Measuring the impact of one day schooling options on children's development and learning: Classroom teacher and parent insights

Unconventional Spaces of Learning in Aotearoa, New Zealand



A report for the Wayne Francis Charitable Trust

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Key points

This report shares insights from phase three of a research project exploring Unconventional Spaces of Learning (USL) in Aotearoa, New Zealand (NZ).

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' in NZ relates to a specific area of learning support provision for secondary school students. There are many variations of USL and this phase three report focuses on One Day School options (ODS) as a USL approach. We use the term interchangeably in this report.

During phase one, twenty-one USLs were identified and explored in light of their theoretical foundations, key drivers, and selected characteristics. The data was analysed using textual analysis. Emerging trends indicate that while holistic, child-centred approaches were prevalent, there was also a growing number of sustainability-focused USLs, adult-directed individualised programmes and ‘one-day schooling (ODS) option' initiatives.

During phase two, USL providers were invited to share their insights into the sector's current issues, challenges and opportunities. Findings were analysed using thematic analysis. Findings indicate that providers face similar issues. These have been grouped into the following themes: collaboration, personnel, the nature of learners and learning, relationships with schools and Ministry of Education (MOE), access and funding, and increased demand. Participants shared their recommendations for further support and research. These included raising awareness of USL within NZ, increased funding support, and additional research to measure the impact of USL on children's development and learning. This latter idea of measuring impact became the focus of phase three.

During phase three, parents, hapū and classroom teachers were invited to share their insights on the benefits of students attending a range of outdoor USL programmes. Findings were analysed using a cross-case study thematic analysis. There were similar themes among the teachers who were interviewed, likewise for parents of neurodiverse children. One hapū offered their perspective, too. The findings are grouped into the following themes: academic challenges, physical and hands-on learning strengths, socio-emotional learning (SEL) tendencies, the positive impact of USL, communication, and ways to integrate USL ideas into schools. Some participants shared recommendations for providers. Of significance, both teachers, parents and hapū in all of the case studies agreed that USL's in-school

programming would remove many significant barriers to inclusion. Many suggested it would take a long-term commitment and resources to facilitate such a beneficial change.

The findings are discussed in light of the overall research project, including findings from phases one and two. USL has been explored through three phases of research supported by the Wayne Francis Charitable Trust. 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 noted, "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 ODS option providers who sometimes experienced pushback from teachers who do not want children 'missing school' to attend. Research that measures the impact of attending ODS options would help determine the value of this form of USL. This rationale is further supported by the follow-up conversations held with sector advisors after the release of the phase two report.

Introduction

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*"**This programme is a real lifeline**. It's amazing, really, just to be outside of the classroom, not having to be sitting down and tending to specific things or dealing with all other people. I plan to have him attend this programme at least one day a week for his whole schooling life."*

- Parent Perspective

Background and scope of the research

This phase three report presents user stories from families, hapū and classroom teachers of children attending USL programmes across NZ. During phase three, providers who were identified in phase two, and newly engaged providers were invited to participate in the research. An invitation was extended to families, hapū and classroom teachers of students involved in ODS USL programmes. Furthermore, families, hapū and classroom teachers contributed valuable insights and suggestions to guide future research and enhance the sector's development.

As noted in the following section, this report builds upon previous research exploring USL specifically for neurodiverse children. 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). Neurodiversity often requires changes in the environment and approaches to learning. It is estimated that 1 in 5 New Zealanders identify as neurodiverse. This umbrella term encompasses a range of brain differences, including dyslexia, dyspraxia, dyscalculia, attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), autism, processing disorders, and giftedness. Many neurodiverse individuals receive multiple diagnoses, highlighting how these overlap and intertwine. Recognising these differences highlights the importance of creating USLs that not only offer meaningful experiences but also an opportunity to amplify their individual strengths.

Summary of phase one research

During phase one, Bruce et al., (2023) conducted a literature review to explore the meanings and conceptualisations of USL nationally and internationally. The review included searches on terms such as 'alternative education,' 'one-day schooling options,' 'neurodiverse learning,' and 'flexible learning' within NZ, using sources from Google, social media, libraries, and peer-reviewed databases. Twenty-one USLs were identified, representing an overview. Analysis revealed emerging trends, including the prevalence of ODS providers, which comprised one-third of the USLs. These programmes, often nature-based and

experiential, are operated privately during term time. Additionally, most USLs appeared to have a strong grassroots trend of ownership and connectedness. While regionally specific, they each had philosophical foundations grounded in a global understanding.

Funding emerged as a significant issue, with 17 USLs identified as privately funded. This placed financial burdens on families and raised concerns about equitable access for all. Philosophically, USLs displayed a range of approaches, from socially focused, collaborative learning models to individualised, targeted instruction. While social learning emphasised inquiry and creative collaboration, personalised approaches prioritised tailored, differentiated learning experiences. A holistic approach to education was the dominant driver across most USLs, with nearly half integrating nature-based practices into their frameworks, supporting whole-person development through experiential and embodied (movement, physical) activities.

Questions emerging from phase one research

USL forms part of New Zealand's unique education landscape. Several questions surround alternative provisions, which are outlined here.

1. What are USLs?

USL lacks a universally accepted definition in research or policy, and their visibility in NZ remains limited due to the dominance of the public education system. The term emphasises fluid and flexible 'spaces of learning' rather than rigid school structures, acknowledging diverse, more nuanced approaches outside traditional schooling. While globally referred to as 'alternative education,' in NZ, this term applies explicitly to secondary school support provisions.

2. What contribution do USLs make to education provision?

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

3. Do these spaces provide quality education?

Questions arise about USL's quality, safety (physical and emotional) and curriculum standards significantly as they diverge from standardised approaches. Concerns include staff access to professional development, transitional support for students moving into other educational or employment spaces, and the need for critical evaluation to avoid romanticising these alternatives.

4. How accessible are USLs for marginalised communities?

USL often originates from economically privileged communities, and fees and cultural capital (the child

and family's experiences and cultural resources) pose barriers for marginalised groups. Greater attention is needed to ensure equitable access and address financial and cultural obstacles that may prevent wider involvement in these spaces.

5. How can these spaces last?

USL frequently faces sustainability challenges, often struggling with governance, reliance on key individuals, and financial stability. Long-term success may depend on robust business models, a shared vision, and infrastructure support—something more akin to established systems like Steiner and Montessori schools.

6. What is the place for hybrid alternatives?

Hybrid models, such as ODS options, are becoming more mainstream, raising questions about how to strengthen connections with traditional schools. Better integration of learning and stronger collaboration between programmes could enhance the effectiveness of these hybrid options.

7. What can we all learn from USLs?

USL is a valuable contribution to traditional education, often pioneering innovative practices such as child-centred and inquiry-based learning. These spaces not only model alternative approaches but also offer potential new waves in the future of education.

Phase three sought to explore questions two, three, four, and six listed above. Specifically, we were interested in understanding the overall development and learning of neurodiverse children who attend an ODS to determine the value of this form of USL. We also sought to explore how these USL programmes differ from traditional classroom environments.

Summary of phase two research

During phase two, USL providers identified within phase one were invited to a professional conversation to discuss their views of current practices, issues, opportunities, and challenges. Seven of 21 providers (30%) accepted the invitation. The findings were analysed using thematic analysis. The findings indicate that providers face similar issues. The findings are grouped into seven themes.

The value of collaboration and shared identity

USL providers value collaboration but face challenges like time constraints, competition, and isolation. The phase one report helped highlight what options are currently out there and the sector's diversity. While some providers are beginning to network, others remain hesitant. Time constraints, concerns about protecting intellectual property, and a perceived lack of alignment with other providers' goals were barriers to collaboration. Providers iterated the need for more substantial support, shared problem-solving, and collaborative spaces, with many preferring the term 'Unconventional Spaces of Learning' over 'Alternative Education' due to its positive wording.

Nature of learners

USL providers prioritise a strengths-based approach, focusing on learners' capabilities and talents rather than a medical model, especially for neurodiverse children. Many highlighted the strong connection between outdoor environments, social-emotional learning (SEL), and successful development, with nature-based settings playing a crucial role in meeting learners' needs.

Learners access USL for diverse reasons, including health challenges, sensory needs, parental values and academic preferences. Providers often adapt their processes, such as favouring interviews over forms, to better understand and support each child's unique needs.

Nature of learning

The number of USL providers has grown recently, driven by increased parental demand following COVID-19 pressures and a rise in unmet neurodiverse needs in conventional schooling. Many one-day schooling options evolved from holiday programmes, with outdoor and play-based learning as key motivators. Participants highlighted the importance of reconnecting children with nature and addressing the undervaluation of play-based learning in primary education.

SEL emerged as a central focus for most providers, often integrated with nature-based experiences. Providers emphasised the role of nature in fostering safety, curiosity, teamwork, and self-regulation. While one online provider focused on core academic subjects, most others prioritised SEL, play, and project-based learning, viewing these as essential for holistic child development.

Personnel challenges

USL founders shared similar experiences. They often started with a passion for USL and faced immense challenges, including rapid growth and a steep learning curve in business operations. Many expressed a need for mentoring, collaboration, and support to prevent burnout. Concerns were raised about the sustainability of leaders' energy and the importance of building systems for long-term support and efficiency.

The founders emphasised the importance of philosophical alignment among staff, noting the challenges of retraining traditionally trained teachers. Many struggled to adopt a facilitative child-led approach. Some preferred hiring untrained but passionate individuals who aligned with the USL vision. Staff were encouraged to be fully present, encouraging intentional relationships with learners rather than focusing on multitasking or rigid control, as this presence was seen as central to meaningful learning opportunities.

Relationships with schools and MOE

Relationships between USL providers and schools varied widely. While some providers operated independently, others delivered programmes within schools, aiming to integrate their approaches into

the traditional system. Challenges included schools' lack of understanding of ODS options, attendance policies, and the philosophy behind nature-based and SEL. Some providers focused on teacher training to bridge these gaps, helping schools adopt play-based and child-led approaches. However, philosophical differences, costs, and the need for sustained commitment remain.

Providers also highlighted a cautious relationship with the MOE, with some preferring to operate “under the radar” to avoid political interference. Despite these complexities, there are promising examples of schools successfully integrating USL principles, leading to more outdoor activities and innovative teaching practices. Teachers are beginning to question traditional methods and explore new approaches to support diverse learning needs.

Increased demand for access

Demand for USL programmes has increased tenfold, with many providers unable to meet needs and maintaining waitlists. Increased awareness and growing interest, especially post-Covid, highlight gaps in traditional schooling. Providers observed declining resilience, self-management, and confidence among children. Likewise, seeing parental stress rising. Word-of-mouth drives demand, and neurodiverse learners make up many attendees. Limited capacity and capped student ratios further limited access. The mainstream system's inability to adequately support diverse needs remains a key concern.

Access and funding

Funding and cost remain significant barriers for many families accessing USL programmes. Day rates are often below operational costs, requiring providers to seek philanthropic support for sustainability.

Recommendations

When asked what might be helpful in terms of philanthropic support for the sector, participants shared 1) increased funding support, 2) raising awareness of USL within New Zealand, and 3) further research on the impact of USL on children’s development and learning.

Phase three research approach

The purpose was to understand how ODS options impacted student learning and development in various contexts (home, school, and hapū where appropriate) outside and within primary school settings. Providers were invited to take part in the research by extending an invitation to families, hapū and classroom teachers as the overall aim of this phase three research was twofold:

1. To inquire with families, hapū and classroom teachers of students attending ODS about the benefits to the students.
2. To explore ODS options that are offered within some primary schools.

Providers involved in Phases 1 and 2 of the research were first invited to identify parents and classroom teachers who might wish to participate in this phase. These providers were familiar with the research and its potential implications. Of the five providers approached, two accepted the invitation. Through established networks such as Little Kiwis Nature Play and the Outdoor Classroom Directory other potential participants were found. These networks offered six additional providers. Katie talked with each provider to explain the research aims and invited them to recommend parents and classroom teachers for participation. Four of these six new providers expressed immediate interest and were able to identify families willing to contribute at short notice.

Before agreeing to participate, all participants received a comprehensive information sheet detailing the research process. This included the aims of the research, links to previous reports, participant selection criteria, interview format, timeline, questions, privacy and confidentiality measures, and the voluntary nature of participation. Participants were free to withdraw at any stage.

Eleven one-on-one interviews with parents, classroom teachers, and a hapū representative took place in November and early December 2024 across five locations in New Zealand. Of these, 45% opted for in-person interviews, while the remaining discussions were conducted via Google Meet or Zoom, chosen for their accessibility. Participants were invited to respond to four primary questions and, if willing, engage in extended discussions with additional subsidiary questions.

Questions for Parents/Hapū	Questions for Classroom Teachers
Tell us about your child.	Tell us about this child in this classroom environment - what are your insights about how this child learns?
What do you see are the specific benefits of your child attending this ODS? Can they get these benefits anywhere else?	Do you think this child attending this ODS, out-of-school, is a worthy addition to this child's overall learning and development? Why?
Are there any challenges or issues with your child attending this one-day school? If so, what are they?	What challenges/ issues do you, as a classroom Teacher, face regarding this child's attendance at this ODS?
Could this programme be included in the school system? Why or why not?	Could this programme be included in the school system? How could this work?

The interviews were analysed using a thematic qualitative approach, with the emerging themes presented in the cross-analysis section of this report. These themes follow after a brief overview of each

USL setting across five locations in NZ. The following five case studies provide an essential context for understanding each child's development and learning environment before analysis.

All case study information has been anonymised to protect participant identities. Each USL setting is assigned a numerical code corresponding to the child featured in the study.

Each case study includes:

1. A brief description of the USL environment
2. An outline of the child, including key observations from the parent
3. Insights from the classroom teacher regarding the child's progress

Five case studies across Aotearoa, New Zealand

Case study 1: A coastal town

The independent provider operates a Wednesday programme for children aged 5–12 years from 9:00 am to 3:00 pm. The lead facilitator selects each session's outdoor location based on the weather forecast. Locations vary and may include an estuary, a beach or a forest setting (up to a 30-minute drive each way). The day begins with a brief introduction, where children are encouraged to discuss and consider four key elements: weather, equipment, time, and the day's plan. Following this, children transition into free play activities, with the three female facilitators providing support as needed. The group gathers for a short breathing exercise at lunchtime before enjoying their kai. Free play resumes after lunch, concluding with an end-of-day group meeting where children reflect on their highs and lows of the day. Activities at beach or estuary locations often include boogie boarding, rowing, making fairy potions, tree climbing, or swimming. The programme maintains a consistent staff presence throughout the day, ensuring safety and support.

Child 1 is a 6.5-year-old boy of Māori and Australian Aboriginal descent who is currently in foster care. He has been in this placement with his foster parents for nearly one year. Child 1 has experienced severe trauma, including domestic violence and physical abuse, which initially manifested in significant behavioural challenges such as absconding, violent language, and difficulty settling. His foster parent described the early days, "Child 1 was a whirlwind on their arrival. Child 1 could not focus on a task for no more than probably 30 seconds."

Over the first few months, the foster parents invested tremendous effort into creating structure through clear boundaries and expectations. One foster parent (who is also a primary school teacher) implemented a traffic light system to support behavioural understanding. He explained, "We think it's a

really simple and easy way to talk about the behaviour for them to understand. This term, we've had green weeks, completely green weeks from both children except for a few oranges here and there. So yeah, both of them, their behaviours changed heaps. It is very different from the start of the year—a different child."

The foster family's strong values of respect, kindness, and unconditional love have been central to Child 1's progress. They ensure the children understand that "whatever their behaviour, if they make mistakes, we still love them. And I think that was quite a big thing for Child 1."

With a roll of 600 students, **the school** is trauma-informed. This school-wide approach means that they take the approach to see what has happened to a child and their family rather than focusing on what is wrong with a child. Child 1 is in a New Entrant (NE) classroom of 16 students, where the teaching focus is on play-based learning and assessing each child's readiness to learn using the Ready to Learn Framework and the Perceptual Motor Program (PMP). The Ready to Learn Framework evaluates key developmental areas, including speaking, concepts of print, hearing, seeing, and fine/gross motor skills. At the same time, the PMP programme strengthens physical motor skills to establish strong foundations for early learning success.

Despite showing no significant behavioural concerns in daycare the previous year, Child 1 began displaying physical and vocally aggressive behaviour within weeks of starting school in Term 1. A serious behavioural incident resulted in Child 1 being stood down and receiving additional educational support and funding. Initially, this included the provision of a teacher aide and access to a quieter unit within the school grounds that offset time in his NE classroom.

In Term 2, the USL provider was introduced as part of Child 1's intervention plan, followed by Gymnastics and Horse Riding in Term 3. These opportunities were provided free of charge by Oranga Tamariki to address his behavioural and sensory needs and, in time, his learning needs. In Term 4, Child 1 was diagnosed with ADHD and began medication, which, alongside the combined interventions, has had a significant positive impact on his behaviour and ability to engage more and more in his NE classroom activities.

Case study 2: A coastal town

The innovative outdoor classroom programme operates during school hours and is led by a male Classroom Release Teacher (CRT). Sessions are held on the school field, where the CRT sets up a 10-meter diameter tarp supported by 5–6 poles. Beneath the tarp is a fire pit, large plastic seats repurposed from sea buoys, and a table stocked with carpentry tools. The CRT works with each classroom for up to two hours per week, twice a week. On arrival, students sit on the buoy seats and begin with a bingo game centred on a topic of interest (e.g. Te Tiriti o Waitangi). This is followed by a short introduction outlining the session. Students then transition into hands-on activities, including carving items

(boomerangs, spatulas, or hairpins) using small knives, preparing kindling for a fire, or cooking fried bread or sausages over small fire pits. Throughout the session, students spread out—often forming small groups—to focus on their self-chosen projects while the CRT supervises the entire class independently, providing individual support as needed.

Child 2 is a 10-year-old boy with a Jewish and Israeli father and a Pākehā mother. In his early years, he lived in an eco-village, residing in a house bus surrounded by other families. His parents reflected on this time, saying, "He spent most of his early years outside, in the garden, and eating dirt."

Two years ago, the family relocated to their current home, which is still semi-rural, about 10 minutes by car from school, where they now live in a yurt. Today, his parents describe Child 2's routines, sharing, "Child 2 spends a lot of time inside, listening to stories, screen time or maybe outside doing stuff, and loves crafty type things, so he'll be listening to a story and doing his craft." Despite this shift, the family maintains a strong connection to the environment, with a clear value placed on "having a relationship with the environment where we are."

Child 2 did not start school until the age of six. Reflecting on this decision, his parent shared, "We were thinking maybe he'd be homeschooled, and at some point, my partner was like, no, he should go to school. And we made the decision."

Enrolling Child 2 in school was a deeply considered and conscious choice for his family, reflecting their belief in the importance of cultural and community connections in education. His parents said, "I think that's an amazing opportunity for us and for him to be in that environment."

With 75 students, **the school** offers a unique educational approach. Its increasing emphasis on Te Reo Māori aims to integrate it into 80% of the curriculum. The school's philosophy is rooted in Manaakitanga, which emphasises care for oneself, others, the environment, and property.

Child 2 is part of a Year 4–6 class with 20 students (ages 9–11). The daily structure is divided into three focused blocks. The first block prioritises Mathematics, followed by a second block that includes swimming and reading. The final block is dedicated to the kaupapa (theme) of the term—for example, this term's focus was on Te Tiriti o Waitangi and how current government decisions may impact it.

While Child 2 shows strengths in some parts of the curriculum, literacy remains challenging, with signs suggesting possible dyslexic tendencies.

Case study 3: A city

The independent Thursday programme runs weekly for 5–12-year-olds from 9:00 am to 3:00 pm. Sessions are held at a community hall surrounded by a large outdoor grassy area, a pine grove, and regenerating bush, all within walking distance of an orchard and the sea. The programme hosts around

11 children weekly, facilitated by two female adults. Each day begins with a morning hui (meeting), where the group discusses the day's focus (e.g. kindness) and sets an intention for observation and sharing at the end of the day. The day then transitions into free-play activities, with occasional adult-led focus sessions. Children are encouraged to explore independently and engage with the environment. On one particular day, children are guided to gather gorse as a firelighter, followed by a facilitator-led session on fire-building techniques. Once the fire was lit, children gathered to eat lunch and enjoyed s'mores cooked over the flames. The day concludes with an end-of-day hui, where children reflect on their observations, celebrate achievements, and receive awards for their contributions.

Child 3 is a seven-and-a-half-year-old boy who has an older sister. Child 3's mother works in Employment Law and has always found schooling enjoyable and easy. Her husband has been diagnosed with ADHD and dyslexia. Child 3's mother has proactively sought the best educational and developmental support for her children. Child 3 has always been curious and active, showing signs of ADHD from an early age. He was late to talking and toilet training. Child 3's parent shared that he has "always been into absolutely everything as a toddler, just curious about everything". Child 3's mother shared how he is constantly observing everything around him and then goes full-steam ahead into his topic of inquiry, "A few years ago, it was sewage, he was obsessed with sewage, and then he built his own, he got boxes and water and pipes, and he made his water treatment plant. So it's quite incredible". Starting school was a challenge for him. This was in contrast to his Montessori Kindergarten, where there was freedom, and it was child-led. His parents decided to get assessed privately rather than through the lengthy public process. Child 3 was diagnosed with ADHD and started medication (Ritalin) at the beginning of the year. His parent shared, "We weren't surprised when we got the diagnosis. I think we were very surprised though at how far behind his cognitive ability is, and that was quite confronting". Around the same time, his classroom teacher recommended that the USL provider might give him a significant boost. As a result of that recommendation, Child 3 began attending. The parent shared, "The medication kind of mutes him, which I don't like, but it has made a difference at school. He is progressing very slowly but is more focused and can concentrate". Due to his academic challenges, Child 3 has been reclassified from the previous year, 3, to Year 2 due to not meeting certain milestones.

The school is a full primary school with approximately 240 students. Child 3 is part of a Year 2–3 class with 28 students, several of whom are neurodiverse. The school has recently undergone renovations, improving both the soundproofing and the layout of classrooms, creating an environment better suited to focused learning.

The classroom routine has consistency and structure from Monday to Thursday. Each day begins with a writing session, followed by a fruit break and phonics. After a second break, the focus shifts to mathematics. Afternoons are dedicated to rotational reading activities, paired with independent tasks such as using iPads or listening to stories. On Fridays, the four syndicate classes join for 40-minute

rotations in other subjects, such as Te Reo Māori or Science, followed by buddy reading, assembly, and free play. His teacher is the Team Leader for the syndicate.

The teacher recalls that before joining her class this year, Child 3 was often disruptive, struggled to settle, and was easily distracted by movement. To support Child 3's literacy development, the parents fund a private tutor who works with him weekly during school hours. This additional support complements his classroom learning and addresses specific literacy needs.

Case study 4: A small city

The independent Friday programme runs weekly for 8–12-year-olds from 9:00 am to 3:00 pm. Sessions take place in a native bush setting, featuring distinct zones that have evolved based on children's ideas and play preferences: a pine area with a slackline and tyre swings, a native bush zone for play and den-making, a swamp zone for mud play with ropes for climbing, a pond with tadpoles, a carpentry area for whittling, stone carving and building projects, a firepit zone, and a loose parts area for creative construction. Occasionally, the group visits areas outside this space. Each session is led by at least three adults to ensure a 1:3 adult-to-child ratio. The day begins with karakia, kai and korero to establish a sense of community, followed by trust-building games to set the tone for the day. The morning typically involves an environmental, sustainability, or mātauranga Māori-focused learning session or a skills-based activity lasting approximately 1.5 hours. At times, guest experts, such as artists or craftspeople, lead specialised rotations. Children then engage in free play or work on individual projects, exploring their interests through hands-on activities. After a communal lunch, they resume their chosen activities. The day concludes with a reflection session, where children gather to express gratitude and share their achievements through prompts like, *"*I am proud of… because…*"* or "I am grateful for…".

Child 4 is a 9-year-old boy and the only child of a single mum. His mother works at the University and strongly believes in the value of outdoor experiences for children. Since he was one year old, she has proactively sought learning environments that focus on the outdoors or physical activity. Child 4 "presents as a classic hyperactive young man who is extremely social, likes to entertain, likes to be the Larkin in the group". School has been a challenge. In Year 2, the teacher noticed he would disrupt the class continually, so Child 4 received a Resource Teachers Learning and Behaviour (RTLB) referral. From this, they went through a lengthy assessment to get an ADHD diagnosis and medication. The parent shares that she had always intended for her son to attend this USL provider, but the programme's minimum age is 8. Child 4 has now been in the programme for one year. Child 4's parent said, "The medication is what we're using at the moment, and that has its challenges, but it's made a massive difference to his, I guess, academic performance at school. He has just made leaps and bounds in his reading, maths, and enjoyment at school. And saying that, this year has been great".

The primary school for Years 1–6 has approximately 262 students. Child 4 is part of a Year 3–4 class with 28 students, representing a range of learning, social, and emotional needs. The class is one of three middle school classes, and this is the teacher's first year working with Child 4. She is the Year 3 and 4 Team Leader.

The teacher highlights the positive relationship with Child 4's parent, describing her as highly supportive and actively engaged. The parent prioritises SEL over academic outcomes.

To address the diverse learning needs within the class, the teacher incorporates a variety of tactile learning methods. Students rotate through memory games, Play-Doh, letter cutting, and chalk writing exercises in reading. A peer-based approach−Developing Mathematical Inquiry Communities (DMIC)−emphasises collaboration, sharing, and problem-solving skills in mathematics. However, writing activities are more structured, with the teacher modelling the task before allowing independent work. Each term also features an inquiry unit, introducing a new thematic focus for student exploration.

Socially, Child 4 has a very close-knit friendship group, which the teacher describes as being centred around one firm friendship.

Case study 5: A city

The independent Friday programme runs weekly for 5–12-year-olds from 9:00 am to 3:00 pm, facilitated by two educators. Sessions are held in an outdoor environment featuring a working farm, a native bush, and a river. The day follows a series of core routines. Children begin with team-building games as they arrive, followed by a morning circle with karakia and waiata. The morning features a set activity aligned with the New Zealand Curriculum, lasting 1–2 hours. Hands-on, real-world, and experiential activities form part of a term-long inquiry cycle. These could include pest trapping, mustering sheep, pond-dipping, or fire-lighting. After lunch and free play, the children participate in nature journaling and mindfulness exercises, encouraging reflection and connection with their environment. The day concludes with a closing circle, incorporating waiata and karakia.

Child 5 is an 8-year-old boy and the middle child of three boys. His family lives in a rural area with a vast section of land, a vegetable garden and an orchard with a river where he can play all day, go eeling and feed his tuna. Child 5's mother is a primary teacher and works at his current school. She returned to work when he was a preschooler, "he had a teacher who was absolutely passionate about following his passions, and she recognised that Child 5 has a curiosity about the natural world; she spent a lot of time outside of the garden with him observing insects, collecting things that were driven by him and that followed him into school". Child 5 is independent and self- manages well. Upon entering school, it became known very quickly that Child 5 had severe dyslexia. "We knew of this outdoor (USL) programme, so we immediately put all three boys in. We thought it would be one place where Child 5

could thrive”. Child 5's parent shared that they chose to get a formal assessment through the school, "it's paperwork for the school, but also the thought that when he went on to secondary school, that means that if he needs a reader writer for future testing or exams having that paper is quite important". Child 5 is accepting of his diagnosis, "It's not often you'll hear him use it as an excuse. Still, I think now he's more accepting that it's normal for him to struggle because, well, I'm dyslexic".

The school is a small rural primary school for Years 1–6 with approximately 109 children. Child 5 is part of a Year 4 class of 21 students, many of whom have been with the teacher for two consecutive years. This class included six particularly disruptive students, contributing to a challenging classroom dynamic.

The daily routine was structured with news time and mathematics in the morning, followed by literacy in the middle block and passion projects in the afternoon. The teacher identified strong dyslexic tendencies in Child 5, observing significant reading, writing, and spelling difficulties. Despite these challenges, mathematics emerged as a clear strength for Child 5.

Recognising his (and others’) strong performance in the morning sessions, the teacher deliberately shifted to prioritising mathematics in the first block of the day. This adjustment played to Child 5's strengths and helped create a more engaged and productive learning environment. The teacher noted that this change was highly successful, enabling Child 5 to build confidence and experience success in his learning.

A **hapū representative** participated in an interview to provide insight into the Case Study 5 overall programme for the numerous children who attended (not of Child 5) over the years. This contribution is referenced in the cross-case analysis under the label ‘Hapū’ and is included where relevant throughout the discussion. The conversation emphasised the challenges children with learning difficulties face in finding a sense of belonging. It highlighted the positive impact of outdoor programmes on their hauora (physical, mental, social, and spiritual aspects of life) and learning. The representative also discussed the potential for integrating these programmes into traditional schooling, stressing the importance of structured yet flexible learning environments. Additionally, they shared the crucial role of ongoing support from hapū and iwi in creating inclusive and effective educational experiences.

Summary

In summary, these case studies provide a valuable framework for understanding the contexts within Aotearoa, New Zealand.

In the five case studies:

- All five children are boys between 5 - 10 years old
- Three children have ADHD; one which has also experienced significant trauma
- One child has severe dyslexia

- One child has learning behaviours associated with dyslexia - but has not been assessed to confirm this

The USLs are:

- All outdoors, notably on grass, forest or by water
- There is a mixed structure of the day; some with free play, some with activities throughout the day
- All are hands-on, experiential and in real-time

The classroom settings are:

- Uniform in their approach - blocks of writing, maths and reading
- NE class of 16 students; otherwise, 20 - 28 students will be in one class
- Three classroom teachers noted they had multiple children with diverse needs in their respective classrooms

Cross-case analysis and emerging trends

Seven key themes emerged from our cross-case analysis of the five children attending a USL ODS option in NZ. These themes, identified through conversations with classroom teachers and parents, highlight significant factors influencing each child's development and learning.

Four themes have a *direct impact* on the child:

1. Academic challenges
2. SEL tendencies
3. Physical and hands-on learning strengths
4. The positive impact of USL

Two themes have an *indirect impact:*

5. Communication
6. Challenges arising

The final theme focuses on a broader external perspective:

7. Opportunities for integration of USL into the school system

We also examined the emerging trends, commonalities, and differences across these seven themes, providing insights into their collective influence on children's experiences within the USL environment.

Individual quotes from participants are within text below, and also further quotes are appended at the end of this report.

Academic challenges

Literacy challenges are universal among all the children in this study. All children faced considerable difficulties in reading, writing or both. Dyslexia, fine motor skills, and reluctance to engage were recurring issues. One teacher shared, "There was avoidance in literacy, and he certainly would not ask for help, so I had to keep a close eye on him". Relational support significantly impacts outcomes for these children. When children had strong relationships with their teachers, aids and tutors, it led to more successful outcomes rather than formalised rigid interventions such as reading recovery. Parental and hapū advocacy played a significant part in their child's learning and the need for individualised support. Many saw their children struggle with confidence and compare themselves negatively to their peers. One parent shared, "he began noticing what he couldn't do. 'Why can everyone else read, and I can't do the puzzles? Why is that?' Then, we heard him say, 'I must be dumb', which was absolutely heartbreaking to hear".

Socio-emotional learning (SEL) tendencies

Emotional regulation was a challenge in the classroom. Every child benefited from quiet spaces and physical activity opportunities. Some children preferred routines, whereas others did not. Yet they all had emotional triggers, which could be overstimulation, tiredness or sensory overload. Yet when supported appropriately, each child demonstrates unique strengths, such as empathy, independence, humour, and strong social connections. Parent-teacher, hapū-teacher, and hapū-parent alignment were fundamental in providing these children with tailored social strategies or emotional scaffolding. Strong relationships between children and classroom teachers significantly impact the child's well-being, often when there is trust. One parent noted, "he really loves his teacher, which is great. And she's lovely with him. Sometimes, he tries it on in terms of, 'Oh, I didn't have all my medicine today; that's why I'm behaving this way'. And she's like, 'No, you're still in control of your behaviour'".

Strengths in physical and hands-on learning

Across all five locations, high engagement in learning occurred when aligned with personal interest, often in math, science, and crafting. Classroom teachers, parents and hapū highlight the importance of **hands-on, physical, and outdoor activities.** These activities provided a sensory and physical outlet to match children's focus and energy levels. One teacher sums this up perfectly, "Quite focused when something he wants to do, and quick to get it done". These children not only excelled in their areas of interest but also showed significant progress in verbal communication, storytelling, and oral discussions. However, they found written tasks more challenging and usually required additional support or different

learning formats. Children thrived within a strengths-based framework that personalised their interests, abilities and engagement. They benefited from safe, trusting relationships. The hapū shared "the opportunity of this type of education just opened up a whole new world for our kids". Furthermore, the significance of teaching practical skills and healthy risk-taking "is all education. It's learning life skills, and they are privileged enough to get it on board there (at the USL)".

The positive impact of USL one day schooling option

The small setting – you can feel the warmth and the care of all the staff there. You don't have to look for it. You can feel it and see it, but ***it's not just care.***
It's guiding care.
– Hapū perspective

Findings from this research indicate that USL can have a **profound impact on children's hauora**. This positive impact was reported across all five locations and by all participants. The USL environments in this research provide a space where children not only learn but also thrive emotionally, feeling grounded, capable, and successful. This thriving is —often in contrast to the challenges the children face in traditional classroom settings of sensory or cognitive overload and emotional escalations. Classroom teachers, hapū and parents reported improved focus, academic performance, emotional regulation, and social engagement in the classroom and at home. One parent shared, "The day after he goes to this programme, he has his most settled day at school because he just filled up his bucket and mana". The hapū representative shared this after their experience with the USL provider, "The small setting - You can feel the warmth and the care of all the staff there. You don't have to look for it. You can feel it and see it, but it's not just care. It's guiding care".

All the programmes encourage child-led, hands-on experiential learning that drives engagement and confidence. Child-led exploration encourages ownership of learning and enhances emotional satisfaction, building much-needed self-esteem through strength-based activities aligned with their interests. Locations and programming were often more authentic as they were 'in the real world', developing independence, accountability and self-management through structured yet flexible routines. The hapū representative shared, "It also gives them the knowledge that they know how to do this, but it's to be used for this and not for malice but in context, such as fire-lighting or using knives". Yet, there were also spaces where children felt they could navigate peer dynamics and develop social skills and team-based tasks. Lastly, these programmes had tailored and individualised approaches. Ones that prioritised a strengths-based framework and agency of the child's needs. Additionally, these settings allow children to thrive in ways that may not always be possible in a conventional school environment.

Communication

Across five locations, photos, videos, and written reflections from the USL created meaningful opportunities for children to openly share their experiences with classroom teachers. Yet only 50% of case studies shared their photos and stories with classroom teachers. Communication gaps exist. When communication between USL and classroom teachers aligns for each child, it can be a win-win wraparound service for the child. One teacher shares, “Well, his dad often sends me photos of his day. I put them up on the screen, and he’ll share them with the class for news. He absolutely loves this, and his oral language has improved”. Another teacher shares “ways of making his writing a little bit more purposeful, such as trapping. He always preferred writing descriptive, or recounts related to science and things”. Yet when this does not happen, there is a missed opportunity for the child to continue his USL learning in the classroom. One classroom teacher, who did not receive any feedback from the programme or the child who attended, mentioned the lack of clarity regarding the programme and how it aligns with the curriculum. She notes, “I was talking about it with a colleague; I was like, am I meant to initiate (a conversation) with them (the USL)? There is no partnership between us (the provider and the school). I don't know too many details about what they do. I can imagine what they do and get the gist off their website, but I'm not entirely sure”.

Parents appreciate the updates, which prompt discussions and strengthen family connections about their children’s experiences. One parent shares, “The USL teachers send a summary of what they did each day, which is a godsend because he doesn't seem to remember. We'll go through that together, and I'll say, ‘Oh, you did this and that’, and then that would open up the conversation with him”.

Strong cultural alignment and mutual respect between the USL provider and hapū enhance the programme's impact on the attending children and their sense of belonging. The hapū shared, “It was seamless working with the USL provider. It just worked. When the USL provider asked for waiata and karakia, that was a sign of respect, and it went down well. It was a learning curve for us, and bringing in our waiata was just a great tickbox for the kaumatua”. Furthermore, sharing, “We liked that there were (structured) activities because sometimes you can't choose whether you want to do it or not. It’s the same on the marae; when there's a job to be done, we know we've got to get this done so that we can go for a swim or whatever. So it's building a good work ethic”.

Challenges in attending a USL one day schooling option

Consistently, the findings of this research indicate that emotional gains outweigh academic concerns through participation in USL. Specifically, through outdoor learning experiences in small groups with relational staff, children have improved emotional regulation, confidence and engagement. One parent shares, “I'm a teacher myself, but having that break in the week is a good time for him to have it. So he is more settled when he is at school and able to attend more and learn more”.

Travel time, logistical constraints and financial barriers remain consistent challenges for participation in these programmes. One parent shares, *"*We drive over one hour to attend. After a year, this was just too much for our family.*"*

The timetabling of the USL programmes affects full integration, with classroom teachers sharing frustration that children miss assemblies and key subjects (such as timetables practice, kapa haka, and science) only on certain days. Strong support from schools, parents, and hapū significantly enhances the effectiveness of USL.

What can be done to mitigate these challenges? Integrating a USL one day schooling approach into a traditional schooling environment

USLs can support essential life skills like problem-solving and negotiation while aligning with the curriculum, benefiting all children regardless of background or experience. Classroom teachers recognise USLs' potential to improve emotional and social outcomes for children. Yet, they face challenges, from balancing missed literacy or maths content to scheduling and classroom integration to accommodate these children. Parents value USLs for their emotional, social, and developmental benefits, though financial and logistical barriers remain significant. Hapū sees the overall learning and development benefits.

A blended approach, or a hybrid model that combines USL and classroom learning, is ideal for maintaining focus and emotional regulation in neurodiverse children. The USL offers unique pathways for success for these children, cultivating agency, belonging, and purpose. One parent shared, "This programme has been a real lifeline for our family, and I hope he can continue in this programme for the rest of his schooling years". Furthermore, hapū shared, "There needs to be an emphasis on using natural environments like forests for holistic learning experiences".

Effective communication between USLs, schools, and hapū is crucial for widespread acceptance and buy-in from schools and teachers. This will be a first step towards integration and maximising any outcomes. Cultural respect and collaboration with hapū and iwi are essential for ensuring meaningful integration of Indigenous perspectives. Long-term success depends on sustained funding, a long-term commitment from stakeholders, timetable integration, appropriate staff ratios, health and safety, ongoing professional development, and building staff capabilities to ensure consistent and meaningful delivery of a USL in a traditional school setting.

The classroom teacher who has the USL in their school sums this up, "It's a good programme, and I think it's an excellent way to approach things differently, too. Sometimes, I'll tell the CRT Teacher they're getting at each other; they're not friends. Can you organise them to do some team building or something where you've got to take a risk and trust someone else?"

Conclusion

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*I think the more experiences you give our neurodiverse learners, the better it is for them because **they can see that school might not be for them, but actually a different pathway is** … and that's okay.*

- Parent Perspective

This study identifies common patterns in the learning and development of neurodiverse children in NZ's USLs, highlighting shared strengths, challenges, and support pathways. It emphasises significant literacy challenges among the children, including dyslexia, fine motor difficulties, and reluctance toward reading and writing tasks in the classroom. For these children, relational and trusting relationships with their classroom teachers proved more effective than rigid 'known' interventions.

Parental and hapū advocacy played a key role in securing individualised support for their child. Emotional regulation remained a challenge, with children benefiting from quiet spaces, physical activity, and individualised routines to manage overstimulation. Social experiences varied, but all children displayed strengths—empathy, independence, humour, and resilience—when appropriately supported. Engagement was highest when learning aligned with personal interests, particularly in math, science, and hands-on activities. However, written tasks could be accomplished with much cajoling and extra support.

USLs were celebrated as a unique environment that provided sensory and physical outlets, built independence, and supported children's hauora. The child-led learning that was hands-on created opportunities to build confidence, focus and agency. Overall, these USLs were a place where children felt grounded, capable and successful—a contrast to the traditional classroom of sensory and cognitive overload.

The experiences of neurodiverse learners in USL settings confirm the effectiveness of USL programmes to support the achievement of learning and development goals. This research finding supports earlier findings from phases one and two that USL programmes are valuable and beneficial for students, their families, and for hapū in this study.

Clear and consistent communication between USLs, classroom teachers, parents and hapū is essential for effective wraparound care but remains a challenge. While parents and hapū value daily updates that encourage meaningful family conversations and classroom teachers benefit from clearer insights, only

half of the case studies showed this. This finding aligns with phase two research, which revealed that not all USL providers have relationships with schools, teachers or even hapū. Children can share their USL experiences when communication is effective, enhancing oral language, writing, and classroom engagement. However, communication gaps leave teachers uncertain about curriculum alignment and programme goals, resulting in missed opportunities for integration. These challenges bring forward key questions from phase one about the comprehensive quality provision and learning transition from USLs to classroom settings. Bridging this gap remains essential to fully supporting and strengthening children's learning and development goals. Moreover, cultural alignment and mutual respect with hapū can strengthen USL outcomes—fostering emotional regulation, confidence, and engagement for children. Yet only one in five USL programmes suggested this partnership as a bridge to a child's learning and belonging.

Key logistical barriers, such as travel time, financial costs, and scheduling conflicts, continue to pose significant challenges for classroom teachers, parents and hapū. As noted in previous phases of the research, USLs are often attended by economically advantaged communities, and these findings reinforce that trend. However, this study also highlights key exceptions: Child 1 received full financial aid following a significant behavioural stand-down, and children from the hapū came on full scholarships as they were mana whenua. These examples raise important questions: would these USL providers have been accessible, and if accessible, would parents have chosen otherwise? In contrast, Child 4's attendance depended largely on family support, highlighting a key concern from phase one: are programme fees too high for marginalised communities? The role of cultural capital (including a family's experiences and resources) may also act as a barrier to participation. The absence of girls in this study raises further questions: Are boys more naturally inclined towards outdoor physical activities, while girls face cultural or social barriers to participation? Exploring gender discrepancies in future research could provide valuable insights. It's also worth noting that only one hapū was involved in this study. Further research is needed into how these programmes can support and uplift mana whenua.

Despite these challenges, strong support from schools, families, and hapū continues to play a significant role. It allows children to experience the emotional and social benefits of USL, ultimately contributing to improved focus, confidence, and well-being at home and in the classroom. One parent even said, "If there were a Forest school, I'd try and find a way to get him in it full time for five days a week… as it would be more beneficial than traditional schooling for him".

Classroom teachers, parents and hapū agreed that a blended approach—integration of a USL with classroom learning on the school grounds—would be a beneficial next step, particularly for neurodiverse children. Reflecting on phase two of the research, critical questions returned: How can learning triumphs and transformations achieved be integrated and valued by the school? How could the connection between programmes be more successfully facilitated? How are learning successes consolidated? These

questions remain as areas that still require substantial research, especially for successful integration, with clear curriculum links needed for broader acceptance.

Classroom teachers, parents and hapū firmly asserted that long-term success depends on meaningful collaboration with hapū/iwi, sustained funding, timetable integration, appropriate staff ratios, health and safety measures, professional development, and building staff capabilities. These findings align with phase two insights, highlighting the financial challenges schools face in releasing classroom teachers for outdoor learning and finding creative solutions, such as using Special Education Needs Coordinators (SENCOs) or RTLBs. Encouragingly, some schools have already developed successful outdoor initiatives, increasing physical and nature-based activities. This was evident in our findings from Case Study 2.

We know that USLs offer a unique approach to child-led, hands-on, nature-based learning, prioritising SEL and nurturing children's agency and self-efficacy—an approach similar to early childhood education (ECE) settings. Interestingly, three of these case studies highlighted how ECE provided transformative and positive experiences for these neurodiverse children. Yet these gains unravelled when transitioning into the traditional school settings. This raises important questions: Is ECE better equipped to support neurodiverse learners? What can we learn from the similarities between ECE and USL to inform classroom practices for our 5 - 10-year-olds? And what, if any, can classroom teachers glean from these interactions? Some teachers consistently expressed a desire for genuine partnerships and explicit connections made between USL and classroom learning. At the same time, parents and hapū face logistical and financial barriers to participation.

More research is necessary to explore ways of integrating USLs with traditional schooling, especially considering the increasing demand for such programmes and the rising rates of neurodiversity in schools (Neurodiversity in Education Coalition, 2023). These hybrid efforts must also consider ongoing challenges related to classroom teacher stress, workload, financial compensation, and limited resources. A 2023 Teaching Council study revealed that 58% of teachers are likely to leave the profession within five years, underscoring the need for new solutions to alleviate these pressures. Bruce et al. (2023) noted in phase one research, "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 USLs help point us to where education is headed." (p.17)

A hybrid model may offer a solution by integrating USL-type activities within school premises or nearby areas. This could provide greater accessibility, reduce logistical barriers, and create better transitions between USL and classroom environments. Independent USL providers could offer mentoring, expertise, or co-teach alongside classroom teachers. Philanthropic and external funding support could play a key role in reducing financial barriers and ensuring long-term sustainability and collaboration with USL providers. As hapū aptly noted, "I think there is scope and there's hope that there's a place for this in the future"—a sentiment underscoring the potential for innovative solutions in education.

Further research is essential to explore:

1. How USLs can be effectively integrated within traditional school systems while leveraging their strengths and local successes.
2. What other hybrid models currently exist in New Zealand schools that specifically meet the needs of neurodiverse students? Are there more examples like Case Study 2, and what might these models look like in practice?

Addressing these questions could pave the way for more inclusive, effective, and sustainable educational practices for our neurodiverse learners, allowing them too, to thrive.

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Appendix

Academic Challenges		
Child	**Classroom teacher perspective**	**Parent perspective**
1	*Fine motor skills are very difficult for him. Writing remains a significant challenge.*	**He needs constant support and attention. Enjoys his one-on-one time doing homework with me and having success with his learning, as well as doing Ju-jitsu too.**
2	*He struggles with literacy, especially writing. He defaults to phonetic spelling and shows reluctance in reading and writing tasks.*	**He enjoys discussion-based learning but avoids reading and writing tasks. He feels behind and at times is disengaged.**
3	*Fine motor skills are improving, but he writes slowly and lacks academic confidence.*	**He struggles to focus and feels discouraged when comparing himself to peers. Private tutoring supports him weekly.**
4	*He struggles articulating ideas in writing. He doesn't recognise himself as academically behind.*	**He enjoyed his first year but struggled with the transition to formal learning. Academic gaps began to widen.**
5	*Struggles with literacy, especially reading and writing. He engages more when stories are read aloud.*	**He's extremely dyslexic and struggles with cognitive overload in formal settings. Relationship-based support was most effective.**
Hapū perspective *Some of our children struggle with a sense of belonging in school due to learning difficulties, leading to rebellious behavior.*		

Socio-emotional learning perspectives		
Child	**Classroom teacher perspective**	**Parent perspective**
1	**He struggles with sensory overload, often getting overwhelmed and calling out aggressively. However, he is empathetic, integrates well with peers, and engages deeply when interested.**	*At home, hyperactivity, aggression, and delayed speech were challenges. But he's always been bright, loving, and kind.*
2	**He is self-aware and requests quieter spaces**	*Socially, he struggles to find his place*

	when overwhelmed by noise.	*outside of a few close friendships. This extends beyond school.*
3	**He thrives on routine, social play, and familiarity. Without medication, he can become overly cheeky, anxious, or disengaged.**	*He loves social interactions and independence but struggles with self-regulation and emotional control, especially when tired.*
4	**Hands-on, tactile learning suits him best. He enjoys humour but struggles with knowing social boundaries. Emotional regulation has improved.**	*He is hyperactive, social, and physically competent but can be annoying to peers. Social relationships have been strained over time.*
5	**He is reserved, avoids public praise, and is highly loyal to his best friend. Observant, empathetic, and passionate about nature.**	*He is highly independent, deeply empathetic, and intensely focused when passionate about something.*

Strengths in physical and hands-on learning		
Child	**Classroom teacher perspective**	**Parent perspective**
1	*Highly engaged with our specialised sequential literacy programme and enjoys movement-based activities. Strong in projecting his body and physical tasks.*	**Loves family time, outdoor activities, bike rides, and focused one-on-one time.**
2	*Strong mathematical abilities and deep factual knowledge about topics like Māori Atua and Matariki. Highly articulate orally but struggles with written expression.*	**Crafting, outdoor classrooms, and nature activities have been a consistent joy.**
3	*Confident in science and technology topics. Strong problem-solving abilities and verbal confidence in familiar subjects, i.e. mountain biking.*	**Super focus on Lego, building projects, creativity and art. Thrives in outdoor activities.**
4	*Highly focused when motivated, particularly in maths and animal-themed units. Enjoys physical activities and loves being in the production.*	**Thrives in nature-based activities and physical play (e.g., tree climbing, basketball, Taekwondo).**

5	*Strong hands-on learner with strengths in maths. Passionate about nature and enjoys practical activities.*	**Highly independent and focused on nature-related tasks like trapping and cooking over fire. He has a deep connection to the natural world.**
Hapū perspective *Activities involving knives and fire provided children with important life skills and met their need for healthy risk - It's all education, it's all learning life skills, and they were privileged enough to get these there.* *Helps them have a break from school. Also gives them opportunities to lead in areas they are familiar with, such as the natural environment (planting and harvesting).*		

The positive impact of USL		
Child	**Classroom teacher perspective**	**Parent perspective**
1	**The activities provide emotional calm and a sense of belonging. Medication has also amplified these benefits.**	*The programme is a highlight of his week and leaves him feeling emotionally settled and grounded.*
2	**Outdoor environments allow him to excel, feel confident, and take a leadership role. He thrives in hands-on tasks and factual learning outside the classroom.**	*He looks forward to outdoor classroom days. He feels more motivated and engaged in this setting.*
3	**He engages deeply in hands-on, outdoor, and creative tasks, showing confidence in his knowledge and problem-solving.**	*Outdoor experiences provide freedom, creativity, and an outlet for his high energy and mechanical curiosity.*
4	**Provides him with opportunities for physical activity, exploration and emotional regulation.**	*He shows increased self-confidence and resilience in outdoor environments.*
5	**Outdoor learning offers decompression from the challenging classroom environment and allows him to thrive in a calm space.**	*He feels emotionally safe and confident in outdoor spaces, even with unfamiliar peers.*
Hapū perspective *Totally flourished. For some, a different child - showed increased leadership and engagement, contrasting to the school behaviour.* *The warmth, structure, and balance of freedom with responsibility (of achieving a task) helps their emotional safety and self-discipline.*		

Communication		
Child	**Classroom teacher perspective**	**Parent perspective**
1	*He shares outdoor experiences when prompted, using photos (given by parent) as conversation starters. Improved oral language was observed.*	***Parents value the photos and videos shared by the outdoor programme. Reflecting on them together deepens connection and discussion.***
3	*Expressed a lack of clarity about activities at the USL provider and sought more communication about his engagement and progress.*	***Parents appreciate receiving photos and brief daily summaries and using them for family reflection time.***
4	*He often shared some stories, but the teacher was uncertain about specific skill development, routines and overall outdoor programme.*	***Parents rely heavily on daily summaries from outdoor teachers to prompt meaningful conversations at home.***
5	*Teachers appreciated the learning stories and photos, gaining insight into his experiences and emotional well-being.*	***Parents highly valued learning stories with photos and written summaries, enabling meaningful family discussions.***
Hapū perspective *Strong respect and alignment between the outdoor provider and hapū. Positive cultural acknowledgment was observed through curriculum integration.* *The provider sends learning stories of each of our children at the end of every session, which helps build trust and mutual respect. We also had monthly meetings to talk about curriculum and children.*		

Challenges in attending a USL programme		
Child	**Classroom teacher perspective**	**Parent perspective**
1	*Emphasise reconnecting with him after an outdoor day to ease the transition into formal learning. Sees emotional and engagement benefits despite missed academic time.*	**Balances concerns about missed academic content with emotional benefits from outdoor experiences.**

3	*Recognises benefits but notes reduced engagement in specialised subjects due to absence on Fridays.*	**Financial and logistical challenges are acknowledged but deemed worthwhile.**
4	*Highlights missed academic moments and key classroom experiences. Adjusts the schedule to accommodate absences.*	**Financial and logistical constraints impact consistent participation. Recognises benefits despite these difficulties.**
5	*Notes missed opportunities on Fridays, such as assemblies and kapa haka, but acknowledges emotional benefits.*	**Travel time and financial investment were challenging but manageable for a year only. They value the strong school support that allowed us to come.**
Hapū perspective *The one-day programme out of school is seen as beneficial for their overall learning and development—however, there are logistical challenges (transport) and the need for support from schools and funding bodies.*		

What can be done to mitigate these challenges? Integrating a USL approach into a traditional schooling environment		
Child	**Classroom Teacher Perspective**	**Parent perspective**
1	*USL supports life skills (problem-solving, negotiation) and aligns with the curriculum. Trauma or not, nature benefits all children, enhancing their readiness to learn. Literacy can still be addressed on other days.*	**Parents believe USL offers emotional and social benefits. Funding, staffing, and scheduling are significant barriers. Clear links to the curriculum must be demonstrated for widespread acceptance.**
2	*USL is valuable, but balance is key. Splitting the day between outdoor and classroom moments helps maintain focus and emotional regulation. Timing and structure significantly affect outcomes.*	**USL offers curriculum-aligned learning in a creative, enjoyable setting. The parent envisions a more immersive outdoor environment, blending community connections, cultural justice, and environmental awareness. They stress the importance of meaningful cultural engagement and avoiding tokenistic approaches.**
3	*USL is seen as valuable but logistically challenging (health and safety, staff*	**USL offers alternative pathways for success, particularly for neurodiverse children.**

	ratios). Teacher recognises its potential benefits but highlights difficulties in integrating it within large class settings.	**Parents emphasise its value for emotional development and broader life skills beyond traditional academics. A blended approach to traditional and outdoor learning is ideal.**
4	*USL provides unique opportunities but faces logistical challenges (time, location, resources). Teachers express uncertainty about fitting outdoor learning into traditional schedules and maintaining curriculum coverage.*	**Parents see USL as a transformative experience for all children. Emotional literacy and relationship-building are seen as crucial benefits. They emphasise the value of connection to environmental issues.**
5	*USL offers relevance, particularly in local environmental contexts. Neurodiverse children thrive with tailored approaches. Effective communication between outdoor programmes and classrooms is essential for integration.*	**USL fosters agency, belonging, and purpose, especially for neurodiverse children. Success requires long-term staff training, timetable integration, appropriate ratios, and funding. Demonstrating curriculum alignment is crucial for buy-in.**
Hapū perspective *USL requires cultural respect and integration. Support from hapū and iwi is essential in developing and supporting USL programmes. Programmes must prioritise neurodiverse children while being open to broader participation. Funding and MOE support are critical for success.*		