Unconventional Spaces of Learning in Aotearoa New Zealand

A HIGHLIGHTS REPORT 2025





Uncoventional Spaces of Learning (USoL) consistently show a positive impact on children's hauora, attendance and engagement, especially when their needs are not met in the classroom.

For many tamariki, school is not a place of belonging, but of exhaustion, hardship and disconnection. They carry negative self-belief and unmet needs. These burdens weigh heavily on their shoulders - and impact on their learning. Their stories remind us what is missing, and what is needed.

A grassroots movement has emerged seeking to address this need through USoL. They are alternative learning programmes that often exist outside the formal school system or operate alongside it.

In response to a growing awareness of USoL and in particular the needs of neurodiverse tamariki aged 5 - 12 years, the Wayne Francis Charitable Trust commissioned a study into USoL. The research took place over three years, through four distinct phases. Together, the findings show what can become possible. It just takes vision and a collective approach.

Principals reported fewer behavioural incidents, higher attendance, and more engaged classrooms. Parents described USoL as a lifeline. Tamariki themselves spoke of feeling "dumb" in classrooms, but capable and curious in these spaces.

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Wayne Francis CHARITABLE TRUST

PHASE ONE:

Identifying common principles

We reviewed 21 Unconventional Spaces of Learning (USoLs) across Aotearoa through a textual analysis.

- ⅓ were One Day Schools. A child attending needs to sign off an agreement between their enrolled school and the USoL provider.
- ⅔ were small private schools and personalised learning setups.
- Most had strong roots in their community and whenua.

Despite their differences in size and structure, most shared similar values that were in contrast to indoor, instruction led learning:

- Giving tamariki freedom to lead their learning
- Supporting holistic wellbeing - mind, body, heart, and spirit
- Connecting deeply with nature and sustainability.

USoLs restore a child's connection and belonging, especially for those who do not thrive in school.

Many were fee-based and not widely visible to the general public.

Phase one identified that more research was needed to inquire:

- What is the quality of USoLs programmes?
- What checks-and-balances are needed to sustain their quality of provision?
- How do they address equity and access?
- How do whānau and schools find their services?
- How well do they serve neurodiverse tamariki or those who find school challenging?
- And what is the long term and sustainability of these providers?



PHASE TWO:

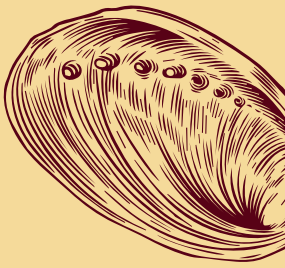
What USoL providers told us

USoL providers shared their experiences. Most began in the last decade, showing the growing need for new ways of supporting tamariki who struggle to thrive in school.

Parents and whānau were increasingly turning to USoLs, especially when needs were not met in school.

The positive benefits of USoLs

- Created safe, nurturing environments where tamariki felt seen and valued. "I wanted children to feel safe with each other, and safe to explore the land around them."
- Uplifted each child's mana and potential. "Neurodiverse children are a gift. If we try to normalise them, we lose something important."
- Learning was play-based, grounded in socio-emotional learning (SEL), and connected to the natural world.



The challenge of operating a USoL

- Demand was high and there were long waitlists
- Keeping fees affordable
- Recruiting kaiako who were present with tamariki: not multitasking or reverting to directive teaching
- Time pressure prevented networking with other USoL providers
- Resource barriers as most providers operated outside of MOE funding.

Relationships with schools were mixed

- An existing partnership between USoL providers and schools helped teachers understand child-led approaches so tamariki could retain self-efficacy when returning to the classroom.
- Schools felt uncertain about attendance and Health and Safety matters.

Areas USoL providers asked for support

- A greater awareness of USoLs in general
- More opportunities for collaboration
- Mentoring in operational and wellbeing support
- Sustainable funding pathways
- Further research to show the healing impact and value of these spaces.



PHASE THREE:

What whānau, classroom teachers and hapū told us

Understanding the impact of USoLs on student learning and well-being is important.

Whānau, classroom teachers, and a hapū representative shared how USoLs affect tamariki who often struggle in schools. Five case studies of USoL revealed a consistently positive impact on children's hauora (wellbeing).

Classroom challenges for tamariki

- Found classrooms overwhelming.
- Faced challenges in literacy, overstimulation, and tiredness. One child shared, "I must be dumb" - as they experienced a system failing to see them.
- Overload often led to avoidance or withdrawal.
- When tamariki did succeed, it was through safe, trusting relationships with kaiako and aides, supported by strong advocacy from whānau and hapū.

Tamariki experiences within USoL

- Child-led, sensory-rich, outdoor learning offered real-world skills, healthy risk-taking, curiosity.
- Warm care from kaiako helped tamariki regulate, relate and build confidence. A parent said, *"It's a real lifeline for our family."*
- Parents and teachers reported improved focus and engagement after a USoL day. One teacher said, *"afterwards, he has his most settled day at school because he has just filled up his bucket."*

Looking forward

Collaboration between whānau, schools, and hapū was valued but uneven.

- Hapū emphasised cultural partnership with whenua and tikanga as a foundation for belonging.
- Families found the cost, travel, and logistics as barriers to overcome.
- Schools worried about missed subjects, and activities such as kapa haka or assemblies.

Despite these challenges, USoLs clearly offer spaces of reconnection, self-worth, and hauora for tamariki.

PHASE FOUR:

Bringing together a USoL in school: What it can look like

Hybrid USoLs case studies within schools were explored in phase four. The hybrid USoL cultures remove whānau barriers while keeping tamariki connected to peers and teachers.

This supports self-efficacy rather than 'othering.'

Systemic barriers: A diagnosis

- Long waits, high costs, and heavy bureaucracy in receiving a diagnosis.
- For some, diagnosis opened pathways for advocacy, yet for others this heightened stress.
- Whānau Māori faced additional barriers in a system shaped by deficit thinking. Many saw neurodivergence as strength, not disorder.
- Without a diagnosis, tamariki risked being labelled as 'difficult' instead of supported.
- The real barrier, perhaps, is school leadership—schools, who are willing to reimagine learning.

Restoring hope

- USoLs grounded in kaitiakitanga, play, and real-world learning connected tamariki with whenua, stories and belonging.
- **Data, across schools, showed improved attendance, fewer behavioural incidents, and more engaged learning when these outdoor, sensory rich spaces were prioritised.** One Principal shared, students *"arrived with hope on Monday and left with warmth on Friday."*

Safe spaces to regulate

- Trusting relationships were prioritised, creating calm, safe spaces that affirmed a child's mana and gifts.
- Attuned kaiako supported co-regulation, opening pathways for agency, reasoning and identity.
- In the outdoors, tamariki nervous systems settled, reducing stress and making space for focus and learning.
- Indoors, tamariki often remained in fight, flight, or freeze and this biologically blocked them from learning.

Leadership and sustainability

- Innovative leadership was pivotal.
- Principals who embodied manaakitanga and whānau-ngatanga shifted school culture from compliance to care, creating schools where tamariki and staff felt seen and valued—sometimes describing students as "their own."
- USoLs remain fragile when they depend on one kaiako.
- Collective responsibility, shared capability, and long-term planning are essential.

USoLs are more than a programme. They can be woven into the school fabric and offer learning journeys that heal and enhance a child's mana, rather than fix their 'problems'.

Conclusion

This four-phase research journey shows what is possible when we reimagine education alongside whānau, communities, USoL providers and schools.

While our study was small, it is one of the first studies to document and track the voices of stakeholders, showing us genuinely what can help tamariki thrive.

What we learned is clear: USoLs are not an "add-on." They are vital pathways. They are safe, relational spaces that restore trust, safety, and belonging. For tamariki carrying heightened stress, they offer spaces where nervous systems can settle.

For whānau Māori, USoL are spaces where the whenua becomes part of everyday learning affirming identity and mana. One principal described how self-directed play enables a natural movement away from colonial education, which has historically failed many Māori students. This approach allows students to connect with nature and share their stories beyond traditional classroom settings. One kaiako Māori noting, *"The outdoor classroom naturally connects students with the land, teaching them to recognise the mana of native plants."*

The evidence shows that the greatest opportunity occurs when USoLs are woven into school culture. A hybrid model held within or close to school premises, and embedded into school culture is the ideal. This helps to remove barriers while keeping tamariki connected to their peers and wider school life. It is also moves USoLs from the margins to the centre of inclusive practice.

- **For whānau, the message is that your voice matters. You have already shaped this work. Sharing your experiences with schools can bring change.**
- **For policy makers, USoLs offer a credible, practice-grounded pathway to equity.**
- **For principals, there is only one message for you—an invitation to start.**

The challenge now is collective: moving from the knowing to the doing.

The question we leave you with is simple:

WHAT WOULD IT TAKE TO TRIAL A USoL IN YOUR SCHOOL?

For more information about these Unconventional Spaces of Learning, please look at the Wayne Francis Charitable Trust website for the detailed reports (in the resources section), and our accompanying ***How to Start a USoL Guide***, or contact **katie.earlenz@gmail.com**



