



Unconventional Spaces of Learning are spaces of hope for tamariki with diverse learning needs.

By Katie Earle, Usol Project Lead,
Dr Judy Bruce, Senior Lecturer, AUT

“Sione and Manaia*, two Y4 Pacific Island boys, came to our school, and didn’t talk. They cooperated but didn’t engage. Yet they were not defiant. We put them into our (newly started) Bush School. In that term, the Bush Teacher decided that the kids would make bows and arrows with the aim that each child hit a target. Sione and Manaia immediately knew what to do, and how to make it. They had their bows and arrows made in no time, and the other kids in the outdoor classroom were like ‘Woah’. Then Sione and Manaia started talking. The Bush Teacher invited Sione and Manaia to teach the other children how to make them. And from that point on, they both talked and engaged in all parts of their school life.”*
(School Principal)

After trialing the Usol in this school, the children attending showed improved attendance, fewer behavioural incidents and more engaged learning. The Usol is now a non-negotiable part of their school culture, and the principal shared that “the previous two ERO reviewers adored what we were doing within our Bush School”.

So, what exactly are USoLs?

Across Aotearoa we are seeing a growing grassroots movement of Unconventional Spaces of Learning (USoL). Usol are flexible learning environments usually focused on the holistic developmental needs of tamariki outside the classroom walls. These are not ‘extras’ or interventions—they are

experience pathways that can stand alongside and complement classroom learning. USoLs may exist as hybrid models within or associated with schools, or as standalone programmes without direct association with schools.

Over several years we have explored many USoL models across Aotearoa. Each USoL is unique with different approaches and foci, ranging from structured to unstructured ranges of play based learning, and each responding to unique local taiao. Some schools spend half a day or a whole day each week in the local reserve. Others have created an outdoor classroom space in their school grounds.

In this article we share some of the stories regarding USoL in outdoor environments, with insights from school leaders, kaiako and whānau.

Safe spaces to regulate

Being outside and co-regulation were key elements across these USoL spaces. Practical skills—the doing, such as fire-lighting or invertebrate studies—were important competencies for kaiako, yet what mattered more was the being aspect. Practitioners who noticed and explored their own nervous system regulation, were more likely to model spaces for tamariki to do this too. They could support co-regulation, open pathways for safety, agency, reasoning, and affirm the mana and gifts of tamariki.

The natural environment offered both a physiological and emotional reset for tamariki who attended. The elements of the outdoors activated the parasympathetic nervous systems (the relaxation response) which reduced levels of stress and supported tamariki to experience calmness. Kaiako and whānau shared how this often contrasted sharply with the overstimulation of an indoor busy environment, where many neurodivergent tamariki experienced states

of fight, flight or freeze—biologically blocking them from learning.

Tamariki need hope

One principal reflected that when a child has not yet developed self-regulation, or does not recognise what they are feeling or know how to manage their emotions, where is there hope? Especially if they experience themselves at the bottom of the class, day in, day out. The same principal observed that when a child knew they had their weekly USoL day, they carried a sense of hope into Monday and Tuesday, followed by a feeling of warmth later in the week, and were noticeably more settled on Thursday and Friday.

Likewise, this same pattern was seen at another school, where Johnny* was a whirlwind on arrival, and couldn't focus on learning activities. Along with this, he displayed regular physical and aggressive behaviours. Yet after his USoL—a day of unstructured play with an independent provider—he had his most settled day at school, because he had just filled up his bucket through experiencing an environment that supported his mana. This same sentiment was echoed by his parent, “This USoL programme has been a real lifeline for our family”.

Similar stories were shared from classroom teachers, parents, principals, advisors and hapū across the motu—there was improved focus, academic performance, emotional regulation and social engagement in the classroom and at home.

Try it for a season

In all the USoL programmes we visited between 2022–2025, we heard that each one began as a trial. One teacher in a school started with a trolley, and a handful of children. Today, three and a half years later, they have built an outdoor classroom

and have a regular Bush School four days per week. Another provider, an independent organisation, approached a school to take a handful of children out for a morning, once a week. Now, two years on, it is part of their school culture. Whatever path you may choose to take, start with a trial, a season. Just give it a go!

Resources and Research

We encourage you to head to [our website](#) to learn more about our USoL research and the resources we have produced to support educators and organisations.

The [‘How To Guide’](#) is a clear and practical step-by-step guide for helping you give hope to our most dsregulated children in our primary schools.

The [Phase 4 Research Report](#) outlines the findings that underpinned our How To Guide.

The [Highlights Summary](#) shares the summary of the four phases of research.

*Names have been changed to protect the children's privacy



About the Authors

Katie Earle

I come to this research as a Bush School founder and teacher, and as a long-time advocate for this specialised form of learning. Over time, this work has also positioned me as a practitioner-researcher and connector, working alongside schools, providers, and communities across Aotearoa. My lived experience inevitably shapes how I interpret and present these findings, including how I recognise their value and their relevance for practical application in real-world educational settings.

Dr Judy Bruce

My background is in Alternative Education, youth development and education. I work as Senior Lecturer at AUT and Associate at the Leadership Lab.