (Ruth, 2018). Again, neoliberalism’s power lies in the way it shapes institutional structures, institutional language, and everyday thinking, while appearing ordinary, necessary, and normal (Gramsci, 1971; Hall, 1988; Harvey, 2005). Wilson (2017, p. 50) captures this normalising effect in an astute metaphor, suggesting that “neoliberalism becomes the water in which we swim.”

Foucault’s (1991) concept of governmentality, describing in part the conduct of conduct, draws attention to how this process works at the level of individual subjectivity and identity. For Foucault power operates not only through direct control but also through shaping how people understand themselves and regulate their own behaviour. In tertiary education contexts students are increasingly invited to see themselves as self-managing consumers responsible for investing in their own futures, while educators are positioned as accountable workers required to demonstrate productivity, entrepreneurialism, and measurable outputs (Ball, 2003). Neoliberalism therefore produces particular identities in the educational sphere. The student becomes a consumer, the educator a service provider, the academic a producer, and the institution a competitive enterprise. The idea of education as a social good is thus replaced by the idea that education is a market transaction (Ruth, 2018), with knowledge now largely understood in terms of exchange value.

This shift is visible in the changing language of tertiary education. Terms such as deliverables, employability, learning outcomes, and performance indicators – while appearing neutral – reconstruct education as something measurable, auditable and exchangeable. In spite of the fact that the Education Amendment Act 1990 legally requires universities to serve a role as the critic and conscience of society (Jones et al.,

2000)³, this shift in discourse risks moving attention away from education as relational, contextual, critical, liberating and transformative. It weakens education's connection to social justice by privileging what can be counted over what can be collectively understood, questioned, and transformed (Echeverria, 2022).

Managerialism

Managerialism is the institutional mechanism through which these neoliberal ideas are put into practice. Rees (1999) distinguishes managerialism from management by defining it as a particular ideology of control shaped by market rationalism. It assumes that management can solve problems across almost any context, that organisations should always do more with less, and that private sector practices are appropriate for public and human service institutions. Within tertiary education, managerialism is evident in strategic plans and institutional governance systems that translate teaching, research and service into measurable outputs through audit processes, performance indicators, benchmarking, quality assurance, workload models and funding targets (Narayan, 2020; Parker et al., 2024). Importantly, these practices do not merely organise education; they actively redefine what counts as valuable educational work, privileging those aspects of work that are quantifiable and that can be reported on, compared and audited.

Managerialism connects structure, policy, practice, discourse and identity. Therefore, we can summarize key points articulated in this article thus far: structural reforms create market-based education systems; managerial practices embed those systems in strategic visions and in everyday institutional routines. Discourse normalises these arrangements, shaping what is said, how it is said, and what is excluded from conversation. Neoliberal ideology thus appears to be practical, pragmatic, and necessary. Neoliberalism thereby becomes hegemonic within tertiary education – not solely through enforced policy, but also through language, practices, and identities that organise everyday institutional life. This interrelated set of processes reproduces dominant 'Western' narratives surrounding success within tertiary education (Deem & Brehony, 2005).

McMaster (2013) expands on this thinking by outlining what they consider to be a typical framework of neoliberal educational reforms (across the entire education sector in Aotearoa). This framework includes centralised decision making on academic content delivered via a prescriptive curriculum, as well as the development of national standards which outline what knowledge is expected to be attained at various year

³ Interestingly for the purposes of this article, this requirement does not extend to polytechnics, inclusive of the authors' current workplace from where accounts of Pacific-centred pedagogy and their counter-hegemonic effects are drawn (cited below).

levels. This knowledge is evidenced by systematic testing of learners against the prescribed curriculum. Results are then compared across educational institutions, allowing for a system that ranks schools. In addition, funding and remuneration of schools and educators are linked to these results.

For Indigenous learners, including Pacific learners, neoliberal institutional language has particular and problematic significance. As described above it privileges individual achievement, competition, self-management, and measurable performance; while in contrast (and as discussed below) Pacific understandings of education are often grounded in relationality, reciprocity, collective responsibility, and intergenerational sacrifice and endeavour. The issue at hand here is therefore not only that tertiary institutions measure success narrowly, but that neoliberal discourse and managerial practice reshape what success is; and, generally speaking, this notion of success does not fit Pacific experience and aspirations. Pacific students' educational journeys are often relational and collective, yet these students are educated within systems that privilege individualised performance and individualised success.

Pacific success

Pacific understandings of success as relational, collective, and intergenerational clash with dominant neoliberal frameworks that emphasise individual achievement as key to success. This tension is strongly evident in, though not exclusive to, educational settings within Aotearoa New Zealand. This section of the article provides an overview of Pacific values and experiences in the New Zealand context, with a focus on educational aspirations.

Pacific peoples in Aotearoa New Zealand represent a diverse range of cultural identities, languages, and migration histories, including those from Samoa, Tonga, Fiji, Niue, Tokelau, Tuvalu, Kiribati, and the Cook Islands (Pasefika Proud, 2016).⁴ Common across these diverse populations are concepts such as aiga (extended and immediate family) which reflect systems of reciprocity and shared responsibility, where individual success is understood as belonging to the collective pursuit. Transposing this concept to education, academic achievement is viewed not primarily as a personal accomplishment but instead as a fulfilment of obligations to family, community, wider society and ancestors. This relational understanding of success is reinforced through cultural practices, community expectations, and family support structures (Airini et al., 2010; Marat et al., 2009). As Mayeda et al. (2014) demonstrate, Pacific students are often

⁴ Often for the purposes of research the term 'Pacific Peoples' is used collectively for these nations. Although this categorization can be seen as problematic, in this article 'Pacific people' is used as a term of unity rather than referring to a homogenous group of research subjects. The distinct cultures and differences of Pacific people, their families, villages and nations are not overlooked by the authors; instead the diversity across different Pacific nations is acknowledged and celebrated (Samu, 2006).

motivated by a strong sense of responsibility to their families and communities and frequently frame their educational journeys in terms of honouring parental sacrifice and contributing to collective wellbeing. Similarly, Airini et al. (2010) highlight the importance of relationships and collective identity in shaping Pacific student engagement and success.

Pacific migration to Aotearoa New Zealand has frequently been driven by aspirations for improved education and opportunities for future generations (de Vries, 2009). Education is therefore deeply embedded within Pacific families' overall motivations to relocate and is closely linked to intergenerational mobility. For Pacific people learning has always been a central and lifelong value. Pacific communities respect knowledge and have clear frameworks for learning centred on multiple ways to learn and to impart knowledge (Leenen-Young, 2020).

This relational and community-based understanding of success can be illustrated by two examples rooted in the sporting environment, an area where Pacific people have had visible success in Aotearoa New Zealand. The first appears in Borrell and Enari's (2025) account of motivation and achievement for Pacific professional rugby league players. Borrell and Enari show that these professionals link their sporting activity to a strong sense of identity and belonging aligned to a collective pursuit and the subsequent success of their aiga. The second example is reflected in an episode of 'One Take,' a podcast produced by the New Zealand Warriors Rugby League team, which aired on 17 April 2025. In this episode the concept of service to the collective was discussed as a factor which motivates Pacific players in the National Rugby League. The ex-players who were interviewed shared that success was achieved and celebrated collectively. This communal feeling of achievement, in turn, increased the self-belief, self-esteem and self-efficacy of the players, enhancing motivation and trust in their abilities. Faith in a higher power (usually Christianity), also cited in relation to success, highlights contexts that extend beyond the individual as incentives for success (Searle, 2025).

These perspectives contrast sharply with neoliberal constructs of success, which prioritise individual performance and achievement, competition among participants, and measurable outcomes allowing participants to be ranked against each other and similar groups of people in similar environments such as workplaces or sporting teams. Within tertiary education, success is typically defined through metrics such as course completion rates, grades, and employment outcomes. These measures reflect a narrow conception of value that does not capture the relational and collective dimensions of Pacific success (McMaster, 2013).

This friction creates a structural and cultural tension for Pacific learners. They are required to operate within institutional systems that value and promote individual achievement while having a value system of collectivism and service to others. Recognising this conflict provides a key rationale for developing more inclusive and responsive educational practices.

Social work education as a contradictory site

Social work education acutely illustrates this tension between neoliberalism and Pacific worldviews. The International Federation of Social Workers (2014) defines the social work profession as grounded in values of social justice, collective wellbeing, and relational practice. These values align closely with Pacific perspectives that emphasise connection, reciprocity, community responsibility and service. However, because social work education in Aotearoa New Zealand is delivered within tertiary institutions that are shaped by neoliberal frameworks, a contradiction arises. As noted above, these institutions prioritise the efficient use of resources, accountability, and measurable performance, often through managerial practices that emphasise standardisation and measurable output. This approach to measuring success creates a tension between the values of the social work profession and the structures within which social work education takes place (McMaster, 2013), a tension which echoes the clash of cultural worldviews articulated in this article.

McMaster (2013) details how neoliberalism reshapes the role of the educator, shifting it away from a pedagogy of socially contextualised teaching towards performance and results- driven teaching. Educators are required to meet institutional targets, align with prescribed learning outcomes, and demonstrate measurable results. This set of requirements can limit opportunities for relational and critical engagement in the classroom, which are central to social work practice and thus social work education. Within this context, the classroom risks becoming a site of production parallel to a factory floor rather than a space for critical reflection and social transformation (Giroux, 2014, 2020; Morley & Ablett, 2020).

This contradiction is not lost on Pacific social work students, as the values underpinning both Pacific worldviews and social work education are challenged by systems that privilege individualised achievement and competition. These students are engaged in education for a profession that values and encourages relational and collective approaches, yet they are required to succeed within systems that prioritise individual performance. This situation can create challenges for the perceived role and importance of culture, including developing effective ways of supporting Indigenous engagement with learning (Morley et al., 2017).

At the same time, social work education presents opportunities for Pacific ākonga. Because of its inherent values, it can provide a space where alternative approaches to teaching and learning can be explored. Thus, social work education is potentially a critical platform for challenging and reworking neoliberal assumptions and a place of comfort for Pacific students (Morley, 2016).

From deficit framing to strengths-based understanding

Neoliberal policies often reproduce and intensify existing systems of power and privilege by embedding market logics and notions of individual responsibility (Harvey, 2005; Rees, 1999). In the education sector these policies allow a framing of student experiences that do not fit neoliberal metrics of success as deficiencies or risks. Deficit framings of this kind have become increasingly pervasive, locating any problems or difficulties with learning within the learner, rather than within the system. This perspective fails to account for the hegemonic structural and cultural factors that shape educational experiences. It also overlooks the resilience and adaptability demonstrated by Pacific communities (Robertson & Dale, 2002).

Pacific learners, like other minority groups within the Western world, are often positioned within these deficit-based narratives that emphasise underachievement and risk. These narratives are reinforced through statistical comparisons to the dominant culture(s) (Hunter et al., 2016). While such measures can highlight very real (structural) disparities, they can also fail to recognise the strength, adaptability, determination and resilience that Pacific learners bring to educational contexts (Matapo & Baice, 2019). Matapo and Baice highlight how Pacific peoples have successfully navigated migration, the diaspora, and cultural change, maintaining strong identities and community connections in the process. These experiences represent significant achievements that may not be recognised within educational systems, and are a potential lever to use when strategizing for Pacific ākonga success.

Strength-based approaches can provide an alternative framework to combat neoliberal constructs. Rather than focusing on deficits, these approaches emphasise the strengths, knowledge, and experiences that learners bring. Si'ilata (2014) argues that, for example, recognising Pacific epistemologies and relational approaches to learning is essential for supporting Pacific student success within Western educational systems.

The identification of target group initiatives to address the inequitable outcomes created or exacerbated by a neoliberal approach to education has been a recent policy development (Matapo & Baice, 2019). Notably, the creation of target groups, including that of Pacific learners, is an admission that certain demographics of the population face inequities in educational outcomes. Thus, target groups are contradictory formations: they signal a weakness (deficit?) within neoliberal educational ideologies.

Supporting Pacific learners to address inequitable educational outcomes via target group initiatives can cause consternation. This approach can lead to the unintended consequence of educators viewing Pacific students as an under-achieving group that is failing to recognise its strengths, capabilities, potential and achievements. This viewpoint results from defining Pacific ākonga via educational statistics alone (Matapo & Baice, 2019).

On the other hand, the contradictory nature of target group initiatives can allow space for innovation and resources to be directed towards Pacific learners and associated ideologies that prioritise success in terms of culturally grounded achievements (Unitec, 2021). Taking up opportunities of this kind could be considered a pragmatic approach to supporting the development of Pacific-centred pedagogies within mainstream educational contexts. This approach may assist Pacific social work students and the educators who support them to work within neoliberal systems to reframe negative narratives about Pacific people and communities. Such approaches could also apply to the prolific deficit generalisations and stereotypes experienced by other minority ethnic groups in the education system (Allen & Webber, 2019; Hunter et al., 2016).

Effective pedagogical and institutional strategies to improve Pacific success in tertiary education

Ensuring Pacific ākonga success requires pedagogical innovations that operate within neoliberal educational structures while also challenging their limitations. In other words, culturally grounded teaching strategies are not necessarily separate from these existing structures. Instead, they can work within them to create more inclusive and responsive educational environments.

Relational pedagogy is central to this approach. It requires being aware of and fostering concepts such as *teu le vā* to emphasise the importance of creating and maintaining relational space and connection between ākonga and kaiako (Ka'ili, 2005; Suaalii-Sauni, 2017). Teaching approaches that prioritise relationships, trust, and reciprocity alongside academic content can enhance student engagement and create supportive learning environments. Mafileo (2004) highlights the power of this pedagogy for Pacific learners by promoting the importance of *fekau'aki*. This concept is part of a Tongan relational framework that emphasises connection and mutual understanding when working with social work clients, which can be adapted to classroom/academic environments.

Strength-based teaching can assist the validation of the cultural knowledge and lived experiences Pacific students bring to the classroom. Chu-Fuluifaga and Ikiua-Pasi (2021) found that, for example, strong relationships between lecturers and students are a key predictor of Pacific student success. These relationships support not only academic achievement but also identity development and belonging in both educational and wider community settings. They also help to counter the deficit theorising that can foreclose positive relationships between educators and learners and negatively impact learner confidence.

Embedding Pacific epistemologies within the curriculum is also essential. By incorporating Pacific knowledge, ways of knowing and sharing information in the classroom, these paradigms are validated and work to challenge the dominance of Western frameworks, thereby also highlighting the value of diverse ways of knowing

(Thaman, 2003). In this vein, Faletolu (2010) emphasises the importance of culturally responsive curricula to support Pacific learners so that students may see themselves and their communities in the information they will use when practicing their future profession.

Creating structures around the learning environment which replicate culturally familiar processes is also an important strategy. Collective support plays a critical role in enhancing student success and can be activated by using approaches such as mentoring and peer support (Benseman et al., 2006). Hallie et al. (2021) emphasise the role of Pacific student spaces in fostering community and belonging. In these spaces, challenges are shared and successes are celebrated. Tuakana-teina relationships, in which experienced ākonga mentor less experienced students, can provide opportunities for reciprocal learning and support as well, further aligning with Pacific values of collective responsibility (Rameka & Glasgow, 2017).

In the current social context in which decades of neoliberal policies have decayed social fabric and exacerbated problems faced by Pasifika families and communities, integration of Pasifika values and viewpoints into social work education is of greater relevance than ever. The Bachelor of Social Practice programme at Unitec offers a unique opportunity to showcase such integration. This social work programme offers the only paper in Aotearoa that is dedicated to Pacific perspectives on social work. The paper, titled *Talanoa Pasifika*, provides students with many Pacific social work models representing multiple Pacific perspectives on social work, as well as a practical guide for working with Pacific people within Aotearoa New Zealand. Content also includes an exploration of Pacific values which inform culturally appropriate social work practice with Pacific communities.

The lead author of this article, who teaches into the *Talanoa Pasifika* paper, finds that in addition to the paper's stated main topics students experience incidental learning largely through the process of Talanoa. Pacific students enrolled in this paper are encouraged to connect with their lived experience of being a Pacific person in the diaspora. When doing so, students report varying perspectives, including being exposed to Pacific ways of being and knowing for the first time. This phenomenon highlights the neocolonial process whereby families of migrants often take on the values of the dominant cultural group in an effort to assimilate to perceived 'modern' cultural norms (Harvey, 2005). The *Talanoa Pasifika* paper thus underscores the decolonizing potential of Pacific-centred pedagogy.

Other Pacific students taking this course report that it has helped them to put names to concepts they have intrinsically known through their upbringing and link them to cultural values. Students who are strong in their culture and associated knowledge often position themselves as teachers and tuakana, taking on leadership roles within the classroom and thus increasing their esteem and confidence in the tertiary setting. These experiences filter through to other papers in the degree, centring these students and

their knowledge as valued components of the programme. This latter effect is particularly important considering that Pacific students represent the majority of ākonga across the BSP.

While the Pacific-centred teaching strategies outlined above operate within neoliberal frameworks, they also challenge dominant assumptions about teaching, learning, and success. They demonstrate that alternative approaches are possible, even within constrained systems. The pedagogy taking place within *Talanoa Pasifika* is not simply alternative to dominant educational discourses and practices; it is counter-hegemonic.

Conclusion

Neoliberalism has reshaped tertiary education in Aotearoa New Zealand both through structural reforms and ideological processes. It has over time redefined education as part of a market-driven system with characteristics that emphasise competition, individual responsibility, and measurable outcomes. For Pacific learners, this situation creates a tension between institutional expectations and experiences, and cultural values that prioritise relationality, collective wellbeing, and intergenerational success. This tension is particularly evident within social work education, where professional values closely align with Pacific perspectives but are delivered within neoliberal structures, with their associated ideologies.

However, Pacific learner success in for example social work programmes, including within mainstream educational institutions, demonstrate that neoliberal systems do not fully determine outcomes. Through relational pedagogy, strengths-based approaches, and the integration of Pacific epistemologies, educators and institutions can create spaces that support Pacific success in culturally grounded ways. Because these approaches can operate simultaneously within and against neoliberal frameworks, they reveal the potential for transformation even in the context of constrained environments. Supporting Pacific social work students therefore requires not only adapting to existing systems but also critically engaging with and reshaping the assumptions that underpin them. This critical, counter-hegemonic pedagogical work can lead to outcomes that support Pacific individuals, families and communities in Aotearoa New Zealand.

References

- Airini, Brown, D., Curtis, E. T., Johnson, O., O'Shea, M., Rakena, T. O., Reynolds, G., Sauni, P., Smith, A., Su'a-Huirua, T., Tarawa, M., Townsend, S., Savage, T., & Ulugia-Pua, M. (2010). *Success for all: Improving Māori and Pasifika student success in degree-level studies*. Teaching and Learning Research Initiative.
<http://www.tlri.org.nz/sites/default/files/projects/9247-Airini-final-report.pdf>
- Allen, J. M., & Webber, M. (2019). Stereotypes of minorities and education. In S. Ratuva (Ed.), *The Palgrave handbook of ethnicity* (pp. 1407–1426). Palgrave Macmillan.
https://doi.org/10.1007/978-981-13-2898-5_107
- Apple, M. W. (2007). Creating difference: Neo-liberalism, neo-conservatism and the politics of educational reform. In A. Scott & J. Freeman-Moir (Eds.), *The lost dream of equality: Critical essays on education and social class* (pp. 151–176). Sense Publishers.
- Ball, S. J. (2003). The teacher's soul and the terrors of performativity. *Journal of Education Policy*, 18(2), 215–228.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/0268093022000043065>
- Benseman, J., Coxon, E., Anderson, H., & Anae, M. (2006). Retaining non-traditional students: Lessons learnt from Pasifika students in New Zealand. *Higher Education Research & Development*, 25(2), 147–162.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/07294360600610388>
- Blakey, J., & Clews, J. (2020). Knowing, being and co-constructing an age-friendly Tāmaki Makaurau Auckland. *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health*, 17(23), Article e9136. <https://doi.org/10.3390/ijerph17239136>
- Borell, P., & Enari, D. (2025). Family first: The role of family in Māori and Pasifika professional athlete success. *International Review for the Sociology of Sport*, 60(4), 696–712. <https://doi.org/10.1177/10126902241286389>
- Chu-Fuluifaga, C., & Ikiua-Pasi, J. (2021). *From good to great: The 10 habits of phenomenal educators for Pacific learners in New Zealand tertiary education*. Ako Aotearoa. <https://ako.ac.nz/assets/Knowledge-centre/Good-to-great-Phenomenal-Educators-for-Pacific-Learners/Full-Report-Phenomenal-Educators-for-Pacific.pdf>
- Davies, B., & Bansel, P. (2007). Neoliberalism and education. *International Journal of Qualitative Studies in Education*, 20(3), 247–259.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/09518390701281751>
- Deem, R., & Brehony, K. J. (2005). Management as ideology: The case of “new managerialism” in higher education. *Oxford Review of Education*, 31(2), 217–235.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/03054980500117827>

- de Vries, H. P. (2009). The entrepreneurial spirit of the Pacific peoples: A study of Pacific immigrant entrepreneurship in New Zealand. *Journal of Māori and Pacific Development*, 10(1), 29–51.
- Echeverria, P. (2023). Revisiting the sense of education from a critical perspective to contribute to social justice. *Power and Education*, 15(2), 122–131.
<https://doi.org/10.1177/17577438221116030>
- Faletolu, T. T. A. (2010). Assumed voices of Samoa. *Aotearoa New Zealand Social Work*, 22(4), 20–31. <https://doi.org/10.11157/anzswj-vol22iss4id32>
- Foucault, M. (1991). Governmentality. In G. Burchell, C. Gordon, & P. Miller (Eds.), *The Foucault effect: Studies in governmentality* (pp. 87–104). University of Chicago Press.
- Giroux, H. A. (2014). *Neoliberalism's war on higher education*. Haymarket Books.
- Giroux, H. A. (2020). *On critical pedagogy* (2nd ed.). Bloomsbury Academic.
- Gramsci, A. (1971). *Selections from the prison notebooks* (Q. Hoare & G. N. Smith, Eds. & Trans.). International Publishers.
- Hall, S. (1988). *The hard road to renewal: Thatcherism and the crisis of the left*. Verso.
- Hallie, J. A., Bentley-Gray, D., Filemoni, S., Kautoke, L., Komene, A., & Luatua-Alatasi, T. (2021). Covid-proof: The social practice fono: Going from strength to strength despite lockdown [Paper presentation]. *Rangahau Horonuku Hou: 2021 MIT/Unitec Research Symposium*, Auckland, New Zealand.
- Harvey, D. (2005). *A brief history of neoliberalism*. Oxford University Press.
- Hunter, J., Hunter, R., Bills, T., Cheung, I., Hannant, B., Kritesh, K., & Lachaiya, R. (2016). Developing equity for Pāsifika learners within a New Zealand context: Attending to culture and values. *New Zealand Journal of Educational Studies*, 51(2), 197–209. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s40841-016-0059-7>
- International Federation of Social Workers. (2014, July). *Global definition of social work*. <https://www.ifsw.org/what-is-social-work/global-definition-of-social-work/>
- Jahan, S., Mahmud, A. S., & Papageorgiou, C. (2014). What is Keynesian economics? *Finance & Development*, 51(3), 53–54.
- Jones, B. M. A., & Ball, S. J. (Eds.). (2023). *Neoliberalism and education*. Routledge.
- Jones, D. G., Galvin, K., & Woodhouse, D. (2000). *Universities as critic and conscience of society: The role of academic freedom*. New Zealand Universities Academic Audit Unit.
<https://www.aqa.ac.nz/sites/all/files/ASQ6%20Critic%20and%20Conscience.pdf>

- Ka'ili, T. O. (2005). Tauhi vā: Nurturing Tongan sociospatial ties in Maui and beyond. *The Contemporary Pacific*, 17(1), 83–114. <https://doi.org/10.1353/cp.2005.0017>
- Kelsey, J. (1997). *The New Zealand experiment A world model for structural adjustment?* (New ed.). Auckland University Press.
- Leenen-Young, M. (2020). Pasifika students and learning to learn at university. *MAI Journal*, 9(1), 70–80. <https://doi.org/10.20507/MAIJournal.2020.9.1.8>
- Mafileo, T. (2004). Exploring Tongan social work: Fekau'aki (connecting) and fakatokilalo (humility). *Qualitative Social Work*, 3(3), 239–257. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1473325004045664>
- Marat, D., Latu, S., Aumua, L., Papoutsaki, E., Talakai, M., & Sun, K. (2009). *Whaia te iti kahurangi: Efficacy, agency, achievement and success in the tertiary sector: Focus on students and parents from Pasifika*. Tertiary Education Commission.
- Matapo, J., & Baice, T. (2019). The art of wayfinding Pasifika success. *MAI Journal*, 8(1), 67–76. <https://doi.org/10.20507/MAIJournal.2019.8.1.6>
- Mayeda, D. T., Keil, M., Dutton, H. D., & Ofamo'oni, I. (2014). "You've gotta set a precedent": Māori and Pacific voices on student success in higher education. *AlterNative: An International Journal of Indigenous Peoples*, 10(2), 165–179. <https://doi.org/10.1177/117718011401000206>
- McMaster, C. (2013). Working the "shady spaces": Resisting neoliberal hegemony in New Zealand education. *Policy Futures in Education*, 11(5), 523–531. <https://doi.org/10.2304/pfie.2013.11.5.523>
- Morley, C. (2016). Promoting activism through critical social work education: The impact of global capitalism and neoliberalism on social work and social work education. *Critical and Radical Social Work*, 4(1), 39–57. <https://doi.org/10.1332/204986016X14519919041398>
- Morley, C., & Ablett, P. (2020). Henry Giroux's vision of critical pedagogy: Educating social work activists for a radical democracy. In C. Morley, P. Ablett, C. Noble, & S. Cowden (Eds.), *The Routledge handbook of critical pedagogies for social work* (pp. 201–212). Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781351002042-17>
- Morley, C., Macfarlane, S., & Ablett, P. (2017). The neoliberal colonisation of social work education: A critical analysis and practices for resistance. *Advances in Social Work and Welfare Education*, 19(2), 25–40.
- Narayan, A. K. (2020). The development and use of performance measures in New Zealand tertiary education institutions. *Accounting History*, 25(2), 193–218. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1032373219842383>

- Navarro, V. (2007). Neoliberalism as a class ideology; or, the political causes of the growth of inequalities. *International Journal of Health Services*, 37(1), 47–62. <https://doi.org/10.2190/AP65-X154-4513-R520>
- Pasefika Proud. (2016). *The profile of Pacific peoples in New Zealand*. Ministry of Social Development.
- Parker, L. D., Guthrie, J., & Martin-Sardesai, A. (2024). Performance management in the Australian higher education system: A historically informed critique. *Accounting History*, 29(2), 215–235. <https://doi.org/10.1177/10323732241230348>
- Peters, M. (1999). Neoliberalism. In *The encyclopedia of philosophy of education*. <http://www.vusst.hr/ENCYCLOPAEDIA/neoliberalism.htm>
- Rameka, L., & Glasgow, A. (2017). Tuākana/tēina agency in early childhood education. *Early Childhood Folio*, 21(1), 27–32. <https://doi.org/10.18296/ecf.0036>
- Rees, S. (1995). The fraud and the fiction. In S. Rees & G. Rodley (Eds.), *The human costs of managerialism: Advocating the recovery of humanity* (pp. 15–28). Pluto Press.
- Rees, S. (1999). Managerialism in social welfare: Proposals for a humanitarian alternative—An Australian perspective. *European Journal of Social Work*, 2(2), 193–202. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13691459908413817>
- Roberts, P. (2009). A new patriotism? Neoliberalism, citizenship and tertiary education in New Zealand. *Educational Philosophy and Theory*, 41(4), 410–423. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1469-5812.2008.00437.x>
- Robertson, S., & Dale, R. (2002). Local states of emergency: The contradictions of neo-liberal governance in education in New Zealand. *British Journal of Sociology of Education*, 23(3), 463–482. <https://doi.org/10.1080/0142569022000015472>
- Ruth, D. (2018). Education as gift: Taking education out of the market and the market out of education. *New Zealand Sociology*, 33(2), 203–228.
- Sakhiyya, Z., & Rata, E. (2019). From “priceless” to “priced”: The value of knowledge in higher education. *Globalisation, Societies and Education*, 17(3), 285–295. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14767724.2019.1583089>
- Samu, T. W. (2006). The “Pasifika umbrella” and quality teaching: Understanding and responding to the diverse realities within. *Waikato Journal of Education*, 12(1), 35–49. <https://doi.org/10.15663/wje.v12i1.297>
- Searle, B. (Host). (2025, April 17). Pasifika week (38) [Audio podcast episode]. In *One Take*. One New Zealand Warriors. <https://omny.fm/shows/one-take/episode-38-pasifika-week-jerry-seuseu-ali-lauitiiti-monty-betham>

- Séville, A. (2017). From “one right way” to “one ruinous way”? Discursive shifts in “There is no alternative”. *European Political Science Review*, 9(3), 449–470. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S1755773916000035>
- Si'ilata, R. K. (2014). *Va'a Tele: Pasifika learners riding the success wave on linguistically and culturally responsive pedagogies* [Doctoral thesis, University of Auckland].
- Small, D. (2009, November 24–27). *Neoliberalism's fate: Implications for education* [Conference paper]. 37th Annual Conference of ANZCIES, University of New England, Armidale, Australia.
- Social Work Alliance. (2025). *Strategic priorities for social work workforce planning and development in Aotearoa New Zealand*. Toitū te Waioira. <https://toitutewaioira.nz/release-of-social-work-alliances-position-paper-strategic-priorities-for-social-work-workforce-planning-and-development-in-aotearoa-new-zealand/>
- Springer, S. (2016). *The discourse of neoliberalism: An anatomy of a powerful idea*. Rowman & Littlefield.
- Springer, S. (2018). *Understanding neoliberalism: A comprehensive approach*. Rowman & Littlefield.
- Suaalii-Sauni, T. (2017). The va and Kaupapa Māori. In T. K. Hoskins & A. Jones (Eds.), *Critical conversations in Kaupapa Māori* (pp. 161–178). Huia Publishers.
- Taylor-Gooby, P., & Leruth, B. (2018). Individualism and neo-liberalism. In P. Taylor-Gooby & B. Leruth (Eds.), *Attitudes, aspirations and welfare: Social policy directions in uncertain times* (pp. 29–61). Palgrave Macmillan.
- Thaman, K. H. (2003). Decolonizing Pacific studies: Indigenous perspectives, knowledge, and wisdom in higher education. *The Contemporary Pacific*, 15(1), 1–17. <https://doi.org/10.1353/cp.2003.0032>
- Unitec. (2021). *Unitec Fono Faufautua*. <https://www.unitec.ac.nz/pacific/who-we-are/fono>
- Wilson, J. (2017). *Neoliberalism*. Routledge.