# NEOLIBERALISM, AUDIT CULTURE, AND TEACHERS: EMPOWERING GOAL SETTING WITHIN AUDIT CULTURE

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## Abstract

*In this paper, I discuss the concepts of neoliberalism and audit culture, and how they affect teaching culture. Moreover, I propose a form of goal setting that, if used properly, will hopefully work to combat some of the more onerous aspects of neoliberalism and audit clture in education.*

## Keywords

Neoliberalism; audit culture; goal setting; ego orientation; mastery orientation

## Background

My insights come from being a credentialed English/Physical Education teacher in 1970s California, while also coaching swimming for 23 years. I subsequently pursued a second career in the tertiary sector—all in the United States—before becoming a permanent resident of Aotearoa/New Zealand in 2008. I write this piece about a neoliberalism stemming from a 1980s Reaganism and Thatcherism and 'audit' culture which is gradually leaking out globally and into more than simply commerce, no more so than in the public education sector.

When I first arrived at the University of Waikato in 2008, I attended a Physical Education New Zealand (PENZ) conference in Tauranga. One of the keynote speakers was Merrill Melnick, from The College at Brockport, New York. I have known Merrill for years, and was interested in his keynote topic regarding 'bullying' in schools, in male culture, and in sport particularly. At that time, to me, it seemed this topic was a no-brainer: of course, kids have been bullied, particularly in male culture, at schools for decades (cf., Orwell, 1945). But at the tea break, I found that the majority of attendees I spoke with recoiled at the very thought that bullying existed in New Zealand schools, much less that it was a topic worthy to be studied. Several years later, however, 'bullying' in schools in New Zealand became a hot topic. Like it or not, educational globalization (and Americanisation) eventually touches on even formerly insular worlds.

In this essay, I attempt to unpack several terms and demonstrate why they are a significant part of structures that impinge upon all New Zealand teachers—but especially on beginning teachers. I then argue that the act of clearly setting goals (and accompanying values) for beginning teachers can often act to mitigate some of the effects of larger global and governmental structures. Finally, I propose a few ways that goal setting, rather than being a vehicle for audit culture disciplinary practice, may effectively give back to beginning teachers (and experienced ones as well) a sense of balance, clarity, and control over their own life trajectories in this professional field. I begin by discussing neoliberalism, audit culture, and how sensible and mindful goal setting may assuage some of the structures that impinge upon us as educators.

Commonly referred to as 'beginning teachers' in New Zealand or—as I call them—'novices',[i] like many professionals about to enter into a 'career', are often uncertain about which paths to choose, whose advice to take, and what they should set out to do during their work life. The field of education itself is a shifting landscape, and negotiating it can often be difficult—especially for the beginning teacher. Western governments, since a global move towards neoliberal policies in the 1980s, have more and more tended towards centralisation of accountability, albeit directing schools to follow a more competitive free-market model (cf., Gordon & Whitty, 1997; Connell, 2013).

For individuals who find themselves within this system of governmental structure, setting professional goals can be fraught with uncertainty, anxiety and indecision. Setting career (and life) goals within such a system may mean that an individual is torn between her/his values and the expressed values of the marketplace. In the many small ways everyday that teachers decide, 'Should I respond to the day-to-day needs of children, or should I follow policy that is clearly removed from the best interests of the children?' is one example where values and goals need to be crystal clear. As John Dewey (1903) wrote:

> Many reformers are contending against the conditions which place the direction of school affairs … in the hands of a body of men [sic] who are outside the school system itself, who have not necessarily any expert knowledge of education and who are moved by non-educational motives. (p. 195)

If teachers, in the name of managerial efficiency, must fit their teaching within certain parameters that are more easily surveilled and audited, creative learning likely will not take place. (This is not to deny standards—but, local control of standards must be balanced with central government controls.) Ironically—and insidiously—the 'privatization' of educational institutions in countries like the United Kingdom, United States, Australia, and New Zealand (through neoliberal policies) has lead to less professional freedom and more audit-culture surveillance.

## Some terms

So we are all speaking the same jargon/language—or at least understanding it similarly—in this section I briefly explain what I mean by the terms 'neoliberal', 'audit culture', and 'goal setting'. The terms are related.

While very complex and taking on more meanings, for our purposes, the daily enactment of an economic-based neoliberalism is not totally in line with its avowed precepts. These avowed precepts would include the state/central government promulgating a laissez-faire market attitude, so that privatization (of many societal structures) is encouraged, and the state/central government's fiduciary responsibility diminishes. In reality, these precepts have resulted in central governments dictating standards as they withdraw from realms of former government responsibilities; healthcare, education, and housing are three examples. As the neoliberal policies of the 1980s have played out across the globe, it has become clear that not *all* publicly-run institutions are, by virtue of being public, negative.[ii]

However, according to David Harvey, who wrote *A Brief History of Neoliberalism* (2005) and is a graduate of the University of Cambridge:

> State after state, from the new ones that emerged from the collapse of the Soviet Union to *old-style social democracies and welfare states such as New Zealand* and Sweden, have embraced, sometimes voluntarily and sometimes in response to coercive pressures, some version of neoliberal theory and adjusted at least some of their policies and practices accordingly. (2007, p. 23, emphasis added)

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[i] Distinguishing these terms may be contentious, but for my purposes, I see 'novice' as indicating an individual's level of experience in a job or task, while 'beginning teachers', at least in New Zealand, more commonly refers to provisionally-registered teachers, a level in a teacher career structure. The first is largely an indicant of experience level; the second as a facet of a class of people at various career stages.

[ii] There is not space to fully explore this argument, but the creation of manufactured goods and the education of children are not, obviously, equivalent tasks, nor do they require equivalent sensibilities.

Harvey adds that a part of the "U. S. transition" (2007, p. 31) towards *normalizing* the "private property rights, individual liberty, unencumbered markets, and free trade" (2007, p. 21) took place in "media and in educational institutions" (2007, p. 31). The two-pronged forces of mass, corporate (private) media and educational institutional acceptance of neoliberal principles worked to create "an ideological onslaught aimed at persuading the public of the common sense character of neoliberal propositions" (2007, p. 31).

Thus, the insidiousness of a valorisation of individual self-sufficiency (versus the previous social democratic values), markets that find their own balance points (versus government assistance through lean times), privatisation of state-owned industries, and free trade (which means the 'rich get richer' and the 'poor get poorer') created what Harvey has termed a 'hegemonic discourse':

> Neoliberalism has, in short, become hegemonic as a mode of discourse and has pervasive effects on ways of thought and political-economic practices to the point where it has become incorporated into the common sense way we interpret, live in, and understand the world. (2007, p. 23)

Like daily stress, the system of neoliberalism sometimes weighs us down without us even knowing the source. This, unfortunately, may result in novice teachers sometimes performing for the system rather than for their students. A novice teacher, in good faith attempting to 'tick all the boxes', may make choices to finish a required report rather than prepare for the next day's lessons. By 2016, therefore, the neoliberal natures of both privatisation and private citizens' individual efforts (as opposed to the collectivism inherent in a strong central government system) seems both naturalised and commonsensical.

'Audit' culture is, according to Cris Shore, a Professor in the Anthropology Department at the University of Auckland, a "*condition*: one shaped by the use of modern techniques and principals of financial audit, but in contexts far removed from the world of financial accountability" (Shore, 2008, p. 279). Education is one such context: teaching students is not simply about making profit, except in the long-term with more educated, interactive citizenry. Like neoliberalism, audit culture purports to valorise one set of values while really producing quite their opposite. As Shore (2008) explains:

> … these new systems of audit are not, as they claim, just neutral or politically innocent practices designed to promote 'transparency' or efficiency: rather, they are disciplinary technologies—or 'techniques of the self'—aimed at instilling new norms of conduct into the workforce…. (p. 283)

Citing Michel Foucault's work, Shore links 'surveillance' and disciplinary tools that 'produce' docile public school employees with this audit system.

What an audit culture actually does is to produce human beings in the system who are more malleable and efficient. Whenever humans interface with other humans, however, aims of efficiency are misguided at best: in teaching, individual quirks, idiosyncrasies, and interests create an admixture of hopes and motivations that make teaching an art as well as a craft.

Audit culture is a logical outgrowth of neoliberalism, according to Michael Apple (a Professor in educational theory at the University of Wisconsin), one that depends upon a commodification of the very social fabric upon which teaching and education depend. One of audit culture's tenets has resulted in educational 'reforms' that include:

> … the position that 'only that which is measurable is important'…. [It] has threatened some of the most creative and critical practices that have been developed through concerted efforts in some of the most difficult settings. (2005, p. 11)

Other effects of an audit culture include the normalization of language: "the language of privatisation, marketisation, and constant evaluation has increasingly saturated public discourse" (Apple, 2005, p. 19). The rhetorics are in opposition to the results—and that is one reason why neoliberalism and audit culture are so difficult to grasp and contest.

But the risk to both institutions (like healthcare, housing, and education) and democratic societies is real. As Apple (2005) wrote,

> The ultimate result of an auditing culture of this kind is not the promised de-centralisation that plays such a significant role rhetorically in most neo-liberal self-understandings, but what seems to be a massive re-centralisation and what is best seen as a process of de-democratisation. (p. 15).

In other words, audit culture has a tangible effect upon power centralizing within governments, while responsibility disproportionally layers upon work forces.

Neoliberal and audit culture policies devalue the work that teachers do with individual students: it simply is not a part of the efficient educational system that proponents strive for if it is not 'measurable'. But reinstating the human factor back into teaching by setting individual (not market- or accountability-driven) goals may be a way forward.

Like most terms, 'goal setting' can be utilized by those with a passion for neoliberal and audit culture—to further mark out measurable as well as achievable 'objectives', to increase work expectations and responsibilities (often with less resources), and, ultimately, to surveil employees. In common parlance, goal setting is often seen as an integral facet of a neoliberal model, but it does not have to be. I do not mean for the term 'goal setting' to be used in those ways.

In my sense of 'goal setting', the goals, although professional, remain essentially personal, perhaps shared with a trusted senior colleague. These goals become a private empowerment tool that teachers may use to combat the audit culture, and ultimately, the neoliberal, market-driven model.

## The meaning(s) of 'goal setting' in contemporary educational practice

As I shall demonstrate from sport psychology and achievement motivation literature, if we teach teachers to resist the subverted 'values' of audit culture[iii] by introducing goal setting and values clarification in humane ways, we may reduce anxiety, uncertainty, and indecision in beginning teachers. Teachers can learn to make their own choices, to retain their own counsel (and the counsel of more experienced teachers', chosen by the novice teacher), to resist being forced (from above) to compete with each other in a marketplace, and to maintain a clear vision of what it is they wish to accomplish in the short and long term of their educational career. These will become stronger, more capable teachers whose professional longevity will make them more valuable to students. Setting a variety of types of goals can often help individuals toward clarity regarding what kinds of decisions they may plan for in their careers.

When someone enters a sports team, they are treated as an individual who is a member of a team. But individual skills are always based on where the beginner athlete's skills currently are: thus, *improvement* is one of the best markers of 'success' for young athletes and their coaches. This emphasis on improvement, or mastery of a task, may be termed 'task orientation'; it is based on a goal of attaining knowledge, skills, strategies, and values. On the other hand, an ego-oriented achievement motivation is based on how well the athlete does against objective markers of 'success': if this ego-oriented athlete succeeds, it marks superiority, measured in a competitive framework against others, not against the self. Similarly, when teachers are embedded in audit culture values, they are being driven into an ego-orientation framework; when they can see themselves as supportive of one another, for example in cooperative behaviours, they exhibit more of a task orientation.

In teaching and learning, an emphasis on ego-oriented achievement motivation is problematic primarily because it tends to dull intrinsic motivation (Duda & Nicholls, 1992). Intrinsic motivation, in athletes, students, and teachers alike, is likely the most important factor that will keep an individual engaged and involved. On the other hand, contrary to popular myth, ego orientation and strict competition dampens intrinsic motivation—especially in fairly novel situations. Guided goal setting may help novice and beginning teachers to become more efficacious and intrinsically motivated while

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[iii] Arguably, 'audit culture' benefits governments when individuals in that government align their interests with private firms. This shift from 'public servants' or representatives of electorates benefitting majorities of citizens (*summum bonum* principle) to public and private industries in cahoots with one another is another possible, but not certain, result of neoliberal thinking and action.

still seeing the big picture—done properly, goal setting not only plans a course of action, but it sustains inner incentive, confidence, and relationships.

Similarly, motivations, individual and team loyalty, and goals may vary widely among 'team' members. So, while 'team' goal setting can underscore group allegiance and bonding, individual goal setting can stoke the fires of independent engagement, and not simply produce docile, efficient workers, but rather creative, positive problem solvers.

Having the novice teacher work to set their own achievable goals enhances good practice. Creating an educational climate that provides assistance and recognition for the individual, flexibility, and encouragement contributes to both self-efficacy and intrinsic motivation. Though mentoring programmes can be an insidious trap of audit culture (and sometimes are suspected as such), senior, more experienced teachers may assist in guiding the beginning teacher to set personally appropriate and achievable goals. There are a few different kinds of goals, and these can more easily give the beginning teacher space to manoeuvre within a neoliberal, audit-driven culture. In the next brief section, I outline a few key types of goal setting that may work for teachers. With individual, focussed efforts, successful goal setting may also cement a stronger identity of self and self within the group for the individuals involved—resulting in higher intrinsic motivation and more group allegiance.

## Goal setting

There are many 'how-to' systems for goal setting. We know that business has borrowed from sport coaching—'successful' coaches as motivational speakers attest to the blurring of outcomes that lay people see produced from business and sport. But thinkers like John Wooden, former basketball coach at UCLA, have questioned some of the stereotypical, ego-oriented (now neoliberal, audit culture) ways of determining what 'success' and 'winning' really might mean.

Wooden redefined 'success' this way: It is "peace of mind attained only through self-satisfaction in knowing you made the effort to do the best of which you're capable" (Wooden, 2001). With that working definition of success in mind (particularly when we look at 'performance' goals), I'd like to discuss five different kinds of goals.

There are: cinch goals, training goals, mindset goals, dream goals, and performance goals (Rinehart, 1993). They naturally move from short-term, relatively easily achieved (e.g., 'survival') goals to longer-term, career-impacting goals. Each of these is slightly different, and each has strengths and weaknesses. Just as in the art of teaching, goal setting must be attuned to the individual's developmental stage, aspirations, previous experiences, and interests. But these goals are agreed-upon, individuated markers of 'success', not of 'winning'. They are also evaluated and monitored by the individual novice teacher, not by the educational system—or by representatives of that system. They are goals that, taken together, may build blocks of mastery for the beginning teacher.

*Cinch goals* are meant to be goals that are quickly and easily achievable. These might be goals where a person articulates something already learned, or slightly changes a lesson. A new primary teacher, for example, may apply the known structure of completed core subject lesson plans to a new physical education or music unit. These are goals that set up the learner positively, that give an incentive through a sense of accomplishment. Think of them as jump-starting the student or teacher—it provides incentive, an action plan, and a feeling of progress.

*Training goals* are those goals that, incrementally, challenge the beginning teacher. Often, a trusted senior-level teacher may assist in identifying weak points in a teacher's repertoire. A teacher may make it his/her goal to achieve a reasonable life/work balance: the training goal is to gradually take less work home in order to achieve his goal. Or they may make it their goal to have all students cooperate on group projects, and set a training goal of 70% of students demonstrating cooperative behaviours in such projects.[iv]

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[iv] While goal setting, it is important to know as exactly as possible what we mean by terms such as 'cooperative': how is that operationally defined? The key in this kind of goal setting is that the beginning teacher controls it; not the system.

*Mindset goals* are goals where the novice teacher "seeks out [their] weakest psychological points and attack[s] them" (Rinehart, 1993, p. 59). A novice teacher might want to deliver more content and less entertainment in a given lesson, or learn coping strategies for addressing large groups. A teacher may wish to work on their own sense of confidence in pedagogical practice within innovative learning environments.

*Dream goals* are slightly more challenging. These are the *what if?* kinds of goals. These are goals that we aspire to; those 'dream' goals that we hardly reveal to another living soul (that is why it is important that this type of goal setting is for and by the beginning teacher, with no 'audit' culture interference). Teachers may see as a dream goal developing an innovative new programme for students in middle school years that gets picked up and used by other schools. Teachers may aspire to a career path that exposes them to wide diversity in experiences that may lead to a deeper sense of long-term purpose. These goals need to be carefully and honestly thought through, so that, over a long period of time, they can be gradually achieved. In going for these goals, the beginning teacher should set out clearly stated markers of success. This goal is meant for novice teachers, to reinforce their high motivations and intrinsic reward systems that sustain their vision and values in stressful times.

*Performance goals* often can be confused with ego-orientation goals. But they are not the same: they are forms of ipsative assessment. These are goals where an individual gauges him/herself against previous self-bests; where self-defined markers of success are the performance, and achieving them is the inner-driven success. A beginning teacher may set as a performance goal engaging struggling, intransigent students with a project that really grabs them. To gauge 'success', this teacher may consider how many students completed a project, how much time were they 'engaged', and what was their affect during the project?

For each of these goals, it is important for the teacher to set incremental 'how to' indicators. How might an individual achieve their goal? To create that life/work balance, what kinds of behaviours would a beginning teacher have to model? How might s/he manage time more effectively? To see all students engaged in a lesson, might the teacher require more sleep, spend more time thinking (asking) about what fires up their students, find a quiet space in which to ponder? What degree of feedback is necessary, welcome, engaging?

Finally, when goals are achieved, how should one celebrate? Is it important to immediately set new goals? Well, yes, eventually. In life, learning and interest never end. But relishing our successes also helps us to realize the joy and pleasure of learning and personal growth.

When beginning teachers—with guidance—set goals for themselves, they begin to enjoy their careers. They demonstrate, through their own life, what 'success' can be: "peace of mind attained only through self-satisfaction in knowing you made the effort to do the best of which you're capable" (Wooden, 2001). They become more valued and more valuable as members of the school community. And, their strength and self-efficacy may make them mindful members of a professional core of teachers and educators who may resist and re-shape what appears to be an inevitable future for neoliberal policy shifts, and provoke contemporary education into an alternative future school system that is both efficient and humane. At the very least, if delivered in a mastery model—as opposed to a stereotypically individualistic, ego-oriented model—beginning teachers may become a cohort who begin to see through the cynical rhetorics of doublespeak neoliberalism and audit culture.

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