

Provider Insights:

Unconventional Spaces of Learning in New Zealand

A report for the Wayne Francis Charitable Trust

J Bruce,

A Schoone,

and T Martin

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Key points

- This report shares insights from phase two of a research project exploring unconventional spaces of learning (USL)[1] in New Zealand.
- During phase one, twenty-one USL were identified and explored in light of their theoretical foundations, key drivers and selected characteristics. Textual analysis was used to analyse data.
- Emerging trends indicate that while holistic, child centred approaches were prevalent there were also a growing number of sustainability focused USL, as well as adult directed individualised programmes, and 'one day schooling option' initiatives.
- During phase two, USL providers were invited to share their insights into current issues, challenges and opportunities facing the sector. Findings were analysed using thematic analysis.
- Findings indicate that there are similar issues facing providers. The findings are grouped together into the themes of collaboration, personnel, the nature of learners and learning, relationships with schools and MOE, access and funding, and increased demand.
- Participants shared their recommendations for further support and research. These included raising awareness of USL within New Zealand, increased funding support, and further research to measure impact of USL on children's development and learning.
- The findings are discussed in light of the overall research project, including phase one findings.

[1] We use the term Unconventional Spaces of Learning to denote the idea of not being conventional, and 'spaces of learning' rather than schools. 'Spaces' are more fluid and nuanced. 'Learning' is also more flexible than 'schooling' and 'formal education'. Further, while globally 'alternative education' is often used to refer to alternative forms of learning spaces, the term 'alternative education' is NZ relates specifically to a specific area of learning support provision for secondary school students.

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Introduction

"There is more talk about alternatives in the public domain. A lot of providers have started in the last decade and this indicates challenges within the mainstream." – provider perspective

Background and scope of the research

The purpose of this report is to share provider insights into the current issues, successes and challenges for unconventional spaces of learning (USL). During phase two of the research, providers (identified in phase one) were invited to professional conversations to explore current issues, challenges and opportunities of their work. Additionally, providers shared insights regarding future research and recommendations to strengthen the sector.

This research provides an exploration of USL for years 3 to 10 within New Zealand that provide for neurodiverse learners, and those for whom mainstream does not cater well. For those who identify as neurodiverse, there is an understanding that their brain is 'wired differently' and ways of being and doing require adaptation. As Skelling (2020) notes, "Neurodiversity is a term used to describe neurological differences in the human brain. From this perspective, the diverse spectrum of neurological difference is viewed as a range of natural variations in the human brain rather than as a deficit in an individual" (p.1). Given this difference, it is important to consider alternative spaces which allow for successful learning opportunities and an amplification of strengths. The following alternatives were not included in this research: homeschooling, unschooling, religious schools, state specialist schools, and kura kaupapa Māori. Each of these alternatives requires specific focus which is beyond the scope of this research.

Summary of phase one research

During phase one (Bruce, Martin & Schoone, 2023[2]) a literature review was undertaken that explored USL and alternative education meanings and conceptualisations nationally and internationally. An online search for USL was undertaken that included searches such as

[2] The full report is available on the Wayne Francis Charitable Trust website.

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‘alternative education’, ‘alternative schooling’, ‘one day schooling option’, ‘neurodiverse learning’, and ‘flexible learning’ within New Zealand. Sources were found via a general google search, social media platforms such as Facebook, library searches, and peer reviewed research database searches. Twenty-one USL were identified, and while this is not an exhaustive list, it does represent a comprehensive overview of USLs whose information was available at the time of writing this report. For each of the 21 USLs, a range of components were explored including, philosophical origins, key drivers, aims, delivery, access and funding.

Textual analysis was used to identify perceived trends that are emerging within the New Zealand context. In this phase two report we share a summary of phase one in order to provide context for the phase two study.

Of the 21 USL, one third (7) were one day schooling option providers. In most instances, these programmes were run during term time, they were nature based and guided by experiential or play based pedagogy. All 7 were privately funded.

The regional base of more than half of all USL was identified. It appeared that there was a strong, grass roots trend of ownership and connectedness across the regional USLs especially. While regionally specific however, there are philosophical foundations that have global understanding.

Seventeen USLs were identified as private or independently funded and as such equitable access to these provisions is an issue worthy of further exploration. In circumstances where the specific learning needs of an individual were more effectively met through participation in programmes offered by USLs, costs for many USL must be met by whānau.

There was a range of socially focused and individualised/personalised learning USLs. These reflected different key drivers and philosophical understandings of learning. Social learning requires meaningful interaction with others and can occur through collaborative, inquiry based, and creative problem-solving activities with others. Whereas, individual/personalised learning places emphasis on developing the individual through targeted, differentiated learning. Targeted USLs tended to also place emphasis on individual learning needs, and tended to be more adult directed.

The key driver for the majority of USL was a holistic philosophical approach to learning. Holistic learning activities ensure opportunities for whole person learning. The focus may also be toward one area of development. E.g., Holistic (nature based) or holistic (embodied/movement based). Approximately half of the holistic based USLs have a strong nature-based focus.

In summary, while historically the philosophical drivers of alternatives in education have tended to reflect holistic, child centred approaches and while these remain central to many USL, there were three emerging trends:

1. Alternatives linked to sustainability and the environment (Holistic-nature-based; Sustainability).
2. Alternatives that were targeted to recognise individual learning needs (Targeted Inclusive; Individual/personalised in focus)
3. One Day alternatives.

Questions emerging from phase one research

USL form part of New Zealand's unique education landscape. There are a number of questions that surround alternative provisions and these are outlined here.

1. What are unconventional spaces of learning?

   There is no universal acceptance, either in research or in governmental policy, of what exactly constitutes alternative approaches to education. Due to New Zealand's strong public education system, there is a lack of general awareness and acceptance of alternative approaches to education. The lack of visibility may create barriers for those parents and caregivers seeking alternative education pathways for their children because they do not know "what's out there." For the purpose of this research, we use the term Unconventional Spaces of Learning to denote the idea of not being conventional, and 'spaces of learning' rather than schools. 'Spaces' are more fluid and nuanced. 'Learning' is also more flexible than 'schooling' and 'formal education'. Further, while globally 'alternative education' is often used to refer to alternative forms of learning spaces, the term 'alternative education' is NZ relates specifically to a specific area of learning support provision for secondary school students.

2. What contribution do unconventional spaces of learning make to education provision?

Due to New Zealand's relatively non prescriptive national curriculum coupled with governance at a local school level, a range of bespoke schooling innovations are possible. Alternative approaches to education exist within the conventional system (Vaughan, 2004). We need to further consider the unique contributions USL make that are novel, and valuable.

3. Do these spaces provide quality education?

   Every parent and caregiver is concerned about the quality of provision, which includes the physical and emotional safety along with curriculum, learning and assessment approaches to promote human development across a range of factors. When USL depart from standardised approaches, what checks-and-balances are in place? Additionally, what access do staff have to quality professional learning opportunities? Few USL spaces provide comprehensive provision across all age ranges. How do children and young people experience transition from these USL into new spaces or learning, or employment? The propensity to romanticise alternatives in education should be met with critical appraisal.

4. How accessible are unconventional spaces of learning for marginalised communities?

   In many cases, USL has been developed by economically advantaged communities. While there is a lack of information regarding the diversity of the student population in New Zealand's current provision, we need to carefully consider how the fees required can be prohibitive for marginalised communities who may benefit from alternative approaches. In addition, we must be mindful of the extent of cultural capital (the child and family's experiences and cultural resources) required for the transition into a USL.

5. How can these spaces last?

   USL has a history of short-lived initiatives. In the US context, Tyak and Cuban (1995) ask, "Why have outsiders' attempts to reinvent schooling—break the mold strategies—generally being short lived shooting stars?" (p.5). While there are complex social, political, and economic factors at play, we suggest central to USL's sustainability is the continuity of stable governance, ownership of the vision beyond one person, and a robust business model. Historical legacy and wider infrastructure support, such as with Steiner and Montessori schools, helps facilitate sustainable provision. A key consideration for USL

providers is to appraise the extent of state funding it receives, or what it wishes to, and the trade-offs required in the process that may impact upon its novel approaches.

6. What is the place for hybrid alternatives?
   It is apparent that various hybrid models of education exist and will continue to appear. How then might alternative providers become more intentional about establishing connections or partnerships to further amplify learning outcomes? For those attending one day schooling options, how can learning triumphs and transformations achieved be integrated and valued by the school in which students are enrolled and attend for the majority of the week? How could connection between programmes be more successfully facilitated? In the instance that a student chooses to engage regularly in these spaces, how are learning successes consolidated?

7. What can we all learn from unconventional spaces of learning?
   USL are important counterpoints to conventional education and provide models for conventional schools that seek innovative change (McGregor & Mills, 2012; te Riele, 2007). History has shown, for example, that progressive ideals for education (such as child-centred learning, inquiry-based learning, democratic values) have been slowly co-opted by conventional schools. Perhaps USL help point us to where education is headed.

These questions provided insights that were explored further during phase two provider insight conversations.

Phase two research approach

Each provider that was identified within phase one was invited to a professional conversation to discuss their views of current practices and issues, opportunities and challenges. Additionally, providers were invited to share their recommendations regarding future support for those operating as USL.

Seven of 21 providers (30%) that were approached accepted the invitation to a professional conversation. The conversations took place online for approximately one hour during September 2023. Participants were provided with a copy of the phase one report prior to the conversation. Participants responses are anonymised.

Of those interviewed, four were founding directors of organisations and three were managers. With the exception of one provider, all were relatively newly formed (within the last decade).

Questions guiding the conversations were:

1. What are your initial reflections of the USL report?
2. Do you see your organisation as a USL provider?
3. What do you see as the benefits, issues and challenges of USL?
4. What areas of future research would be helpful?
5. What other actions might be helpful to support the sector?

Interviews were analysed through a qualitative, thematic approach. The emerging themes are presented in the following section, along with recommendations.

Findings, including recommendations

Findings indicate that there are similar issues facing providers. The findings are grouped together into the themes of collaboration, personnel, the nature of learners and learning, relationships with schools and MOE, access and funding and increased demand. Participants shared their recommendations for further support and research. These included raising awareness of USL within New Zealand, increased funding support, and further research to measure impact of USL on children's development and learning. The findings are discussed in light of the overall research project, including phase one findings.

The value of collaboration and shared identity

Collaboration between providers was discussed by all participants in the research. There was a range of collaborative experiences shared, and many place high value on being able to network together in supportive ways. As one participant notes, "we are connected, but not supported. Having the report [phase one] is a big start for something that can grow a lot, in terms of putting all the providers together to have a shared voice". Some commented on the value of the USL report noting

> *The report highlighted the diversity of the sector and also what else is available. It's been really helpful to know what else is out there. We have recently begun*

> *talking to other providers in a collaborative way. Because everyone has their own focus and space, then the competitive element isn't there.*

Some participants shared that even though their USL provision was similar to other organisations, they are working in insolation. The idea of networking and collaboration was understood to be important, but sometimes challenging. Challenges included time constraints, reluctance due to competition, and sometimes a lack of relevance/relatability with other providers. As one participant explains

> *Some people are wanting to protect their IP and less keen to collaborate. But we need more collaboration, more support from leaders in the field. It would be great to talk to people, share problems and challenges because they are so immense.*

Creating a shared sense of connectedness and identity was noted by many of the participants. Part of this identity could be in language used to describe the sector. For example, many of the participants welcomed the term 'Unconventional Spaces of Learning', as opposed to Alternative Education, which one participant noted "has connotations in New Zealand". She went on to say that "we are proud to be unconventional; as are those we work with".

Nature of learners

Many of the learners accessing USL are neurodiverse. Having a strengths-based approach was foundational across all participating providers. Programmes were designed in ways that focused on capability and talents rather than adopting a medical model. As one participant notes

> *Neurodiverse children are highly intuitive and talented and they are a gift to our society. If we try and normalise them, then we are losing something really important in this world. They have gifts that you cannot see in a conventional classroom because we do not create learning spaces to foster their talents.*

Many participants interviewed in this study indicated that they recognise there is a strong link between learning outdoors and social emotional learning (SEL) for neurodiverse learners and this link is a key to successful development. As one participant notes "when the children attend they are amazing and the way they are at [one day schooling option] is so different – the environment suits their needs". Another agrees "the environment is the maker or breaker – it is not the children – it is the environment!" For five of the seven providers who took part in this study, this combined focus of nature based and SEL was a key component of their programmes. One of the seven

providers only offered online learning in a small number of curriculum areas, and all of the other providers had a strong emphasis on SEL.

There was a wide range of reasons that children were attending USL. This was especially true for the online provider. She shares

> *we have many children who are unwell; those who require low stimulus environments; children attending because their parents do not want values taught in school; lifestyle reasons; parents wanting more academic rigour; and covid disruption meant that some parents wanted more structure and routine.*

Some providers have needed to change their processes to accommodate more adequately for the needs of some children. For example, one participant explains "some parents haven't disclosed everything so I find the interview process is better than a form filled out. Some parents seem quite desperate with their children struggling every day at school."

Nature of learning

USL provider numbers have increased in recent times. Participants speculated a number of reasons for this including parental demand as a result of covid pressures, and a growing number of children with neurodiverse needs not met within conventional schooling. A number of providers were one day schooling option providers that began as holiday programmes, and grew over time.

The focus on learning outdoors was a huge motivator for many. One nature-based provider wonders "maybe this is because it used to happen naturally…the kiwi way of playing in the outdoors with freedom". One participant shares "I noticed that not many people got outdoors, especially with children. We have amazing, mostly free spaces and I wanted more people to enjoy these spaces". The value of play based learning in primary schools "is not really understood and is undervalued, and there is a huge jump from preschool to school".

Another key area of learning that was highlighted by many participants was the emphasis that USL have on social and emotional learning (SEL). Participants were very passionate about the value of this curriculum focus and suggested that it would be great if schools could do more of this. As one participant notes, aside from the Health and Physical Education Learning Area, there is little else in the *New Zealand Curriculum* (Ministry of Education, 2007) that focus on SEL, except

the front end “but less attention appears to be given to this by schools”. One of the providers shared their curriculum focus which was on the development of universal life skills, play and project-based learning, and SEL. Almost all other providers had a similar focus, with the exception of an online provider. The online provider had a focus on Maths, English, The Arts and Science.

Connecting SEL with nature-based learning was a key focus for a number of providers. As one participant shares

> *I wanted children to feel completely safe and to be able to explore who they are; to try; to be curious in a safe space. At the heart of learning, is how we connect to the natural world and being safe with each other and safe to explore, we encourage children how to be with each other and with the land. Just to be really curious enough to sense what is going on around them.*

Likewise, another participant shares the way in which “nature is a teacher…being in nature is a tool to self-regulate, and through nature students are working on team work, communication skills, critical thinking, maths, science and social and emotional skills…SEL is HUGE through nature-based learning”.

Personnel challenges

Founders had quite similar experiences and discussed challenges that were “immense”. One participant notes

> *Our growth was really fast and I needed support. It’s such a new space and it would be great to talk to others. I would love more support and be able to learn from others in a collaborative way.*

Founders shared similar stories of starting small with a passion for learning and seeing children thriving in learning contexts that were unconventional. All founders shared the challenges they experienced as they needed to quickly learn about business – often building while operating. Two participants shared that they would love some business mentoring for support and knowledge around creating efficiencies. Another participant shares her concerns around burn out in the sector for USL founders and managers. She reflects “I’ve been hitting hurdle after hurdle after hurdle and it requires a lot of energy. How do we make sure that educators are being supported, and so they won’t burn out? We need a lot more support.”

Founders all had articulate philosophical approaches to learning. An example of this was one participant who shares her belief that

> *when children are young the idea that when they spend time in the outdoors, they will grow a love for this. Conversely, nature education that does not involve a lot of time outdoors, they may grow an interest in something learned, but their love for the outdoors doesn't grow.*

Regarding teachers employed in USL, many participants commented on the need for untraining and retraining. In fact, some mentioned that it is often easier to employ untrained teachers. As one participant explains "teachers teach in a certain way – they are too teacher directed. They are needing to unlearn and need to become more facilitative". Another participant shares

> *it is a challenge to find staff that work well with the philosophy. Sometimes it is better to have untrained teachers. It is better to work with those who are passionate about the outdoors and about children. It is hard to undo teacher control – they want to control the play and the rhythm of the day. Is it safer for the adults but restricts freedom for kids.*

As one founding director indicates "for staff, they need to be 100% present – not task, not multitask – be absolutely present. This allows for conversations, allows space for empathetic listening. It is intentional and purposeful". She explained the ways in which being in relationship is the work, not the tasks and not trying to multitask. When staff shift their attention to too many tasks, they lose the connection and interpersonal relationship opportunities.

Relationships with schools and MOE

Relationships with schools varied significantly. For some providers, the schools are not involved at all, and for others they are delivering programmes within schools. One participant notes "schools vary in their understanding of one day schooling options and the value added. There does seem to be some confusion around attendance and also policy around safety."

Two providers who were previously traditional one day schooling option providers, now deliver their programmes in schools. One participant explains "our missing piece is the flow back to schools – so we don't take students out of school now, we are trying to push in. We are working with schools now."

Another participant shares that with one day schooling options

> *what is often missing is the flow back in to schools, so the students go back to a harmful environment. Parents and school relationships become frayed. Generally, schools become frustrated about students missing class to attend [one day schooling option]. Teachers just don't really know what they don't know. They are not supported, or taught about working with [neurodiverse] children.*

Two providers now offer training for teachers in school to teach them about the philosophy and to create in school one day schooling options for children selected by the school. One participant explains "teachers in schools struggle to understand the [nature based, SEL, play based] philosophy. It can work but kids need time to learn how to play and how to create. They are not used to this way of learning. In ECE they do." The providers work in partnership on the delivery of the programme. It is hoped that schools will be able to learn different approaches to teaching and learning and sustain these after the providers are no longer in the schools. One of the providers recalls

> *students came and were so connected to the bell, they had to ask to eat; they didn't know how to play; they didn't know how to imitate play; they didn't know when to take their jersey off, or put a coat on. They had lost self-efficacy.*

The philosophical differences became obvious through this in school approach. While proving successful there are a few challenges, and not yet any research on the impact. A key challenge is the cost to the school to release a teacher half a day a week. Some schools are using SENCOs and RTLBs. Encouragingly, some schools have implemented the within school programme themselves and there is now more active, outdoors activities happening. Teachers are asking 'how can I teach in a different way?'

Regarding relationships with providers, the Ministry of Education (MOE) does not typically have any direct involvement. A small number of the providers indicated that they preferred to operate "under the radar" and were wary of increased engagement and involved by MOE in their programmes. Across some providers, on participant explains "there are lots of different political agendas coming from the government and this creates fear. We all fly under the radar…we don't advertise widely because we are trying not to attract political attention."

Increased demand for access

Many providers cannot keep up with demand and some indicated they have wait lists. “There is more talk about alternatives in the public domain” and one of the participants explains “a lot of providers have started in the last decade and this indicates challenges within the mainstream.”

During and following Covid all providers noticed an increase in demand for access to programmes and in some contexts the student numbers increased significantly. Prior to Covid, one participant explains “children would have been ok in the systems, and Covid has derailed this – there is a decreased resilience and self-management skills and mostly the erosion of confidence. Parents are stressed too.”

Another participant shares that “demand is high, and it is through word of mouth. We’re in a known circle and there is growing interest. We have 25-30% known neurodiverse, in reality it is likely to be higher. We have capped our ratio in one day. The remainder are on a wait list.”

Many of the participants attributed a lack of adequate and appropriate service provision for children (especially those who are neurodiverse) within conventional school settings.

Access and funding

Every participant mentioned the barrier of funding and cost for many parents seeking to access programmes. The day rate varies for one day schooling options (approx $70-90/day), and participants all shared how this is a barrier for many. Another participant estimates that the actual cost for operation is $160/day and she has worked hard to try and build a sustainable model with philanthropic support.

Recommendations

When asked what might be useful in terms of philanthropic support for the sector, participants shared a number of key ideas including raising awareness of USL within New Zealand, increased funding support, and further research to measure impact of USL on children’s development and learning.

Areas of support

Most participants indicated that they would like to see increased awareness of USL across New Zealand. In fact, one participant shared that one of their greatest challenges is that people don't know they exist; or the perception of what they offer doesn't match the reality. Another participant shares "sharing this research is a great way to bring awareness that the school system is not working."

Another issue of awareness is knowing what funding is available for parents who are unable to afford the USL fees. Student scholarship funding is really helpful for children who need this. Other participants were aware of support being offered to the sector through a collaborative, systems change approach.

Further research areas

Returning to the phase one question of quality provision in USLs, participants suggested that research to measure impact and value would be helpful to the sector. As one participant notes "how do we measure the benefits, because we know the benefits are there? We need research to show this works. This is beneficial."

This was especially true for one day schooling option providers who at times experience push back from teachers who do not want children 'missing school' to attend. Research that measures the impact of attending one day schooling options would help to determine the values of this form of USL. Following a cohort prior to attendance, during and following may provide insights as to the effectiveness of the programme.

Other ideas were shared "more research like this project and presenting it to MOE saying, 'this need is here, why aren't you addressing this?' Research can highlight what is working in USL and why it is working."

One provider offered their USL as a site for further research. The focus of their work is now in school delivery of a USL nature-based programme.

Conclusion

Rather than existing as a counterpoint to conventional schooling, USL meets a legitimate need, provides an essential service, and illuminates areas of convention that require an 'undoing'.

Findings indicate that there are similar issues facing providers. Themes of collaboration, personnel, the nature of learners and learning, relationships with schools and MOE, access and funding, and increased demand were all shared in the findings section. All providers indicated that collaboration was highly valued with others working in the USL space. Some indicated that they had experienced isolation and that networking and collaboration would provide the opportunity for shared learning together. This was especially true for founders, managers and directors who were especially keen to learn and share together with others facing similar issues and challenges.

Regarding personnel, another issue shared was that of staff training. In many cases providers preferred working with untrained teachers or when working with trained teachers, they were aware of the need to support teachers to unlearn practices that provided barriers to effective USL pedagogy and learning.

It is perhaps not surprising that there is increased demand for USL services, and this appears to be more so post Covid. There are range of complex issues shaping demand and this is an area requiring further research (Rudge, 2021).

It appears that USL providers are likely to have a great deal to offer to other educators and to conventional schooling practices, in regards to effective teaching and learning, especially for neurodiverse learners. Early anecdotal evidence of this may be seen from the one-day providers now working in conventional schools. Further research in this particular area would be useful to understand this further.

Participants recommended that further work be undertaken to raise awareness of USL within New Zealand. Participants shared that there is a need for increased funding support to provide quality services to meet the growing demand. Finally, it was recommended by participants that further research be undertaken to measure impact of USL on children's development and learning.

The interconnections between conventional schooling and unconventional spaces of learning are worthy of further investigation, especially with a growth in demand to alternative pathways. Kaftl (2013) maintains that alternative learning spaces incorporate “many kinds of connection and disconnection, sometimes simultaneously, with several ‘mainstreams’” (p. 90). These multiple forms of connection and disconnection, Kraft calls dis/connection, a “combination of modes of engagement and separation that must be carefully managed…” (p. 90). Day school USLs are sites where the connection/disconnection is most visible as children participate in both conventional schools and USL. On the one hand, a participant spoke of the “missing piece” as being “the flow back to schools”, while another provider found a solution by offering training with schools for teachers on the philosophy of the one-day USL, through modelling of practice.

In essence we might ask, is the balance right between connection and disconnection? What is clear, is that there are strong connections between founder philosophy and provider practices and USL and parents/whānau aspirations. Furthermore, the disconnection from conventional pedagogy has, in many cases, enabled a greater focus on SEL and nature-based learning, that anecdotally meets the needs of neurodiverse learners. The disconnection, however, has created dilemmas with funding, and general awareness of USL in the public domain, with a strong ‘value add’ message. What is desired is greater connection between:

- USL
- USL and research
- USL and schools
- USL and the public (and including the philanthropic sector).

A key challenge for USL is to be widely understood as a critical part of education provision within NZ. Rather than existing as a counterpoint to conventional schooling, USL meets a legitimate need, provides an essential service, and illuminates areas of convention that require an ‘undoing’. There is a need to explore further and continue to negotiate the connections and disconnections between USL and conventional schooling in ways that do not isolate or minimise the valuable work of USL provision.

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