

**Present Day Utopias?
Listening to Alternative Possibilities for
Educational Futures.**

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Abstract

Educational futures scholars argue that today's education system is no longer fit for purpose. They argue that major change is needed in response to certain mega-trends beyond education, but schools have failed to keep up with the pace of change. These scholars argue that much of the rhetoric around 'future focused education' is superficial and insufficient to generate the radical change required. Educational futures theorist Keri Facer argues that we need to move away from attempting to predict and be ready for the future. Instead we should seek to "understand the present", to look for new possibilities for our futures in what is happening today. In the research described here, people involved in various forms of alternative education were interviewed. The aim was to explore the ideas, philosophies and practices found in these spaces as a way to investigate what the margins of the education system might have to say to the mainstream. Several interesting themes of value to educational futures discussions were revealed. Firstly, relationships – across multiple contexts – between people, ideas and the environment are central. The second theme is that alternative perspectives on time and trust differ markedly from those in the mainstream. Thirdly, there is a commitment to developing a love of learning that continues throughout life. An additional (and unexpected) important finding was the apparent developmental affordances for the adults working in these centres. The alternative education centres studied had clearly articulated purposes, underpinned by specific philosophies. They were also characterized by the presence of adults able to think in divergent ways about education. This culture, which could be summarized as "thinking for ourselves, thinking with others", has much to offer a mainstream education system interested in re-imagining itself for new and different futures.


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Attestation of Authorship

I hereby declare that this submission is my own work and that, to the best of my knowledge and belief, it contains no material previously published or written by another person (except where explicitly defined in the acknowledgements), nor material which to a substantial extent has been submitted for the award of any other degree or diploma of a university or other institution of higher learning.


Signature

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1.0 Introduction

Since we cannot know what knowledge will be most needed in the future, it is senseless to try to teach it in advance. Instead, we should try to turn out people who love learning so much and learn so well they will be able to learn whatever needs to be learned.

John Holt, 1964

Educational futurists propose that our current education system is in need of urgent attention (Dator, 2009, 2014; Gilbert, 2005, 2016, 2017; Sardar, 2010). They argue that a lack of significant change and continued ignorance about the level of radical change required in schools could result in the gradual collapse of the entire system itself (Sardar, 2010). With many aspects of mass schooling still linked to its 19th century origins, an inability to think differently about schooling could be an impediment to the level of change required. While some superficial change is evident both in New Zealand and internationally, traditional aspects of the schooling experience for young people still remain. The approach at most mainstream primary schools is to continue to process children in batches by age, with certain types of information delivered at certain ages, and an expectation that children meet standardised norms both academically and socially. Any deviation from these norms is viewed as unusual or as not meeting the standard. Traditional, hierarchical power structures still exist, with children experiencing few opportunities to have a say in their learning or in how and when they access their educational experience. These elements are generally unchallenged by wider society, and most people send their children to a mainstream primary school.

However, others question mainstream philosophies and choose to enrol their children in alternative settings, which, by their very existence, defy the ‘common sense’ approach of enrolling a child in a state-funded and controlled, school. Both teachers and parents in these spaces think differently and hold alternative worldviews that enable them to question the unquestionable (Peck, 2009), and challenge the notion of common sense. These alternative spaces are a source of interest to inform new thinking on educational futures and to also question the future in general. Considering alternative perspectives and viewpoints is one way of rethinking educational futures and provides an opportunity to unpack existing assumptions and restrictions on thinking when envisioning multiple alternative educational futures (Milojevic, 2005). The ability to see and consider multiple perspectives is one of many new essential dispositions described

by those in educational futures research (Drago-Severson, 2016) as is an ability to be comfortable with the uncertainty of our uncertain futures.

Uncertain, complex and postnormal are some of the terms used to describe the future (Sardar, 2010). For the past two decades, educational futurists have debated what is needed to bring our global approach to education into the 21st century. An industrialised model of education, established to meet the economic and social needs of the 19th and early 20th centuries, still largely remains in place in mainstream education models. Freire (2000) termed this model the “banking concept of education” (p.72) whereby the teacher deposits information into the learner, the learner receives it, memorises it and repeats it. Today we reinforce this model through the regular testing of children, including primary school-aged children, to assess if they have learnt such information.

New research around how learning is experienced challenges this traditional model (Claxton, 2008) as do new ideas around the concept of what knowledge is, how it can be used, and what forms of it are most valuable to *teach* (Bereiter, 2002; Gilbert, 2005). Some critical theorists argue that the kind of knowledge currently valued in schools follows that of a predominantly westernised view of the world, which may exclude other cultures, belief structures and marginalised or minority groups (Milojevic, 2005). *What* is taught in schools is also often driven by the current economic times, and a society’s requirements for its future workers. What is less visible are discussions around the actual function and purpose of school itself, which would, in turn, open up debate around what type of knowledge is important. Gilbert (2016) proposes that the slow progress in fundamental change in education is due to the absence of this discussion and suggests that our priority should be reframing how we see knowledge, learning and intellectual thought. It is simply *how* we think about education, about schools, and about the future that may be our greatest barrier to innovative approaches in changing our educational landscape. Gilbert (2016) suggests that the “conceptual categories that structure our thinking are themselves part of the problem.” (p.188). This inability to think differently could be the difference between innovative radical transformation of a system and superficial surface-level changes to schooling.

Educational policymakers and educators may view some changes in education as ‘innovative’ and ‘21st century schooling’, but many of these changes are superficial and

do not address the entrenched norms of schooling. These norms include set class times, children starting school at a certain age, and adults having virtually all the power in schools. Another aspect of schooling that is largely unquestioned is the discussion around what students are learning – what knowledge is valued, which ‘learning areas’ are seen as essential for students, and which aspects of The New Zealand Curriculum are not valued or measured. Educational research is one way of uncovering more information around these assumptions and considering alternatives to retaining the status quo.

One criticism of the current approach to educational futures research is that there is insufficient critical theory-based research. Ahlqvist & Rhisiart (2015) argue that educational futures research is predominantly represented by empirical research that assumes a future similar to today, but different (e.g. Toffler’s (1974) ‘assumed futures’ or Sardar & Sweeney’s (2016) ‘extended present’). They claim that there is inadequate debate around what kind of future we are actually preparing our learners for – an already-accepted globalised, technologically-driven future, or a range of different possible alternative futures (Milojevic, 2005).

Applying a critical theory lens to educational research is one way to hear from those with alternative perspectives and experiences to our own, and can help challenge existing assumptions around education. This approach encourages us to question the current status quo and allows us to temporarily step out of our own skins to engage with the minds of others. Through this process, we can hold multiple perspectives lightly and be open to pluralistic thought, which may allow us to experience richer imaginings of the present that don’t have to, as yet, make sense to us (Miller, 2011). Educational researcher Keri Facer (2013) proposes that, in order to think differently about the future, and to generate imaginative thought in that process, we should look at the “possibilities of the present” (p.136), and search for “novelty” and “surprise” (p.141). Futures studies researcher Sohail Inayatullah (2005) proposes we seek out such potential spaces for surprise on the margins, and look to the “periphery” (p.9). When considering the educational system as a whole, it is the teachers and learners at its very edges that this research addresses – those teaching and learning in the areas of unschooling, home-schooling, democratic schools and forest schools.

Alternative perspectives and views on education were gathered from a series of interviews with representatives from these alternative educational models. Findings from the research reveal some aspects of the educational experience in these centres that differ from the mainstream primary school experience. Firstly, teachers focus on *relationships* across multiple contexts (including learners' relationships with the environment). Secondly, adults in these spaces hold alternative concepts of both *time* (both in children's ages and stages, and in the flexibility of timetabling) and *trust* (where trust is given not earned). Thirdly, that the purpose of these spaces is to develop a *love of learning* that extends well beyond time spent inside a learning institution, and extends into everyday life and life as an adult.

From these findings, it is proposed that these alternative spaces help us in two, quite discrete ways to reframe educational futures thinking away from the prevailing notion of preparing our learners to 'function' in a competitive, globalised, technologically saturated and unstable environment. Firstly, these spaces have moved from *talking* about how schools could be different, reformed and reconceptualised, to making a commitment to *living* this notion and doing something about it. By distancing themselves from mainstream education, they can re-think the purpose of school, and transform it into one that they see as best for their learners today as well as in the future. That purpose is to allow the learner, the self, to emerge in a setting where they can have time and space to develop their passions. They will often follow the New Zealand Curriculum as a whole document, without prioritising the Learning Areas over and above the Key Competencies and/or the Values. This approach highlights aspects of the New Zealand Curriculum that are not always valued or measured when viewing the 'achievement' of an individual learner. Their purpose is to allow the learner to experience lived democracy and participate fully and authentically in developing their learning pathway, so they understand themselves as a learner and take this understanding with them when they leave.

Secondly, teachers, leaders and parents in these spaces display evidence of thinking about education in a different way to those in more mainstream spaces. They hold different perspectives and worldviews and are committed to them. Adults reflect on their 'transformation' in these spaces and report real shifts in their thinking, displaying the ability to discard long-held belief structures about education. This allows them to be open to creative thought about the possibilities within schooling to provide what they

believe is best for their learners for today primarily, but also for the future. This transformation featured most noticeably for adults in forest school settings.¹ Some adults working in these alternative models of education were also open to the opinions and worldviews of those in the mainstream, and sought out opportunities to connect and converse with them about education. This very approach and openness again highlights the ability to hold multiple perspectives at one time (pluralism) and is aligned to futurists' recommendations of how adults will need to be comfortable working with those who have different worldviews to themselves. By their very existence, these alternative spaces defy the mainstream, yet adults functioning in these spaces can engage with those in mainstream education, communicate with them and, at times, seek out their advice and collaboration. Several participants proposed future opportunities to build more connections through 'cross-sector' initiatives; their teachers visiting mainstream schools and having teachers from mainstream schools visit them. It is this openness to learning from those with different perspectives, rather than taking an us-versus-them approach that could help us to think differently about the future of education.

An alternative concept of time features in the findings and is central to the way the adults in these spaces can again let go of traditional, westernised, hegemonic views of time. Adults in these spaces view time differently. This is evident in timetabling of the school day and in the expectations placed on children at certain times of their childhood. There is no urgency around children meeting required expectations of learning – to reach a predetermined standard by a certain age.

Mainstream educators and education policymakers could well look to these spaces as sources of interest, not for what they *do* to prepare their learners for an uncertain, complex future, but in terms of how adults in these spaces *think* about education and its role in preparing learners for life. The purpose of this thesis is to uncover the current possibilities in alternative spaces in order to help those in mainstream education think differently about educational futures. Listening to these alternative perspectives and using the ideas embedded in them to think differently about the future of education, is likely to challenge many of mainstream education's long-held assumptions and, consequently, allow it to see its future differently. Following this introduction, Chapter Two provides an overview of the educational futures literature and the specific forms of

¹ See Section 2.3.4.4 below for an explanation of the 'forest school' concept.

alternative education covered in this thesis. Chapter Three explains the methodological approach used in the research and details the research methods. The key findings are presented in Chapter Four, Chapter Five discusses these findings and what they represent to new thinking around educational futures, and Chapter Six provides some conclusions and recommendations for the future.

2.0 Literature review

The future is already potentially present in the shape of the blind spots and contradictions of the present – in its silences and exclusions, its conflicts and fragmentations.

Terry Eagleton (2005)

2.1 Introduction

Young people today are constantly being told that the world they are growing into is one that is complex, uncertain and unpredictable. The way we are preparing our youth for this future, and the role schools play in this process, is the focus of much commentary and debate by scholars of educational futures. These commentators argue that our educational system is not keeping pace with the changes brought about by globalisation and technological advances (Brynjolfsson & McAfee, 2012) or the significant environmental and climate changes now well under way (Gilbert, 2016). Our education system was set up to meet the needs of the 19th and 20th centuries (Gidley, 2012; Robinson, 2011) and major change is now needed if we are to prepare young people for these uncertain futures (Claxton, 2008; Gilbert, 2005, 2016, 2017).

Some futurists refer to the the uncertainty, complexity, challenges and ‘wicked’ problems that lie ahead as ‘postnormal’ times (Bolstad, 2011; Dator, 2009, 2014; Frame, 2008; Frame & Brown, 2008; Rayner, 2006; Sardar, 2010). In response to this educational futures theorists have argued that our current education systems are no longer fit for purpose, that we need to develop models of learning that are future-focused and/or more appropriate for the 21st century (Bolstad et al., 2012; Dumont & Istance, 2010; Gilbert, 2005; Kress, 2008; Leadbeater, 2005). Some argue that we need new ways of viewing, using and creating knowledge (Bereiter, 2002; Gilbert, 2005); others emphasise new ideas about human learning (Bereiter, 2002; Kress, 2008; Wells & Claxton, 2008); and others focus on the socio-economic implications of the exponential growth in the speed and capacity of digital technologies (Brynjolfsson & McAfee, 2012).

As this work has been taken up in policy contexts, two major responses have emerged. The first involves the identification of new ‘21st century’ skills needed by learners. In some contexts the term 21st century skills is used to mean the ‘four Cs’ of creativity, communication, critical thinking and collaboration. The capacity to innovate and be

entrepreneurial are sometimes added to this list. In other contexts, flexibility and adaptive expertise are emphasised (Dumont & Istance, 2010), while in still others the focus is on the capacity for autonomous and continuous lifelong learning (Bolstad et al., 2012; Dumont & Istance, 2010). The second response has been to focus on responding to, and considering the educational affordances of, the new digital technologies. The term ‘digital literacies’ has emerged to describe the technical capabilities needed by young people to function in today’s technologically saturated environments. Related to this has been a commitment to the development of large open-plan learning spaces designed for collaboration (known as Innovative Learning Environments or ILEs).

According to Gilbert (2017), these two approaches are not enough to address the complexity that can be expected in the next two to three decades. She argues that what requires more urgent attention and consideration is a third approach to educational futures. The new understandings we have about knowledge and learning (Bereiter, 2002; Claxton, 2011; Gilbert, 2005; Kress, 2008) have not received the same level of thought and implementation as the previous two approaches: the four Cs and digital literacies. What is missing is the discussion around what kind of knowledge is valued, how we use knowledge, how we *think* about knowledge, and how we *think* about thinking. Curriculum thinking has yet to engage with the explosion of new knowledge or the way knowledge is constantly changing and being replaced. (Gilbert, 2005, Weinberger, 2012). Gilbert (2017) would argue that this is an example of pretending that we have new ideas when really these ‘new ideas’ are simply being assimilated into a system that was constructed during the Industrial Revolution. Gilbert (2017) proposes that our inability to rethink our view on knowledge, and our apparent resistance to thinking differently about how learners acquire or create new knowledge, is likely to prevent the change our education system requires. Adult development theorists argue that these new ways of thinking will require major cognitive shift by those involved. Simply adding new ideas into the existing mental schema of educators will not work: change to their meaning-making *system* is required (Berger, 2011; Kegan, 1994).

This literature review will draw on the following fields of work: the educational futures literature, utopian thought, and the alternative education literature to summarise some common threads and ideas. One idea common to these literatures is the notion of thinking differently about the future by using different tools and deconstructing some of our assumptions about education in order to envision multiple, diverse alternative

futures. Some educational futurists propose that one way of facilitating this alternative way of thinking is to explore what is happening in alternative education, models of education that sit well outside what happens in existing mainstream models (Sliwka, 2008; Sliwka & Yee, 2015). This literature review will discuss the possibilities of those alternative spaces for inspiring a different kind of thinking around educational futures.

2.2 Educational futures

It is a cliché that we are living in an era of unprecedented change. It is a reasonable conclusion that schools must also change, but an absurd non-sequitur to believe that this can be limited to buying more computers, more “effective” instruction or better management techniques.

Terry Wrigley, 2011

2.2.1 A background to educational futures

Over the last twenty years, the terms ‘educational futures’, ‘future-focused education’ and ‘21st century learning’ have become endemic in national and international education conversations, policy development and curriculum documents (Bolstad, 2011). Bolstad (2011) attempts to distinguish three interconnected notions of taking a “future focus in education” (p.3) when she describes how firstly, it is thinking about students’ future lives, secondly, about the actual future of schooling itself, and finally about how these students can prepare for the complexities of problems in the future. For the purposes of this research, it is this final element that is of most interest; the area that Bolstad (2011) concludes is the most difficult to understand and attempt to predict and plan around. This area of educational futures builds on the notion of ‘wicked problems’ that require different, divergent thinking and multiple diverse solutions; problems that cannot be solved by traditional predictive modelling and planning approaches (Frame, 2008). The complexity of the problems we will face has also been described as ‘postnormal’. Initially proposed by Funtowicz and Ravetz (1995) within a science context, the term ‘postnormal’ is used to refer to the period we are now in, a period in which uncertainty, complexity and value conflict, along with high-stakes decision-making with tight time constraints are ‘the new normal’. For Sardar (2010) the postnormal is characterised by the ‘three Cs’ (complexity, chaos and contradictions) that will shape and influence our experience of the future. Educational futures scholars argue that education policy and practice should be taking account of these elements of the future in designing learning programmes for today’s young people.

2.2.1 Futures studies

One way that futures theorists analyse the future is to use plausible, probable, possible and preferable futures (Henchey, 1978, p.26 cited in Sardar & Sweeney, 2016). Sardar and Sweeney (2016) disagree with this approach, suggesting instead that the level of chaos, complexity and contradiction within the scenarios of today and tomorrow render these approaches to futures forecasting redundant. They discuss the Three Horizons model, which helps uncover “our current situation in a variety of ways and helps illuminate the choices available” (p.2) during postnormal times of “far-reaching, rapid and simultaneous changes” (p.2).

The Three Horizons model attempts to provide a tool for policy makers and others to explore alternative futures, critique existing predictions and navigate uncertainty in postnormal times. The model consists of considering the Extended Present (simply expanding and extending on the present for the next five to 10 years), Familiar Futures (within the next 10 to 20 years, often colonised with images from science fiction movies and images of the future we are familiar with) and, finally, Unthought Futures. It is this Unthought Futures idea that I want to pick up on in this project.

Sardar and Sweeney (2016) describe Unthought Futures as the unthought-of that “lies beyond our imagination” (p.8). It involves ideas we cannot access if we restrict ourselves to today’s assumptions and worldviews to the point, ideas that we cannot articulate because we literally cannot imagine them. Unthought Futures is a space where Sardar and Sweeney (2016) propose we “need to examine small things and imagine their impact on larger scales and upon multiple overlapping systems over time.” (p.9). Differing levels of ignorance and uncertainty are discussed alongside the model, including Invincible Ignorance. This occurs when we are ignorant of the “potential risks of recent developments” which, as a side effect, provides us with a “false sense of confidence in existing paradigms and modes of knowing, being and doing.” (p.8). They propose that, “We can only grapple with Invincible Ignorance by questioning our axioms, by critiquing our basic and long cherished assumptions, and by totally rethinking our worldview.” (p.8).

New *kinds* of thinking are required if we are to participate in the space of Unthought Futures, if we are to contribute to the transformation in education that theorists such as Gilbert et al., (2012) and Inayatullah (2005) argue is necessary.

2.2.1.1 New ways of thinking about education's future

An alternative way of viewing education, from its purpose to how it functions as a system, requires a different level of thinking so that decisions are unfiltered by past assumptions and are receptive to multiple perspectives and worldviews. Contemporary theorists of adult cognitive development argue that the kind of thinking required for dealing with complexity and uncertainty requires a different mindset, one that is not presently common in the general adult population. For example, Kegan (1994) proposes that in order to deal with the complexities of modern life, thinkers must move from a level of consciousness based on the needs of what they have always known and inherently perceived as a part of themselves (what he calls a 'socialised' mind), to a next level, termed 'self-authoring'. Following Kegan, Berger (2011) maintains that about forty per cent of adults are functioning (and settle at) at the level of the 'socialised' mind. Gilbert & Bull (2015) argue that this has significant implications for our collective capacity to adopt the kind of thinking required for seriously considering education's possible futures. In order to move from a socialised to a self-authored mind, one must experience a mind-set change, a move from one way of making sense of the world to another. This is much more than adding new information into one's existing schema; it involves schema change. Drago-Severson (2016) proposes that one way of supporting this kind of 'transformational' learning is to provide opportunities to unpack the assumptions and re-examine the belief structures that influence a person's thinking; to look at alternative perspectives; and to participate in imagining different ways of behaving and thinking. In a research project designed to investigate the extent to which a group of teachers could undergo this kind of transformational learning, Gilbert and Bull (2015) found that, while all participants claimed to have experienced transformation, on their measures, only about a third had. This would appear to indicate that promoting major change in the *way* teachers think is not a viable way of transforming the education system for the future.

Another body of work emphasises what is known as 'utopic thought'. Using utopic thought we can temporarily step back from what we have always known and be

receptive to unusual and strange concepts. Futurists continue to debate the positive and negative elements of such an approach (Milojevic, 2003), and the ability to see both perspectives allows us to consider utopic thought as a constructive, or otherwise, tool in educational futures thinking.

2.2.2 Utopic thought in education

Utopia is described by John Carey (1999, p.xi, cited Milojevic, 2003) as meaning “nowhere” or “no-place” as well as a “good place” or a “perfect place.” Educational theorist Paulo Freire challenges us to ‘dare to dream’ when thinking of education ideals but suggests that educational utopias should be viewed in a “*possible dream*” (Roberts, 2015, p.381), not fantasy or something that resides only in the imagination, but something that can possibly come to fruition (Roberts, 2015). In terms of its relevance to educational futures, McLaren and Suoranta (2009) describe a notion of holding a concrete-utopian view rather than a utopian view, and Wright (2009a, cited in Fielding & Moss, 2011) argues for real utopias that are “grounded in the real potentials of humanity” (p.4). It may be that a balance is somehow required in order to think beyond our imagination, but believing that it is indeed possible. There is some concern that in utopic thinking (as well as educational futures thinking), dominant voices may prevail (Milojevic, 2003; Inayatullah, 2005), ignoring those outside of the dominant, westernised, mainstream sector of society. Inayatullah (2005) suggests that in considering educational futures, we are at risk of simply thinking in Sardar and Sweeney’s (2016) Extended Present space, where the future is colonised by what is currently occurring. Milojevic (2005) suggests we consider and explore *alternative futures* to help us to “destabilize hegemonic futures” (p.30).

Envisioning alternative educational futures via utopic thought is limited, some argue, by notions of ‘common sense’ (McLaren and Suoranta, 2009). However, according to Dator’s Second Law of the Future, “any useful idea about the future should appear to be ridiculous” (Dator, Sweeney & Yee, 2015, p.135). Along with this notion of ‘ridiculousness’, Sardar & Sweeny (2016) encourage ‘global weirding’, where futurists not only engage with, but also embrace, the truly weird. Schultz (2014, as cited in Sardar & Sweeny, 2016) supports this notion. She suggests Dator’s Second Law should specify ‘ridiculous only’: for her, useful ideas about the future should “appear to be transgressive (challenge paradigms) and repellent (challenge values).” (p.3).

Some would argue that the idea of children directing their own learning pathway, or the idea of five-year-olds having as much say in the hiring and firing of teaching staff as the principal of a democratic school is ridiculous, transgressive and repellent. Similarly, the idea of having all learning occur in an outdoor setting all day, regardless of the weather, as in the case of forest schools, could also fit this description. However, this project's aim is to consider the potential of these ideas—ridiculousness, weirding and transgression—for educational futures thinking.

Inayatullah (2005) reinforces this thinking when he suggests that when uncovering insights during futures scanning processes we also seek out data beyond traditional sources, encompassing things that may fall into the arena of data that is not normal, sane, conventional or “acceptable reality” (p.8).

Some futurists recommend seeking creative ideas and possibilities not only in the realm of vivid imagination and idealistic fantasies or educational utopias, but also in the present – beyond what is known to us in traditional and mainstream education settings (Facer, 2013; Sliwka, 2008). As a creator of future-based educational scenarios, Facer (2013) recommends looking to the present for possibilities for the future. She challenges researchers to uncover the “existing and latent assets of local communities” (p.141) and cites Tsing & Pollman (2005, p.107) who suggest that “unexpected connections can make new things come into being.” Facer asks researchers to look for the “powerful potential for surprise, disruption and novelty in existence in young people, in schools, in society” (p.141). Similarly, Adams & Groves (2007) propose that “latent futures” could already be in existence but out of our view.

Facer (2013) acknowledges the work of Fielding and Moss (2011) and their thinking around the notion of a ‘common school’ and the discussion around utopias in educational-futures discourse. Fielding and Moss (2011) argue that there are alternatives to the dominant voice in educational futures; much of what is currently advocated in the name of educational futures actually *already exists* in alternative education, in particular, in democratic schools.

Alternative education is nothing new. In a variety of different forms, over a century or more, alternative education practitioners have been challenging the dominant discourse around education philosophy and practice, and developing innovations in practice

(Sliwka, 2008). Sliwka (2008) suggests that mainstream education should look to alternative schools for “meaningful models” (p.108) when considering the reform of mainstream education:

Wherever educational alternatives combine customised learning with collaborative group learning in authentic, inquiry-oriented projects, provide their students with access to diverse knowledge sources and assess them for deeper understanding and further learning, alternative schools seem to be ahead of mainstream education and can serve as meaningful models for the renewal of mainstream education across the globe. (p.108)

If we hold onto past assumptions about education when looking at the present, it is possible that our educational futures will be colonised by pre-existing social structures and norms that do little to set the stage for divergent, ‘ridiculous’ thought in creating future scenarios, ideals and utopias. Critical theory is one lens through which to view the possibilities for the future and the unpacking of the present. Chapter Three discusses this in more detail and provides an overview of its direct relevance to the approach taken for this research. One aspect of critical theory is the notion of listening to the voices of those outside, or marginal to, mainstream thought. In the education context, there are many groups considered marginal to the mainstream. These groups, representing many different voices, structures and philosophies, tend to be grouped together under the heading of ‘alternative education’.

The next section looks at this generalised group. Its aim is to unpack the term ‘alternative education’ and to seek out potential spaces of inspiration for utopic thought. Combining the thinking of Facer, Sliwka and Miller (looking at the possibilities of the present, exploring alternative futures, and seeing what exists in alternative spaces) with Inayatullah’s suggestion of thinking about the future by looking at the very edges or margins, and acknowledging Dator’s and Sardar and Sweeney’s notions of ‘ridiculous’ thought, the next section aims to investigate the possibilities offered by different types of alternative spaces for this kind of utopic thought.

2.3 Alternative Education

2.3.1 Introduction

This section of the literature review provides an overview of alternative education. It explores the history of the term ‘alternative education’, and looks at the profiles of a number of different types of alternative education.

2.3.2 History of alternative education

Alternative education is widely thought of as the provision of options for parents and children that fall outside of mainstream traditional schooling. There are many variants, including those that can be attached to mainstream school settings (Kura Kaupapa Māori, Montessori, Reggio Emilia); those that are deliberately positioned as far away from mainstream school settings as possible (unschooling, world schooling); and a variety of other types that fall somewhere in between.

Historically, alternative education can be traced back to the time of the establishment of formal schooling in the first half of the 19th century where it was available for parents seeking alternatives to state-provided education (Swilka, 2008). Prominent influences include Jean-Jacques Rousseau’s *Emile* published in 1762 with its focus on the development of the individual child; Maria Montessori’s *Casa de Bambini*, which opened in 1907 and also focused on child development; the Waldorf-Steiner schools established in 1919; and John Dewey’s critique of traditional schooling, *Democracy and Education*, which favoured learning through experience and action over rote learning and memorisation and was a key influencer of the progressive education movement (Dewey, 1916/1944). Later influences included John Holt (school reform, then homeschooling and later unschooling), A.S. Neill (democratic schooling), Ivan Illich’s book *Deschooling Society* (homeschooling, unschooling), and Paulo Freire (critical pedagogy).

The establishment and ongoing existence of alternative forms of education challenged the purpose of state-provided education itself. For the theorists listed above, “the process of education” cannot be forced or imposed on a child: education must come from “within the child” (Boyask, McPhail, Kaur, & O’Connell, 2008, p. 19). State-run

education is seen as imposing external goals and ideals on children, as indoctrinating them into societal norms. Furthermore, the economic imperatives of the time are seen as influencing the type of knowledge taught in schools, in order to prepare children for the future in 'work'. In alternative education, which has progressive education as its roots, children are generally seen in a different way. They are viewed as people to be developed into who *they are*, not who they *should be* to suit the needs of the state.

Boyask et al. (2008) describe New Zealand's educational history as being rich in experimentation with alternative education. There were some key periods, in particular, the 1970s, with the visits of leading progressive educational reformers and theorists Paulo Freire and Ivan Illich. The flow-on from their visits created many experimental classrooms, some of which drew on earlier approaches developed by the visionary educationalist Elwyn Richardson at Oruaiti School in the Far North (see: Richardson, 1964). Discovery 1 in Christchurch emerged as an experimental school. This school is still open today, maintaining many of its original philosophical commitments.

The absence of any real impact of experimental schooling on mainstream schooling and widespread policy is lamented by Boyask et al., (2008). These authors propose that alternative education sites are "significant to examine" (p.32) because they enable us to build concepts of possibilities for future societies, providing "windows into real-life laboratories" (p.32), allowing us to consider the purpose of schools in the 21st century.

Today, alternative education continues to evolve and redefine itself. Variants of the above co-exist alongside new models (e.g. forest schools and world schooling). Some deliberately stand alone, while others have partially merged into the mainstream, either as schools-within-schools on shared land, or as sister schools. One-day schools, where children attend their local mainstream school for four days of the week and an alternative site for one day, can also cause a merging of two philosophies of education. According to Sliwka (2008), the alternative education sector is fragmented, which makes it hard to track the numbers involved in alternative education at any one time.

2.3.3 Defining alternative education

The term 'alternative education' tends to be used generically to describe a wide range of philosophies and practices. Kraftl (2013) defines alternative education sites as those that

are outside of state funding and administration, but here in New Zealand some alternative education models are funded by the government. For some, state funding is a conflict.

According to Kraftl (2013, p.4), “autonomous learning spaces” are a key feature of alternative education, while for Sliwka (2008) it is characterised by a “special, often innovative curriculum and a flexible programme of study which is based to a large extent on the individual student’s interests and needs” (p.93). When attempting to contrast alternative education with mainstream education, Woods & Woods (2009) argue that the former is “grounded in alternative philosophies and cultures” (p.3) whereas the latter represents the “main conventions of publicly funded school education as generally understood in Western countries” (p.3). Kraftl (2013a) suggests that some forms of alternative education “*knowingly* distance themselves” (p.437) from mainstream education. Conversely, Vaughan (2004) asserts that many forms of alternative education are now evident in mainstream settings, thus blurring the boundaries between the two. She suggests that, for various reasons, earlier forms of alternative education have been “recast” (p.8) as different pathways for accessing education in New Zealand.

Vaughan (2004a) cites the New Zealand Government’s definition of alternative education as a “provision for young people ‘alienated’ from school and at risk” (p.13). In 2015, the Ministry of Education’s Alternative Education website described Alternative Education (AE) in the following way:

Negative experiences in school may have led some students to become habitual truants, while other students are deemed behaviourally challenging and are consequently excluded from school. AE aims to provide a constructive alternative delivery of education for these students, in a nurturing environment with high expectations of student potential. (Te Kete Ipurangi, 2015)

Since 2015 the description cited by Vaughan has been edited, possibly to reflect a new view of alternative education in New Zealand (for example, the reference to ‘behaviourally challenging’ students has been removed).

Alternative education is a short term intervention which supports students who have been alienated from mainstream education. It re-engages students in a meaningful learning programme targeted to their individual needs and supports them to transition back to mainstream education, further education, training or employment. (Te Kete Ipurangi, n.d.)

For Vaughan (2004) it is important to differentiate between the Ministry of Education's definition, focused on re-engaging students to transition them back into the mainstream, and other definitions that emphasise alternative education's links to progressive, child-centred, democratic philosophies of education. The project described here follows this approach. It does not focus on Alternative Education (AE) as defined in the later Ministry definition above. Rather, its focus is on forms of alternative education that have been deliberately chosen by children and their families as an alternative to the mainstream, not forms they have been forced into accepting. In addition, the study's focus is on forms of alternative education offered to primary age children (age five to eleven).

2.3.4 'Most alternative' alternatives

In some contexts, alternative education has been assimilated and/or blended into the mainstream. For example, there are now many Montessori and/or Reggio Emilia 'branded' early childhood centres in New Zealand. However, this has caused problems. These centres often have to choose between maintaining a pure commitment to the Montessori philosophy (and eschewing government support) and complying with mainstream reporting and assessment requirements. As Vaughan (2004) points out, this conflict between philosophy and funding can be very disruptive, to the point of closure for some centres (see also: Nagata, 2007; Peck, 2009). However, some centres have been able to persevere under these conditions, striking a balance to enable the continuation of their service to their communities. They include Timatanga Community School (Auckland), Tamariki School and Ao Tawhiti Unlimited Discovery (Christchurch) and Summerhill (Suffolk, England).

In the early stages of this project, the plan was to speak with representatives from across the alternative education sector, including Montessori, Steiner, forest schools and democratic schools. However, it soon became apparent that this was too broad a spectrum. Many Montessori and Steiner centres exist within mainstream settings (e.g. the Montessori units on state school sites at Glendowie and Howick). I decided to see this as a limitation in terms of my search for surprise, novelty, potential disruption and ridiculousness. My focus shifted to spaces that could be considered most removed from the everyday, 'commonsense' notions we associate with present-day state primary schooling. As outlined above, Inayatullah (2005) proposes that we search for the future

on the edges, the margins, not at the centre of where power is located. Following this, I looked for the ‘most alternative’ spaces, those furthest away from state-based influence and alignment. The result of this was a focus on the following four forms of alternative education:

- Unschooling
- Homeschooling
- Democratic schools or schools with a strong democratic environment
- Forest schools

These four are very much on the edges of the mainstream. Unschooling and homeschooling, by definition, are detached from it. Democratic schooling rejects the ‘commonsense’ notion that adults should hold all authority and power in a school. Forest schools are premised on the idea that children should lead their own learning, in the outdoors. While these spaces could overlap (for example, homeschoolers could access a one-day forest school, and forest schools could have a strong democratic environment), their philosophies are distinct. The next section provides some background information on the philosophies of each of these four spaces.

2.3.4.1 Unschooling

Educationist Ivan Illich created an international conversation around the negative impact of schooling when he released his book *Deschooling Society* (1973). He argued that universal education was impossible and that alternatives to it could include educational “webs” (p.5). Clearly ahead of his time, he describes an alternative to school whereby people would connect with others through webs (based at libraries or other community facilities), and be “matched up” (p.31) with likeminded people with whom they could discuss shared areas of interest.

Influenced by Illich, the U.S. educationist John Holt argued that reforming public education was impossible, that true education required ‘unschooling’, which he defined as follows:

This is also known as interest driven, child-led, natural, organic, eclectic, or self-directed [...] When pressed, I define unschooling as allowing children as much freedom to learn in the world, as their parents can comfortably bear. The advantage of this method is that it doesn’t require you, the parent, to become someone else – a professional teacher pouring knowledge into child-vessels on a planned basis. Instead you live and learn together, pursuing questions and

interests as they arise and using conventional schooling on an “on demand” basis, if at all. (Farenga, 2010)

Unschooling and home schooling are related concepts. However, homeschooling is not necessarily unschooling.

2.3.4.2 Homeschooling

In attempting to define homeschooling, Murphy (2012) proposes two key aspects. First is a conscious decision by parents to have their children educated *not* in an institution, but in the home. Second, it is a “deliberate rejection” (p.5) of the kind of schooling provided by the government. According to Kraftl (2013a), homeschooling features “different modes of feeling, timing, learning and, crucially, relating between adult and child.” (p.448).

Homeschoolers challenge the ‘common-sense’ view that schools are good for children’s social development (Medlin, 2000). Supporting this, Medlin, (2000) cites a number of large-scale research projects highlighting significant positive differences in social maturity measures for homeschooled children when compared to traditionally schooled children.

Describing the pedagogy of homeschooling, Vaughan (2004) lists the following elements: an “independent student-driven programme quite unlike the national curriculum” (p. 105); close relationships between learner and teacher; and a markedly different approach to the timetabling of learning - timetabling is either “non-existent or highly flexible” (p.105).

Vaughan (2004) estimates that in New Zealand, homeschooling families represent just one per cent of school-age children. However, she reports that this figure is growing, as supported by Facer (2011) who says homeschooling numbers are on the rise in the United Kingdom. The Millennium Project’s State of the Future Report predicts that by 2030 schools will be abolished and home-based learning will become the norm (The Millennium Project - Global Futures Studies and Research, n.d.).

2.3.4.3 Democratic schools

Educationalist A.S. Neill is a prominent figure in the history of democratic schools, most notably for his vision of creating Summerhill in 1921. This boarding school in Suffolk, England, features self-directed learning, optional courses and classes, and an environment where children and adults have an equal say in the running of the school (Stronach & Piper, 2008). Democracy is practiced through whole-school meetings (Woods & Woods, 2009).

Sudbury Valley School (SVS), a democratic school in Massachusetts in the United States, has inspired a spinoff culture of similarly structured schools across the world. More than 30 schools now identify themselves as Sudbury schools. There is no official association, and SVS specifically states that this is to make it clear that there is no official connection or accrediting of the practice or philosophy of independent schools claiming ‘Sudbury’ status. SVS has been functioning since 1968 with the same principles as Summerhill. SVS also features weekly whole-school meetings where decisions are made regarding school rules (these schools have many rules co-created with the learners to enable a sense of freedom and understanding of what is and isn’t acceptable); purchasing decisions; the formation of any new committees or groups; and the recruitment of teachers. At SVS, a four-year-old has the same amount of say, through voting, as the older children and teachers (Gray, 2013). It is this aspect of democratic schools that some would find novel, surprising or ridiculous. Unlike Summerhill, SVS is not a boarding school and students attend for the day only.

Anthropologist Peter Gray and co-founder of SVS David Chanoff, have carried out longitudinal studies on the post-school lives of over 800 SVS graduates (Gray & Chanoff, 1986). These studies show that

[...] the students go on to lead deeply satisfying lives. Most are unusually resilient. Almost all feel that they are in control of their destiny. In disproportionately high numbers – 42 percent – Sudbury graduates become entrepreneurs. The alumni study shows that a “spectacularly high number” pursue careers in the arts – music, art, dance, writing, acting. Math, business and education are popular routes, too. ((Marano, 2006), p.100).

An educational approach that produces graduates who “lead deeply satisfying lives”, are “unusually resilient” and who in “disproportionately high numbers” become entrepreneurs, should surely be of interest to mainstream education. The education

inspectors that reported on Summerhill in 1949 suggested that the democratic school was a “piece of fascinating and invaluable educational research” (A.S. Neill’s Summerhill, n.d.).

In New Zealand, Tamariki School in Christchurch promotes itself as a democratic school, and has been included in international studies on alternative schools (Sliwka, 2008). It too practices decision-making through whole-school meetings where students and teachers are invited to vote and have equal say. Mixed ages feature at Tamariki, as they do at Summerhill and SVS. Peck (2009), a New Zealand researcher, suggests that the model in place at Summerhill, where older children support the younger children, reflects the Māori view of tuakana-teina, where older children (tuakana) nurture the younger ones (teina).

‘Learning through play’, or ‘free play’-based approaches to learning feature prominently in democratic schools. Research shows these approaches to be effective in developing not only oral language and socio-emotional skills (interpersonal relationships, self regulation), but also cognitive thinking skills, particularly in the area of divergent thinking. According to White (2012), play is “practice in divergent thinking” (p.13): children in play invest time in creating and restructuring new ideas.

New Zealand-based neuroscience educator Nathan Mikaere-Wallis argues that brain development research suggests delaying formal learning for children until they are seven. Between the ages of three and seven, they need time to play, to build a picture of themselves as a learner, and to develop foundation learning aptitudes and social skills (Mikaere-Wallis, 2014). According to him, research shows that an individual’s perception of themselves as a learner when they are seven is a clear indicator of their future success, across many aspects of their life (personal, financial, academic).

According to Apple & Beane (1999) students in democratic schools are not passive knowledge consumers. They are “meaning makers” (p.17) who actively use knowledge from external sources to engage in “complex activities that require them to construct their own knowledge” (p.17). This fits with the new approaches to knowledge recommended by future-focused educators.

2.3.4.4 Forest schools

Forest schools can be seen as a subset of democratic, homeschooling and unschooling environments. Some democratic schools identify as ‘forest’ or ‘bush’ schools in that they follow democratic school principles, but are based in an outdoor setting (e.g. The Deep Green Bush School, n.d.). Conversely forest schools appeal to, and can be added on to, homeschooling and unschooling-based experiences.

Forest schools are included in this research for their capacity to support ‘ridiculous’, disruptive and novel ideas about education’s future. They are disruptive because they challenge the idea that children should be ‘contained’, controlled and managed in classrooms. Some people will see the notion of children learning outside all day, every day of the year as ‘ridiculous’. However, some research is showing outdoor learning’s capacity for enhancing socio-emotional skills (e.g. American Institutes for Research, 2005), and for supporting children with ADD and ADHD (e.g. Louv, 2005). Other research reports links between forest-school environments and certain positive learning dispositions. According to Knight (2016) forest schools align well to the principles of Guy Claxton’s Building Learning Power model (2002). They provide an environment where children can access “the mental, emotional and social resources to enjoy challenges and cope well with uncertainty and complexity” (Claxton et al., 2011, p.iii). Claxton (2008) cites research showing that young people attending a forest school experienced changes in how they saw themselves as learners (e.g. more “confident, resourceful, collaborative, concentrated and thoughtful” (p. 26)). Other scholars in this area argue that a love of the environment and an emotional attachment to it can result in children forming positive relationships with the land and the planet, and lead them to act as advocates for its protection in the future (e.g. American Institutes for Research, 2005; Louv, 2005). In a world of increasing complexity, young learners from these alternative spaces today could be part of the solution to the ‘wicked problems’ of tomorrow.

2.3.5 Summary

This investigation was restricted to participants from unschooling, homeschooling, democratic schools and forest-school contexts. These four forms of alternative education were selected for their distance from traditional mainstream schooling and their potential as appropriate sites to uncover surprise and novelty (Facer, 2013).

2.4 Research question

Literature searches for research looking at these four forms of alternative education, focusing only on the primary level, and looking for the potential for novelty, produced only a very few studies. Here in New Zealand, Peck (2009) discusses the possibility of a Summerhill in Aotearoa and questions the current neoliberal approach in education. Boyask (2013) contemplates the impact of free schools in the United Kingdom, asking whether the intersections between these and democratic schools could contribute to the transformation of schooling. While research on these forms of alternative education exists, there is little, if any, that looks at their capacity to inform educational *futures* discussions. The voices of alternative education are largely unheard in these discussions. The aim of this research was to address this gap in the research. By approaching representatives of these sectors, and listening to their thoughts on how they are preparing their learners for the future, my aim was to investigate what these sectors could offer the educational futures discussions. Are these spaces able to provide inspiration, novelty, surprise, disruption and imagining? From this, the following research question was developed.

Research Question

What ideas, philosophies and practices inform the work of unschooling, homeschooling, democratic schools and forest schools as they prepare their learners for the future?

This research aims to address Facer's recommendation that we look to the "possibilities in the present", using Swilka's suggestion that we explore alternative education. It adopts a critical theory-informed approach that seeks to unpack the present, deconstruct common sense assumptions around education, and listen to the voices of those who are currently unheard in educational futures discussions.

3.0 Methodology

3.1 Introduction

My approach to addressing the above research question has been influenced by the critical theory research tradition. Briefly, this tradition draws on Antonio Gramsci's concept of hegemony; that is, sets of ideas and practices that are widely accepted as 'common sense' or 'just how things are' but, because they reinforce existing social hierarchies, these ideas are oppressive (Gramsci, 1971). Hegemonic ideas are invisible, so people unknowingly but willingly contribute to their own oppression, and existing social hierarchies are maintained without the need for explicit coercion.

The starting point for this research was that many of the ideas in the 'future-focused education' literature have been assimilated into the existing, hegemonic discourses of education. This has removed the power – and the meaning – from these ideas; using Freire's term, the ideas have been 'domesticated' (Freire, 1985). Drawing on critical theory, the aim was not to try to describe or directly challenge this domestication, but rather, by looking outside prevailing discourses, to find ways to make the invisible visible, and to attempt to explain why future-focused education ideas, while apparently welcome, have, thus far, had little effect on classroom practice.

I decided to investigate the philosophies and practices of various alternative forms of education, not to appropriate, or synthesise their ideas for possible uptake in mainstream contexts, but to highlight what is not – and cannot be – said in the mainstream. My hypothesis was that this investigation could be a way to uncover some of the assumptions that make change so difficult.

3.2 Critical theory

Critical theory in educational research is historically associated with its origins in the Frankfurt School in Germany 1929-1930, with the work of critical theorists such as Max Horkheimer, Herbert Marcuse and Theodor Adorno who "defied Marxist orthodoxy" (Kincheloe & McLaren, 2000, p.280) and who were interested in capitalism's influence on society as well as other issues of domination and subjugation.

Education has been seen by some critical theorists as an important ‘ideological state apparatus’ (ISA) through which existing power structures and inequalities are maintained (e.g. Althusser, 1971). Others, such as Henry Giroux, argue for education’s empowerment and/or democratic possibilities and for education as an important site for empowering individuals (Giroux, 1997).

Because there are many different forms of critical theory, the term is difficult to define precisely (Kincheloe & McLaren, 2000; Carr & Kemmis, 1986). However, there is a common focus on disrupting existing modes of power and domination, challenging the unquestioned assumptions that maintain existing power relations, strengthening democratic processes, and engaging with the marginalised and excluded (Kincheloe & McLaren, 2000; Steinberg & Kincheloe, 2010).

There is recognition that change is extremely difficult. Critical theorists are interested in changing social structures; however, their focus is on identifying and challenging the deeper hegemonic ideas through which existing social structures are held in place. As Carr & Kemmis (2003) put it,

The outcome of critical research, therefore, is not just the formulation of informed practical judgement, but theoretical accounts which provide a basis for analysing systematically distorted decisions and practices and suggesting the kinds of social and educational action by which these distortions may be removed. (p.31)

Recently, several scholars have made the case for the use of critical theory in the educational futures field. For example, Milojevic (2003) identifies a concern around the acceptance of globalisation and technological advancement as givens. For her, there is a strong risk that images of the future will be colonised by images of globalisation and technological advancement. She points out that this is because these images “make the most sense” (p.456) within currently prevailing views of the future, time and the past. Inayatullah (2005), Milojevic (2005), and Ahlqvist & Rishart (2015) all draw on critical theory to argue for the need to disturb and/or challenge prevailing discourses around educational futures.

According to Sohail Inayatullah (2005), one way of doing this is to ‘search for’ our future/s, not by looking at the heart of the system or centre of power, but at what lies *outside* it. He advocates deliberately searching on the periphery, looking for the marginalised, unheard voices, listening carefully to them, and bringing them into the

debate. This, he says, is a strategy that will allow us to see past the hegemonic ideas that normalise education in its current form.

Ivana Milojevic (2005) argues that:

...an important part of the hegemony of the new emerging dominant futures vision is to deny other alternatives. As argued by Postman (1993:48), they do so not by making them illegal, immoral or unpopular, but by making them invisible and therefore irrelevant. (p.154)

and that

Bringing many different, excluded, pseudo-included, directly or structurally invisible groups and perspectives into the future of education discourse and debate will help change not only what is taught in schools but also 'everyday life pedagogies' (Luke 1996b) and, critically, how we imagine and situate 'education' itself.' (p.165)

The research described here draws on this strategy. As Tsing and Pollman (2005, p.107 as cited in Facer, 2013) put it, "unexpected connections can make new things come into being".

Drawing on critical theory, my aim has been to investigate whether or not listening to usually marginalised voices could allow us to see outside the hegemony of currently prevailing ideas on educational futures, and to think differently about educating our children for their possible future/s.

The title of this thesis is *Present day utopias? Listening to alternative possibilities for educational futures*. My use of the utopia concept was informed by Gandin and Apple (2012)'s quote from Slavoj Žižek, who describes utopia in the following way:

True utopia emerges when there are no ways to resolve the situation within the coordinates of the possible and, out of the pure urge to survive, you have to invent a new space. Utopia is not a free imagination; utopia is a matter of innermost urgency; you are forced to image something else as the only way out. (p.636)

'Imaging' something else involves, as McLaren & Suoranta (2009) put it, attempting to "speak the unspeakable" while at the same time "remaining organically connected to the familiar and mundane" (p. 258). This is what I have tried to do here.

3.3 Research design

This project had two aims: to listen actively, carefully and respectfully to voices from various alternative education contexts, and then to use what these voices have to say to suggest new, non-hegemonic ways of thinking about educational futures. Its purpose was not to just *describe* the philosophies and practices of the four alternative education settings in their own contexts, but to use these philosophies and practices as a way of disrupting, or breaking out of, currently prevailing ideas about educational futures. The research design was structured by these two aims.

The ‘object of enquiry’ was the ideas, philosophies and practices of a sample of alternative education providers. Its premise (and ontological position) is that these perspectives matter, and that understanding them is likely to provide opportunities for thinking outside current hegemony. Building on these perspectives to suggest these new ways of thinking is this project’s ‘contribution to knowledge’.

The research design is informed by phenomenology/interpretivism. In research informed by this paradigm, the aim is to understand how the research participants:

construct [their] reality in interaction with their social worlds [...] the researcher is interested in understanding the meaning a phenomenon has for those involved. (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016, p.35)

The aim here was to understand the philosophies and practices of various alternative education contexts ‘through the eyes of’ their participants; that is, not as an ‘objective’ observer, but as someone who is trying to see the world *as they do*, to understand *their* meaning-making systems. The idea was that developing an understanding of other “possible ways of seeing the world” (Steinberg & Kincheloe, 2010, p.142) would “make the familiar strange” (Rosaldo, 1993; Mills, 1959), the invisible visible, and that this in turn would in turn challenge the researcher to question their own “comfortable assumptions” (Steinberg & Kincheloe, 2010, p.145) about schooling and knowledge. This unsettling of the researcher’s assumptions was to be the basis of the second part of the project: using these insights to create spaces for new ways of thinking about educational futures.

Four key alternative education areas were selected in order to seek ideas most removed from ‘commonsense’ approaches that are linked with present-day state primary

schooling. Those on the very edges of the education sector were sought out to search for surprise, novelty and potential ridiculousness, in order to address Inayatullah's (2005) suggestions that we search for the future on the edges, the margins, not at the centre of where power is located. As outlined previously in Chapter Two, unschooling and homeschooling, democratic schools and forest schools are positioned in such a way. Unschooling and home schooling exist for those not wanting to participate in school itself, democratic schooling challenges the notion of adults holding all the power in a school and forest schools exist outside of classroom walls.

Potential participants within these four areas were approached and invited to join the study. The plan was to interview each participant face-to-face. The interviews would together form a collection of descriptive stories, which, when analysed for key themes, could be used to inform new thinking about educational futures.

It was decided to use semi-structured interviews with scripted questions that would be broadly the same for all participants while also allowing free-flowing conversation. The questions were designed to encourage participants to talk freely about the ideas, philosophies and practices of their particular form of alternative education, but within a structure that would keep them on track (see Appendix D for the questions). This process involved interaction between the participants and the researcher who, rather than being an objective observer or conduit of information, acted, to some extent, as a co-constructor of the research.

3.4 Research methods

3.4.1 Participant selection

Purposive sampling (Cresswell, 2013) was used to locate appropriate participants from each of the following four types of alternative education: unschooling, homeschooling, democratic schooling, and forest schools. Because there are only a small number of active centres and networks, representative sampling was not possible. I was already aware of a number of organisations I could ask to be involved in my research, though there was no guarantee they would be willing to participate. The Directory of Schools, available through the Ministry of Education's 'Education Counts' website, lists all special character schools currently operating in New Zealand. In addition to purposive

sampling, I also used 'snowball' selection (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). As I began to talk with people in the alternative education sector, some gave me the names of other potential participants to contact. This recruitment process resulted in eight participants from the four models of alternative education. This small sample is in no way representative of the alternative education sector; rather, each of the eight participants is an independent voice from the sector. However, in the data analysis process, their voices are combined into common themes.

Participants were initially emailed with a brief explanation of the intended research, an invitation to contact me for more information, and a Participant Information Sheet (see Appendix B). I generally received a positive response within two to three days.

The eight participants were interviewed over a two-month period at a mutually agreed location. Most interviews took between 90 minutes and two hours. They were guided by the same questions, although participants had the opportunity to deviate from the set schedule and expand or reroute some questions. The interviews were recorded on a voice recorder and a phone to ensure that there was a duplicate of the recording if needed.

The participants are not identified here as individuals or in terms of their connection with specific centres. Instead they are differentiated from each other via codes (Participant A, B, C etc). Some participants (e.g. the representatives from homeschooling and unschooling spaces) are, for obvious reasons, not from a specific centre.

The contexts of the eight participants are listed below:

1. Special character school, state funded (Yr 0-8)
2. Special character school, state funded (Yr 0-8)
3. Special character school, state funded (Yr 0-8)
4. State-funded early childhood education provider (Preschool-Yr 1)
5. Private school (Yr 0-8)
6. Private school (Yr 0-3)
7. Homeschooling representative (Yr 0-13)
8. Unschooling representative (Yr 0-3)

Most of the participants were totally open about their experiences, philosophies and challenges, and started from a position of trust towards me, which I did not expect. That I was a teacher from a mainstream setting did not seem to be an issue, as they understood that I was interested in the synergy between future-focused themes in education and what they were doing in an alternative space.

Interviews were recorded in their entirety and transcribed from start to finish. Each participants' transcript was emailed to them with an invitation to correct anything they thought misrepresented their views and/or to delete any content they were uncomfortable with. All participants accepted the transcriptions without deletions, some offering minor rephrasings or explanations to clarify their statements.

3.4.2 Data Analysis

Due to the large amount of information provided by the participants, the process of analysing and presenting the data was challenging. As the researcher I am very conscious that the analysis presented here does not adequately capture the degree of dedication, innovation and passion the participants bring to their educational endeavours.

3.4.2.1 Thematic analysis

A thematic analysis approach was taken to coding the data. Transcribing the interviews manually allowed for the identification of concepts that, within the context of the conversation, were unusual or powerful.

The coding process had five phases, which were as follows:

A. Initial exploration

An initial exploration of the first three interviews quickly revealed repeated words and concepts, such as trust; the challenging nature of the environment; different notions of time; transformational change; love; and compulsion versus choice.

B. Initial coding of themes

I trialled identification and grouping of themes using the first three interview transcripts. They were rich in data that addressed my research question. While I

tracked the frequency of certain words and phrases, there were some words in the first three interviews that I experienced as surprising or powerful. I identified several themes in the first three interviews and then ‘searched for’ these in the other five, where they seemed equally relevant. These themes were as follows:

- difficult, challenging space
- trust
- time
- choice vs compulsion
- links to mainstream
- chaos vs control
- transformative adult thinking
- concepts of love
- importance of relationships

C. Coding of remaining interviews

All interviews were read and coded according to the above themes, and, in this process, some new themes were identified:

- flexibility
- low adult-to-child ratios
- driving philosophies
- a commitment to nurturing an innate love of *learning*

D. Revisiting transcripts to analyse new themes

I returned to the first three interviews and analysed them for the new themes outlined under C. above.

E. Selection of dominant themes, identification of supporting themes

I then re-read all of the transcripts. Out of this, the following four themes stood out strongly as common to all transcripts:

- the importance of *relationships*
- alternative perspectives on *time*
- *trust*
- *love*

These four were selected as the dominant themes.

3.4.4 Approach to reporting findings

Three approaches to reporting the findings appropriately were considered. My aim was to find a balance between celebrating and acknowledging the uniqueness of each centre and my search for common themes. These were as follows:

- A. Discuss the answers to the questions posed in the interview and report on the themes uncovered in each question.
- B. Address the research question in parts by reporting separately on participants' ideas, philosophies and practices, and their views on how they are preparing students for the future.
- C. Acknowledge clearly dominant and recurring themes across the interviews and focus only on these.

I decided on the third option above. The next chapter presents data from the interviews to show how the four themes were derived.

4.0 Findings

4.1 Introduction

The purpose of this project was to investigate the ideas, philosophies and practices of a sample of different alternative education contexts networks and to look at how these ideas, philosophies and practices supported preparing students for the future. When analysing the data from all eight sources, one dominant theme (importance of relationships) and three supporting themes (concepts of trust, concepts of time, and developing a love of learning) emerged. These ideas are linked to the philosophies that guide all who participate in these alternative spaces.

This chapter begins by outlining three of the key philosophies articulated by participants in their interviews. These were: child-directed learning, learning through play, and nature-based approaches. It then discusses data on the four key themes from the interviews: relationships, time, trust and love.

4.2 Initial touchstones – Linking key educational philosophies

One of the first interview questions asked of each participant was: “Can you tell me a bit about your educational philosophy?” While this information is available on most of the participants’ websites, a summary from the principal or representative is a good way of getting at what drives the learning philosophy in their centre. Three named philosophies were mentioned frequently, as follows.

4.2.1 Child-directed learning

One of the key tenets of democratic schools is the idea that the child should lead their own learning. Children should have a genuine say in how their day and their learning is structured. This was clearly expressed in the interviews for this project. One participant explains that child-led learning is “the core philosophy” while another refers to “maximal child choice”. A homeschooler participant said that she adopts a ‘facilitator’ role: her child is “doing 98% of the learning herself”.

4.2.2 Learning through play

While the ‘learning through play’ idea is mainstream in early childhood education contexts, it isn’t in primary schools (Menzies, 2015), although some early-years primary school teachers are beginning to show interest (see, e.g. (Longworth Education, n.d.)).

The idea of play as a fundamental part of the child’s day featured in several of the interviews. Interviewees commented on the the value of play, and the importance of giving children *time* to play. For example:

Participant H:

So, it’s [play is] an interesting concept, and I used to say to teachers that visited, imagine the day flipped around. Instead of your playtime that you call playtime, we have that all day, and your class time, your instruction time is like our playtime, our break time. It’s just completely flipped around.

Participant B:

...even though I have been quite academic oriented, there is so much free time that they have, particularly under the age of 12, to play, and ... to explore, to hang out with friends... I feel that having all that free time to play, explore and imagine and relate to other kids is good for their learning.

Participant E:

Children needed the opportunity to be children and to play and just all the huge amount of learning and development that goes on through play, so that’s a really strong fundamental of the school.

Giving time for children to play, in particular, to immerse themselves in high-level play (e.g socio-dramatic play, extensive storylines and character development), was seen as essential, and a factor that differentiates the alternative environment from the mainstream environment.

Participant H:

I think that you need time for developing socio-dramatic games. And I don’t think we give children enough time at school. Maybe they just get started and then the bell goes or maybe for some children it takes time to start these games off. But in the forest it happens all the time every day, they were into these, this play where they all take on different roles and things like that. My experience of break-time at school was generally children on the jungle gyms, maybe bouncing a ball or hitting with a cricket bat or chasing each other around or... very low-level play. I would have to say I saw very little of that high-order play in the playground when I was teaching.

4.2.3 Nature-based learning

Two of the eight participants are linked to outdoors-based education centres. One of these has a simple shed for extreme weather (it has been used three times in three years), while the other has no permanent outdoor structure (apart from the family home of the school's director). In rainy weather, the children construct shelters out of tarpaulins and natural resources from the environment. For the participants from these centres, nature-based learning is fundamental to their educational philosophy. Both also mentioned learning-through-play philosophies and both said that they used the (New Zealand Curriculum's) Key Competencies in their practice. For example:

Participant H:

[it is important for children to be]...running their own learning and being in an environment that allows them to practice all their Key Competencies and all the Values of the Curriculum and I just felt that children needed to get outside..... So it was really those two main things, the developmental stages and allowing children outside to develop their Key Competencies.

Participant G:

Our philosophy is just there are a number of different things, to reconnect kids to nature, play-based learning, learning through playing, exploration and discovery, and all of those lovely innate curiosities that children have.

These three named philosophies appear to underpin the four key themes emerging from the interviews. These are discussed below.

4.3 Dominant theme – relationships

Teacher-student relationships are often discussed in mainstream education, usually in the context of discussions of improving student achievement (e.g. Hattie, 2009). However, in the alternative education situations studied here, relationships are talked about in a much wider sense. In the interviews, eleven different relationship types were mentioned. These included the teacher-student, teacher-teacher, and teacher-parent that are a focus in mainstream schools. However, discussion of *other* relationship types was more evident than is usual in mainstream schools, and there was more of a focus on the importance of *relationship-building*. In what follows I emphasise four elements from the interviewees' talk about relationships that I experienced as 'surprising' or 'novel' (following Keri Facer's recommendation, discussed earlier). These were as follows:

student-student relationships; participants' relationships with *mainstream education providers*; internal/intrapersonal relationships *within* participants; and relationships with the *environment*.

4.3.1 The importance of relationships

The importance of 'relationships' is mentioned again and again in the interviews. There is a particular focus on their centrality to the learning and development of students. Several interviewees spoke of their 'intentionality' in ensuring a focus on relationship-building. For example:

Participant B:

...we belong to a group that is quite intentional about relationship building... this really cohesive group which intentionally made space for relationships... when you join, you understand this is high commitment because of the intentionality around relationships.

Participant C:

I think we're preparing them for that [the future]. I think focusing on letting them make their own decisions, problem solve, being there to support but essentially having those social capabilities, those relationships with other people of their own, is the most important thing we can do for them.

4.3.2 Student-student relationships

Student-student relationships were particularly important for the homeschoolers, who talked explicitly about an 'intentional' focus on enabling them. They were keen to counter the stereotype of homeschooled children being 'socially delayed'. For them, homeschooled children are advantaged by the wide range of different relationships they have, with people of all ages. This claim has research support (see, e.g. Medlin, 2000).

For example:

Participant B:

...while public perception of the homeschoolers is 'what about the socialisation?' and all that, for us, it's a total non-issue... you do have to be intentional about your getting together, but actually relationships that happen within homeschooling are really, really great. And I find that most homeschooled kids relate really well to kids of all ages and they relate very well to adults, and that's because when you're hanging out with other families you're not just hanging out with your peer group, you're relating to children of all ages and while you have your own friends, you're not just restricted to people in your own age group by any means. So it's lovely that there are a much wider range of relationships than probably most kids experience.

However, participants from other settings also said that building student-student relationships was a priority. Many said that their children had strong relationship skills, possibly better than those of children in mainstream-schooling settings. One participant reported feedback from the secondary school their children had gone on to as follows:

Participant E:

...we have had informal feedback that our kids, because of their social skills particularly, do adapt really well and do actually bring something to offer ... but I've had a lot of informal feedback, which is lovely.

Some participants said that, with relationships, quality is more important than quantity, that having time to form deep relationships with a small number of people is better for children's development than knowing a great many people superficially. This brings us to what was, for me, a surprising finding: the strong and mainly positive relationships that most participants had with mainstream education providers.

4.3.3 Relationships with mainstream schools

Interviewees regularly mentioned links to the mainstream school system. These links were mostly positive and at times, supportive. Participants were asked to comment on how they thought what happened in their contexts might compare to the mainstream. While many didn't have a lot to say on this, they clearly do not see themselves as functioning in isolation from the mainstream. In particular, they are clearly very aware that their children are highly likely to have to transition to other schools, particularly at secondary level. Christchurch has one alternative secondary school (two of the centres I spoke with are 'feeder schools' for this school), but Auckland has limited options.

One participant, who was relatively new to the area they operated in, seemed to spend a significant proportion of their time nurturing and developing relationships with local primary school principals. This seemed to be driven by a genuine desire for them to understand the nature of her centre and what she was hoping to achieve for the betterment of the children in their local community. She did not want her centre to be separate from, or in competition with, the local schools, rather, she wanted there to be functional relationships. This did not always go smoothly, but she seemed determined to be successful in her efforts. As she put it:

Participant G:

What I've learned over the past term is that we need to have a partnership with schools ... our whole philosophy is that we want to complement what's happening in classrooms, and classroom teachers can only do a certain amount... so if we can ... somehow work in partnership with schools to help some of the children... we now understand that we really need that relationship.

I've had one principal been to visit; I've got two coming this week, three maybe next week, and I've invited them to come.

... we were thinking maybe we do start writing IEPs for each of them and then that's something that we can communicate back to the schools as well... so we can work in a partnership more with the schools.

Another participant's relationships with mainstream schools were in the context of their centre's membership of a local Community of Learning or CoL, (Ministry of Education, n.d.). CoLs are a government initiative to encourage collaboration and community across groups of schools, with a focus on developing shared achievement goals.

Participant E:

...when I've been doing professional development one of the things in being part of the Community of Learning and we get release days, is we are hoping that our staff can go in and see how some things are done in other schools because we're always interested in learning... [and] on upskilling our teaching and our ways of engaging children. I know there's some really good teachers out there that have fantastic ideas, so it is one of the things we hope to do...

This participant was happy to be part of this CoL, praised their Ministry of Education liaison contact who assisted with the establishment of the CoL, and was also involved in another separate cluster of six local early childhood education providers.

Another participant also mentioned the similarities between mainstream schooling and her centre, saying that sometimes there were more similarities than differences.

Participant D:

I have seen lots of joy in mainstream schools too and I think the pressure that we're all under together makes us more similar than different.

...and every time I've gone over there [to an Auckland-based mainstream primary school] it's an amazing vibe. I see more in common than I do different.

This receptiveness to the mainstream, suggests that these participants understand the benefits of interacting with and learning from people who are different from them. It

suggests that they are prepared to investigate how others outside their system function, and that they are open to having their current mindset challenged. This ‘disposition’ towards growth was not something I expected when this project was designed, but I focus on it here as another ‘surprising’ finding, one that seems worthy of further investigation.

4.3.4 Intrapersonal relationships – adult personal transformation

This project set out to explore the philosophies and practices of a selection of alternative education settings, and to look at what, if anything, these ideas could offer mainstream thinking about educational futures. Its focus was these ideas, as expressed by the participants. However, from the interviews it became clear that, for several of the participants, the ideas, as they attempted to work with them, had not just been ‘added onto’ their existing thinking, but had *changed* their thinking. Working with the ideas had moved their thinking up, over some sort of threshold, into a new level. What was also clear from the interviews was that these participants were aware of this, and had strong feelings about it. This was not something the research set out to investigate, however, it seems to me to be a significant finding.

Below are extracts from the interviews of two participants, both teachers with many years of very successful experience in mainstream settings (one at senior management level). Both had made the decision to exit mainstream teaching. Very soon after entering their new settings, long-held beliefs and practice had been stripped away and they were teaching in a way that was worlds apart from where they had been previously. One participant explained what this was like as follows:

Participant H

...it was me that had to change. My management of it and my whole idea that I wasn’t in charge... When I was at [previous school] there was a lot of play-based learning but I still think... there was an element of control on my part and so being at the forest gave me that movement into that complete lack of control.

I think it evolved for me, I mean, the children just came in and played and they just did their thing... but for me I think I changed the most. I think it just opened up my mind completely to how I thought it should be.

But by the end of that year I had changed hugely, and I had seen my role as mainly just providing the environment, providing the loose parts, and standing back and watching. I still had the role of teaching them reading, maths and writing but the

actual rest of the curriculum I'd given over to them, but then... there was a definite shift for me.

This kind of transformation also occurred with Participant G who said:

...it's completely turned my whole philosophy of what I did my whole career upside down.

Other participants, particularly those from homeschooling, also talked about changes in their thinking, and that of others in their networks.

Participant A

I have changed in allowing them to say what they are interested in and why, and to try to answer their own questions first, just to see what they think might be the answer, and I have stepped back a little bit from needing them to do a certain thing by a certain age because school does it that way, so I have changed and they have changed...

This participant talked about how she had been able to step back, facilitate, guide and coach, which was a completely new way of teaching for her.

Participant A

And also it's collaborative. It's not ever going to work if it's the teacher to the pupil. This is a team. And so I will help you find the information you want. You can build with that information. You've got another question, I'll help you. It's a guide, it's not ever that authoritarian position of 'you will learn this, and you will do it properly and you will do it now!' That doesn't come into it.

Another home-based teacher talked about how some of their community of parents had acknowledged that they were "petrified", they "don't feel confident at all", but then with support from the homeschooling network, they moved to a place where they did feel confident in their abilities.

Participant B

... a lot of people don't even come into it confidently, either, they feel. I've seen a lot of people come into homeschooling because their oldest child they can see isn't going to thrive in school and they've come in and they've been petrified. They've pulled their oldest child out of school because they're not managing and they don't feel confident at all about it but then as they've got into it they've realised 'oh this is actually really great' and they've homeschooled all their children or pulled out all the kids or they've...[not started their youngest at school].

Participant A:

I do see a lot of parents who suddenly realise they can do it, because they've pulled out their medically needing child, and then they realise they could do it for the 'easier' ones. I see it where they only want to do it for primary school... and then they realise that they could actually teach it at high school as well because it's a lifestyle... it's not knowing the answer, it's knowing how to find the answer, and so it's a mindset. So I see a lot of people who, their confidence grows and they suddenly go 'I can do this.'

This material on internal changes in the participants stood out strongly in the interviews. It is included here because, in retrospect, it seems that the capacity of these participants to pay attention to, to be open to, and aware of their own learning, and to not have to be 'the one who knows everything', is significant in terms of the aims of this study. Are these capacities more often found in people working in alternative settings? If so, is this a feature of people who choose to work in these environments, or do the demands of these environments foster these capacities? This research wasn't designed to answer these questions: however, they are of interest here. It could be that teachers who have these capacities, and who can model them for their students, are teachers who are better able to prepare their students for the increasing complexities of the world of the future.

Interestingly, the two teachers who talked about, and seemed most aware of, the significant internal changes they had experienced (Participant H and Participant G above) are both involved in forest schools. The children and teachers in these spaces learn outside all day. There are no classrooms and children interact with, and learn from, the natural world, experiencing a deep sense of connectedness and attachment to the land. This brings us to the fourth element of the talk about relationships in the interviews: the focus on building children's relationships with the environment.

4.3.5 Relationship with the environment

Two of the participants are based in centres with an outdoor setting. These are designed so that learners experience a strong relationship with the environment. For some people, the idea of children spending all day outside in all kinds of weather is impractical, 'ridiculous' even. However, the participants in this project would not agree: for them, this way of learning develops a richer sense of obligation and involvement in the care of our planet, an idea that has obvious links with educational futures.

Participant H

..., because they were in the forest three days a week, using only what the forest gave them to use, [the children] understand [ecological sustainability] extremely well, and they have an innate understanding, they have an empathy with the natural environment and you can't teach that, and you certainly can't teach it in four walls, and I think that's the difference with the children in the forest. I don't think I have ever had that sort of feeling working with children that I have had with those children when it comes to Key Competencies, and that preparation for lifelong learning in the big world. They'll be fine, those kids, they really will.

Participant G

...we're thinking that we will have them [school holiday programme and/or one-day school space] quite separate, so that those children who have that strong connection to the place and to the environment, they can always maintain that, because it is their special area, and they do get quite connected. And because we talk about everything being living and our job to be guardians of this place, [we] don't want to hurt the animals or the plants and seedlings, so they do see it as something living.

The ecological learning opportunities these children have access are authentic and experiential. Participant G explains:

They've built tree huts, they've built fire pits... whoever comes up with an idea, they usually just go with it, they'd learn about different leaves and trees, and changes of the seasons, the sap. We have a big focus on fungi at the moment because just the wet moisture and things like that and how that's part of the whole ecology.

Also mentioned in the interviews were learning experiences that had strong links to science (and other subject areas) curriculum (e.g. one participant talked of daily visits to the beach to understand tides).

4.3.6 Summary

In the interviews, relationships, and their importance to learning, were discussed frequently and extensively. While there were references to learning opportunities in relation to curriculum subjects, the 'relationship' thread was much stronger. Three other themes, seen as supporting the focus on relationships, emerged from the interviews. These were: time, trust, and love/love of learning.

4.4 Supporting themes: time, trust, love

Talk of time (various meanings), trust and love was a feature of the interviews. For the interviewees, a focus on time, trust and love was important in nurturing relationships, and in building a love of learning.

4.4.1 Concepts of time

Time was mentioned again and again, in many different ways. Interviewees talked about ‘having time’ (i.e. as a resource or commodity) and ‘giving time’ (i.e. as a dedication, a gift to someone else). Also discussed were differences in the time children take to reach developmental milestones. To me as the researcher, the way time was talked about by these interviewees differed from how it is talked about in mainstream schools. There were also differences in the way children’s ages and stages are thought/talked about.

In mainstream settings, time is set. Timetables are central and give structure to the day. Most state schools operate on a 9.00am to 3.00pm timetable with subject areas and breaks at set hours of the day. Though there is some fluidity and teacher discretion, and some variation between schools, most schools in New Zealand have this type of structure. Children usually start their formal learning at five years old and move up through the school based on their age, irrespective of whether they are emotionally or cognitively ready for the next steps. Children are organised as age-based cohorts and their learning is delivered in ways thought of as appropriate for that age. In the alternative education settings described here, there are different approaches. Children progress ‘when they are ready’, and are not defined by their biological age. Particularly in homeschooling contexts, they have opportunities to interact and form relationships with older or younger children and/or children who are at different physical and emotional stages. In some contexts this is extended to caring for younger children.

The interviewees’ discussion of time is organised below into three sections:

- Chronological time – the minutes and hours in a day;
- Longer-term milestones – the time required for children to reach developmental, educational and academic milestones;

- Biological ages and stages of life – how children of specific ages learn and interact with others of similar or different biological ages.

4.4.1.1 Time – minutes and hours

For the participants in this study, time appeared to be seen primarily as an asset or resource to be allocated in ways that can best support human interaction. As outlined earlier, relationship-building is seen as a pre-condition for learning, and time is required to build relationships. From the quotes below it is clear that, in these participants' settings, things are organised to make sure this relationship-building time is available.

Participant G:

I know teachers that plan to spend quality time with different groups of children just so that each of them get [some time with the teacher] .. I just think that's really sad that we have to plan to spend quality time. But it's because we're so overloaded [teachers in general], and so I think because we [at this alternative centre] have lower ratios and because we don't have all of these other demands and pressures we *do have more time* to just have a conversation about what we did on the weekend and tell me about your bike ride and so the connections there and it might look like, we're not, just setting a task and kind of saying off you go, go and do that, we're right there and we're working with them.

Definitely, because we've got time. That's the thing. We've got the time and the low ratios to be able to support that. There's no way that a teacher on duty with 200 kids has the time or the ability to spend that amount of – you know the required time to settle the child's emotions, help them heal from whatever's just happened and then go and coach them through conflict resolutions.

Participant A:

Because I see all the problems that come with the institutionalised version of education coming down to the fact that there isn't enough time with the teacher, so I think ideal would be even a lower ratio than that, but 1:10 is a huge improvement over 1:30 or whatever it might be, 1:25 or whatever.

In one interview the participant mentioned the inability of her children to tell the time, clearly seeing this 'ignorance of time' as an asset. As she saw it, these children have more opportunities to experience the joy of being immersed in a learning activity, being in a state of 'flow' to the point of 'losing track of time' as described and advocated for in educational settings by Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi (2014).

Participant A:

We don't look at our clocks, and I have found that the boys who are eight aren't particularly good at telling the time because they haven't just spent the last three years being ruled by a clock...

4.4.1.2 Time – longer-term milestones

A common theme in the interviews was the notion that children should be allowed to reach socio-emotional and academic milestones 'in their own time'. This is very different to conventional practice in mainstream schools. Three participants mentioned the implementation of National Standards (in mainstream primary schools) as a source of stress for young learners (and their parents). Two reported that this anxiety had produced unprecedented demand for places in their centres. One mentioned that their centre was now 'bottom heavy' (larger numbers entering the school in the early years of primary), while another said they had a waiting list. A common view was that children are not all the same. They should be allowed to develop at their own pace, not following someone else's timetable.

Participant B:

They're learning in relationship and that life is part of learning and then also this idea that children are not meeting certain criteria at certain ages or points but that actually they're progressing at a rate which is relevant or appropriate for them... Whereas I've got other children who have really struggled in that area and it hasn't been 'well, this child is above level or below' it's just this is how they've moved, and what's important to me is not whether they've reached a certain milestone at a certain age, but that they are progressing in whatever way that looks like. I think the fact that children can progress at their own rate in a way which is appropriate for their learning style and their development and they're all so different, and so I think that homeschooling at its best can cater for that.

One participant from a special character school had a very definite policy for her staff to follow.

Participant D:

We have a principle of allowing 'Well Below' (in National Standards) until they're eight... I have instructed my junior teacher, because I don't want her to get stressed and start pressurising them, most children I find, at least... 65% or 70% don't want to read until they're seven.

It should be noted that at this same centre, when the children depart for secondary education, they generally leave one full curriculum level above what is 'expected' for their age.

4.4.1.3 Time – ages and stages in life

In mainstream schooling, children are segregated into age groups and taught certain parts of the curriculum at certain stages of their schooling life. Ken Robinson (2011) argues that this 'processing children in batches' is linked to Industrial Age models of education and therefore outdated. The interviewees in this study also disputed the relevance of age cohorts. For them, mixed-age groups mirror real life. Children should be encouraged to learn independently and with others of similar and different ages.

Participant B:

My 14-year-old is into gardening so she's got a whole lot of plants that she'll do that this afternoon and probably T [brother] will help her. And so today is a quiet home day – 14-year-old went off to cello at 8 o'clock, she goes to piano in the afternoon, so she does that all herself. I don't drive her, she catches a bus or bikes.

But S, who's 12, does the same thing, where she can. And T, I don't do anything with him because he's only five and I don't believe in doing too many activities. I think there's just no rush, you know? But on a Monday, S meets with a bunch of other kids who are sort of around her age group – 10 to 14 years old – and she does a science class, which is just an experimental science class, so friends organised a science teacher and they just do heaps of fun stuff. Then on Friday morning, L [the 14-year-old] will get together with some other friends who are all around about 13, 14, 15, 16 years old, and they'll do a literature kind of discussion which is led by one of the parents. Yeah, so there's that sort of thing that happens, some of it's structured. Then on Friday afternoon, we get together with our home-school group, which is about 12 families and we'll- I think we're doing some singing or something and artwork this term. So that goes from literally babies right up to 18-year-olds.

In summary, the participants in this study have conceptions of time that are different to those commonly found in mainstream schools. For them, time is a resource to be used to build the relationships in which learning will happen, not an externally imposed constraint. Children develop on different time-scales, and, while they should learn with others, these others do not need to be the same age.

4.4.2 Concepts of trust

As outlined earlier in this chapter, the ideas that children can—and should—direct their own learning is a key philosophy shared by all participants in this project. This philosophy was expressed in the interviews through the notion of trust. Five of the interviewees talked about trust as something that is ‘given’ to children, not earned. Children are trusted to lead—and be responsible for—their own learning and, to some extent, their own safety.

Participant G:

They know where their boundaries are – we trust them, they know that it is a privilege that they’re here, that not everybody gets to come, so they really respect that and they respond to those little boundaries. So we know that they are safe, we know that they are contained, even though it’s a huge space and we can’t see them all of the time...

This view of children as capable, competent, active, independent learners, able to discover learning in their own way, differs from the more mainstream view of children as vulnerable and passive, as needing to be protected by teachers, to be saved from hurting themselves, not behaving properly, or not learning.

Participant F:

...it’s about working out what I (the student) can do when, and where I can do it. And I’m always coming back to that core value that we have here of respect and trust. So if you can sit within that, then anything’s possible...

And they sort of thrive in that environment too, you know, being trusted to get on and do my stuff. The more they get that, the more they do it, and the more they talk about it with other kids, the more the kids then feed into that group. So, yeah, I think trust is the real key around here.

And ‘I’ll trust you till you muck it up’ – rather than ‘you need to prove to me...’

One participant talked about trust as something that should be modelled, scaffolded and communicated.

Participant A:

I have a policy, if you want to call it that, or a philosophy, of teaching and trusting. Once I am confident that I have covered all the possibilities, I trust them with them and I don’t question, because I know that they have been taught this and this and this. So I can leave them unsupervised, usually. I have had

crayon on the walls, and- but my philosophy is teach them trust because they are typically more trustworthy than we ever give them credit for. And I mean children in general there.

For these interviewees, building active, independent learners is best done through *not* always having an adult in close proximity. Trust is thus a precondition for this kind of learning.

Participant G:

I think when you have trust, you feel safe, and you feel secure, and you can be yourself... the children definitely say 'we don't get in trouble when we're here' but it's because they're busy and they're moving and they're actually engaged in something that they are passionate about, and something that they're not being told to do. Again, it's trusting them, that they can initiate learning, and use their minds without us using their minds for them.

Trust is also a necessary precondition for building the kinds of relationships the participants believe are necessary for learning, and for fostering a love of learning.

4.4.3 Developing a love of learning

The frequent references to 'love' in the interviews was one of the more surprising aspects of the analysis. Five of the eight participants used this word routinely in discussions of learners and education, with one using it very frequently, in a natural and quite unselfconscious way. As the analysis progressed, it seemed that the term 'love' was being used in two main ways: first in the context of developing a love of learning, and second in the context of relationship-building (between adults, between adults and children, and between children). These are dealt with separately below.

As outlined, earlier, the interviewees had a commitment to play-based, child-directed and nature-based educational philosophies. The point of these 'natural' approaches is to foster a love of learning. This is an intrinsic 'good', but it also builds the capacity for more learning, for learning with others, and for building more complex relationships with others.

One participant spoke about learning as a natural part of life. For her, 'learning happens in relationships'.

Participant B:

...learning and life go together and that learning is a natural part of life. So while you do do some structured learning, well I do, and most people do, just a day is full of lots and lots of natural learning opportunities and I think another important thing is that learning happens in relationships...

... my perspective as a hard-core home-schooler is that the children aren't institutionalised out of learning, and again learning is something that happens naturally in life – it's interesting watching my five-year-old... he just thinks learning is what you do in life.

... home-schooled children tend to learn how to learn and so they tend to take initiative. And I think the goal of a lot of home-schoolers is that by the time their child is 12, 13, 14, 15, they have some foundational skills in which to pursue learning for themselves. And it just seems to happen fairly naturally... it has for us, anyway.

One participant described a love of learning as being the catalyst for a life of continual learning.

Participant A:

Go out and show them. And so the mindset of 'you can', and you can learn any time, and you can learn anything, that is your future of education. Everything boils down to whether you love learning and are prepared to learn even if you're 98.

4.4.3.1 Love – on its own

Outside the 'love of learning' context, the term 'love' was used frequently by participants when talking about the relationship-building aspects of work in their settings. This included work between adults, between adults and children, and between children.

Participant D:

And so right now the democratic culture is really strong, and there is a lot of love, and there is a lot of willingness among the older ones to just sit there while the little ones hash it out, to help them to grow socially, and learn more about themselves.

I want it to be a system that has real integrity and I can go somewhere else and it will keep on going. So I actually feel that we're in dire straits, globally as a community. And we're also- of course we've got love and that's what saves humanity, love and creativity, and those are the two things that have been the most undermined by education.

And it's collaboration. It's love, it's creative problem-solving. Creative thinking.

4.4.4 Additional elements

Some additional elements appeared during the analysis process that are worth mentioning here. While not occurring nearly as frequently as the four key themes described above, they appeared to be important to the interviewees, and to have an enabling effect on the more frequently mentioned themes. I have grouped these as follows:

- an alternative view on the binaries of control/choice and chaos/order;
- flexibility;
- environments that are challenging and difficult;
- and high adult-to-child ratios.

Of particular interest, mainly for the contrast with mainstream settings, is the notion of ‘chaos’ as a positive, and the references to ‘organised’ or respectful chaos. This seems to indicate a different way of seeing, and *being* in, complex, uncertain times.

Two examples of this are:

Participant G:

They probably would see chaos, and in a really good way, like I know it’s an organised chaos but somebody visiting for the first time that is used to children learning in a certain way, and everybody in a nice group together working on a lovely task, this is so far from that...

In a classroom it always seems like the ideal is things are ordered. And the ideal is that your classroom is operating in a really organised way because you have large numbers of children and one teacher. So I think the order versus chaos is a very different thing that you will see, but I don’t want to use the word chaos in a negative way; I want it to be a positive chaos. It’s a bit of an oxymoron, isn’t it?

I think the chaos is a good thing because it’s just the way that children operate and... it’s a really beautiful thing when you see that and you see joy and I just think we are taking that away from children far too much.

Participant F:

I think that was always one of the things that when people walked into one of those floors of (centre) previously, they were just like, ‘what the hell’s going on here?’ This doesn’t look like a school, for a start, but it should look chaotic because everybody’s doing something different. What it shouldn’t look like is disrespectful chaos – where kids can’t work because somebody’s doing their thing and they’re playing drums in the middle of it, so it’s about working out what I can do when, and where I can do it, and I’m always coming back to that core value that we have here of respect and trust.

4.5 What of the future?

As mentioned earlier, the opening interview question was ‘Can you tell me a little bit about the philosophy of the your centre?’ This direct question was designed to generate an initial touchstone, a sense of the ideas that guide them. At the end of the interview participants were asked to talk about how they are preparing their learners for the future. Three participants said that they were doing what is best to prepare learners for the uncertain future they may experience. A fourth was adamant that the learners from her centre were going to be ‘fine’ in the future, that they would be strong and resilient due to the time they had spent in this alternative learning space. There was a sense of confidence and certainty around these outcomes.

Participant A:

I think home-schoolers are driving that unknown future... The home-school idea that you can learn anything you want, when you want, is your future of education.

Participant D:

So they’re [family member that works in the artificial intelligence sector] starting a school like this where they are because he said this is the only kind of school that’s actually going to work in the future...

Participant C:

What we’re doing is preparing them for that [the future]. I think focusing on letting them make their own decisions, problem-solve, being there to support, but essentially having that social capability, those relationships with other people of their own, is the most important thing we can do for them.

The above findings present a picture of a group of alternative education communities who are strongly focused on building both relationships and a love of learning. There are some key differences between their approaches and those commonly found in mainstream schools, and, although the participants didn’t talk about this, there are some parallels with approaches advocated by educational futures scholars. For example: these communities have a strong focus on intellectual development; on building the kinds of inter- and intra-personal relationships that can foster deep learning; and on working with, respecting, and learning from diverse others. Children are seen as naturally confident, trustworthy, and capable of leading their own learning, in mixed-age contexts. Learning is organised around the child’s needs (including time), not the system’s. Children are seen as ‘part of’ nature, and the natural world as the best context

for children's learning. In addition, the experience of working in these contexts has been transformative for many of the participants, and they seem able to model this openness to change to the children.

The next chapter picks up on some of these ideas, looking for 'surprising' and/or 'ridiculous' elements that could help us break out of, or see differently, the existing discourses of educational futures.

5.0 Discussion

5.1 Introduction

The aim of this project was to describe the ideas, philosophies and practices of a sample of alternative education settings, to look at what these settings do to prepare learners for their futures, and, from this, to suggest non-hegemonic ways of thinking about educational futures.

This chapter highlights two ideas from this research that stand out for me as the researcher. The first idea is that the participants in this study clearly see education's *purpose* differently from how it is seen in mainstream settings. The second idea is that many of the participants are open to, and aware of, disruptions to *their* thinking, and are able to model this openness to children.

5.2 The purpose of school

Many educational futurists argue that the current system is no longer fit for purpose (e.g. Bolstad et al., 2012; Dumont & Istance, 2010; Gilbert, 2005; Kress, 2008; Leadbeater, 2011). But less common in this literature are discussions of what this purpose *is*, and/or what it *should* be in the 'new times'. The result of this is that the long-standing and problematic multiplicity of education's conflicting purposes remains undisturbed, and continues to constrain our thinking (e.g. Egan, 2008).

Currently, in mainstream primary school settings, 'future-focused' education largely means the introduction of large, open-plan collaborative learning spaces, the acquisition of more technology and devices into schools, IT upgrades, and discussions of new skill sets (e.g. the 4Cs). However, these additions have not disrupted older purposes and things have stayed more or less the same. (Gilbert, 2017, p.77). These changes assume the future to be part of an Extended Present (Sardar & Sweeney, 2016) whereby our approach to primary schooling in New Zealand will continue to look very similar to how it was in the 1970s, with the addition of computers, different physical spaces and a commitment to promoting creativity, communication, collaboration and critical thinking (the 4Cs). While this may look different on the surface, the underlying ideas about what school is *for* are largely unchanged.

This Extended Present-only view of education's purpose is, as Sardar (2010) would argue, "an invitation to impending catastrophe" (p.441). We need more than one way to see and prepare for multiple different future/s. The point of this project has been to investigate, following Boyask et al., (2008), whether alternative education can "provide us with 'windows' into real-life laboratories" (p.32), and whether this can challenge us to *reconsider* what we believe the purpose of school to be. Listening to and taking account of ideas from alternative education could allow us to see past this Extended Present-based approach. In what follows I focus on four ideas that could be helpful: alternative education's focus on *learners*, on allowing them to *be* whoever they are today and to *become* whatever they want to be; the different view of *time*; the lack of focus on the curriculum as content to be covered; and the view of schools as places where democracy is lived and practised, not a topic to be taught.

5.2.1 To allow the learner, the self, to emerge

The current mainstream primary school model in New Zealand sees a child start school at five and spend the next six years learning about 'subjects', (Learning Areas in the New Zealand Curriculum) usually separately from each other and usually within the classroom walls. The child is exposed to certain pre-determined knowledge, which is 'taught' to them at certain times. Through this knowledge, the child is expected to achieve certain normed capabilities (assessed via National Standards), and to become a certain type of person. For Bereiter (2002), Claxton (2008), Kress (2008) and Gilbert, (2005), this knowledge-centered view of curriculum is both inappropriate for the Knowledge Age and out of step with recent research on learning. The learner has to *want* to learn the content, and should be responsible for, and able to control the pace of, their own learning (Bolstad et al., 2012). For Egan, this model has things the wrong way round. He argues (2008, p.23) that children have to "discover [their] real nature", "become [their] true selves" before being socialised into what society expects of them and/or asked to accept pre-existing knowledge. In the alternative education settings studied here, there is no attempt to mould the child into something, rather there is a focus on revealing the learner within. There is no agenda for them to *become* any particular type of person; they can just *be*. Whoever they might become in their time is not mapped out in advance. The aim is to develop deep, reflective, thinking skills, in relationships with others.

5.2.2 A time and space to develop passions and purpose.

Alternative centres challenge common-sense assumptions about the ‘school day’, creating their own kind of innovative learning environment. They allow children to play all day, to opt in and out of lessons, and to decide when, where and with whom they learn, when they are ready. This is to ‘speak the unspeakable’, advocate the ‘ridiculous’. The New Zealand Curriculum is seen in its entirety, not just the Learning Areas. Fluidity and flexibility in timetabling allows learners to be immersed in a project or subject and not have to stop, pack up and suddenly switch from English to Maths because that is what ‘the timetable’ requires. This ‘staying in the moment’ of a rich learning experience, uninterrupted, referred to by Csikszentmihalyi (2014) as ‘flow’, is essential for deep learning. Tony Wagner (2012) discusses the notion of ‘play, passion, purpose’ with the idea that children find their passion through play, experimentation and discovery. If there is time given to develop this passion and a learner consequently spends hours, days, weeks immersed in it, ultimately the learner could become an expert in that field. This approach has the potential to springboard into a deep interest and resultant deep knowledge in one area (Egan 2008, 2010). This can then lead to that learner’s purpose in life or work.

Kress (2008) argues that there should be no formal curriculum:

Learning is seen as the ceaseless, constant engagement with the world, taking place irrespective of the presence of formal curricula or formal teaching, the world engaged with framed instead by the learner’s interest. (p.263)

For him:

There needs to be no overt teaching: and without that no visible metric of success, unless the learner wishes to construct and apply such a metric.” (p. 263).

The alternative spaces studied here confront our commitment to focusing on pre-determined areas of knowledge at the expense of time to explore individual interests and developing passions. While most of the study sites followed the New Zealand Curriculum document, they used it for very different purposes.

5.2.3 Acknowledge the New Zealand Curriculum as a whole document

Opposition to ‘one size fits all’ approaches to education is a key idea in the educational futures literature (e.g. Leadbeater, 2005; Bolstad et al., 2012). However, alongside this

we have seen increased emphasis on standardisation and targets. The introduction of National Standards has seen more time allocated to the Learning Areas National Standards report on (reading, writing, maths), with less time allocated to other parts of the curriculum, such as art, the Key Competencies, or the Values section of the Curriculum. It has also worked against the development of collaborative learning. This tells us that schools are widely thought of existing to disseminate pre-determined knowledge to individuals, and to sort people according to whether or not they ‘have’ this knowledge. This is a deep-seated view, one that precludes a consideration of other possibilities. We are incapable of seeing otherwise, incapable of moving into the ‘unthought futures’ space, the ‘global weirding’ or ‘rigorous imagining’ spaces advocated by futurists.

However, in the alternative education sites studied here, children are not measured and graded, but are given time and space to learn about things that interest to them, alongside, and in collaboration with others. Individual academic achievement is not a focus, and although they were obliged by legislation to collect National Standards data, this information was, in several cases, by agreement, not passed on to the parents or children. This approach reflects their view of the child as ‘naturally’ capable and competent, not something to be moulded into a predefined shape, ready to contribute to society and/or as a worker. As Shernoff (2013) says, children “are not merely adults-in-training. They can be substantial producers and keen problem solvers” (p.344). In terms of building capacity for life and work in the Knowledge Age, it is these capacities that need to be amplified, not stifled by one-size-fits-all knowledge delivery systems.

5.2.4 School as a site to experience lived democracy

The democratic schools studied here are organised so that children experience democracy ‘in action’, not as something they are taught ‘about’ (Fielding & Moss, 2011; Perkins, 2009). Children in these spaces regularly vote on issues that impact their daily lives. Five-year-olds are acknowledged as capable and competent, and their votes are equal in value to those of older children and adults in whole-school meetings. In one of the centres, I observed a five-year-old child capably chairing a whole-school meeting. Learners in these spaces experience the consequences of their decision making and learn from errors in judgment. They also have the power to correct these errors by proposing another change and having the opportunity to vote again. Some democratic

schools in America, such as Sudbury Valley School in Massachusetts, take this to the extreme where children are involved in the hiring of teachers (Marano, 2006). This approach could be seen by some as ‘ridiculous’, however here I want to use it for novel and vigorous imagining.

Mainstream schools sometimes provide opportunities for students to experience democracy through avenues such as student-voice groups, but in reality student have little real power. School are controlled by a hierarchal structure which includes the principal, the Board of Trustees and senior management. Citizenship is a topic covered in the New Zealand Curriculum (it features nine times in the document). Perkins (2009) calls this approach to learning ‘aboutism’ – where children are told ‘about’ something as an abstract concept, rather than experiencing it personally or doing something with what they have learnt. This is obviously very different from the experience of children in democratic schools who directly experience participating and contributing to their school community, and making decisions that impact on their daily life. Educational futures thinkers argue that the need for this lived experience of democracy is even more important today to meet the needs of the challenges of the future. Shah & Goss (2007, as cited in Fielding & Moss, 2011) suggest a need to “deepen democracy through more deliberative and participative democratic mechanisms which spread democracy into the ‘everyday’ of our lives.” (p.26).

The above features of the alternative education spaces studied (in particular, their emphasis on allowing the learner’s self to emerge, in relationship with others) reflect ideas about education’s *purpose* that differ markedly from those that prevail in mainstream contexts. Another difference emerging from this study was the participants openness to thinking differently about education, and their level of awareness of their own thinking. As discussed in the next section, educational futures thinkers argue that these are important capacities that more people need to have if we are to successfully build a future-oriented education system.

5.3 Thinking differently in the present

According to Kegan (1984) and Gilbert & Bull (2015), confronting the complexities of the ‘postnormal’ future before us requires different mindsets from those that might have been adequate in the past. In Kegan (1984)’s model, this mindset is described as ‘self-

authoring'. It is a mindset that is capable of stepping back from, seeing through new eyes, what we have always known. In Kegan's terminology, this is referred to as making 'object' what we were formerly 'subject to', in other words, making visible (or knowable) that which was formerly invisible (and unknowable) to us. According to Kegan (1994):

...what we take as subject and what we take as object are not necessarily fixed for us. They are not permanent. They can change. In fact, transforming our epistemologies, liberating ourselves from that in which we were embedded, making what was subject into object so that we can 'have it' rather than 'be had' by it – this is the most powerful way I know to conceptualize the growth of the mind. (p.34)

As outlined earlier, an unexpected—and surprising—finding from this research was that, for some participants, the ideas and practices of alternative education were not experienced as 'add-ons' to their existing thinking, but were described as changing the *structure* of their thinking. Two participants reported being deeply affected and confronted by this change. They described their surprise at being able to step away from their experiences in mainstream education, to let go of what they had known to try something new and different. As one participant put it: "...it's completely turned my whole philosophy of what I did my whole career upside down."

Gilbert and Bull (2015) maintain that this kind of 'transformational' learning in teachers is a necessary basis for developing future-focused education. From the research described here, it seems possible that exposure to the ideas and practices of alternative education could support transformational learning in mainstream practitioners. Interestingly, the two participants described above are both involved in this kind of work. One offers professional development in learning-through-play approaches in mainstream schools and invites classes of children to visit their forest-based setting. The other facilitates professional development for teachers seeking forest school qualifications. Both are clearly keen for mainstream teachers to have access to the growth and development opportunities they have had.

5.3.1 Embracing disruption to thinking

According to Scott (2015) learners in the future need to have the capacity—and disposition—to work with others who are very different from themselves. Instead of attempting to reproduce existing knowledge and past ways of doing things, we need

disruptive innovation: we need to “engag[e] the talents and ideas of diverse participants” (p.7), to actively seek out and engage with views that are different from our own.

The purpose of the current Ministry of Education strategy known as Communities of Learning (CoLs) is to foster ‘innovation from within the system’ through the sharing of ideas and practices across clusters of schools. The point of this strategy is to produce change, disruptive innovation that can allow schools to break out of, and move beyond, old practices. However, early research on this initiative is showing that, so far, this isn’t happening (e.g. Wylie, 2016). While there could be many explanations for this, it seems that, for many reasons, the ‘system capacity’ to “learn from difference” (Woods & Woods, 2009a, p.245) does not yet exist.

It is interesting to note, in the present context, that the participants in this study do appear to have the capacities needed for this kind of innovation. One participant talked about seeking out opportunities to engage with people who challenged their existence and questioned their intentions. Another sought opportunities to learn from the mainstream and welcomed the merging of ideas and inspiration. A third participant was positive about the opportunity to engage on a semi-regular basis with mainstream teachers, to visit their learning spaces and be in dialogue with them. While this wasn’t part of this project, it would be interesting to investigate whether, if mainstream teachers were asked what they could learn from unschoolers, home-schoolers, democratic schools and forest schools, their response would be similar. It is possible that inviting more alternative education providers to join CoLs might improve the chances of these communities meeting their objectives.

5.3.2 Holding multiple temporalities

Milojevic (2005) suggests that in order to think differently about the future, we must be capable of holding multiple temporalities. Holding a different concept of time, or at least being able to consider alternative concepts of time, she believes, is a key factor in the ability to consider alternative futures that are not colonised by a westernised, hegemonic value of time. Milojevic discusses hegemonic views on time in respect to both the expectation on children and adolescents to reach certain academic achievement

milestones based on their biological age, and the timetabling aspects of the school system by which even the head of the school is bound and controlled.

The participants in this study accept that children will learn key foundation literacy and numeracy capabilities in *their* time, not by some predetermined marker. They also challenge the idea of a school timetable where subjects are taught at set times, separated from each other. Instead, children have large amounts of time for play. This is seen as being important for developing their strengths and engaging their interests, as learning that is valued and worthy of that investment in time. At the same time, the participants recognise that they operate within a society that is ‘ruled by the clock’. They are able to accommodate parents with traditional nine-to-five jobs and their hours of operation reflect this. Others (home-schoolers and unschoolers) are able to ignore time as determining when learning occurs. It becomes possible to allow for “performative spontaneity” along with a “sense of slowness”. (Kraftl, 2013a, p. 438)

Alternative education questions mainstream notions of time – that the school day must be nine to three; children must start school at five and reach certain pre-determined ‘standards’ at certain ages; and the learning areas must be taught at specific times during the day. Following Milojevic, this makes them much more open to considering futures other than the already-colonised Extended Present or Familiar Futures.

6.0 Conclusions

The aim of this research was, following Keri Facer (2013), to “use the present” to imagine new Unthought Futures for education. Exploring ‘the edges’ of current education, looking for instances of surprise, novelty and/or disruption, has produced two interesting ideas that seem worthy of further work. The first idea is that those working on the edges have a different conception of education’s *purpose*. For them, education involves supporting children to love learning, in their own way and their own time, and supporting them to be able to learn with different others. The second idea is that those working on the edges appear to have an openness to having their thinking disrupted, and a willingness to work with different others. This openness to ‘not-knowing’ and ‘not-controlling’ is, it seems to me, a productive starting point for imagining how we might go about building the capacities needed to thrive in the increasingly complex, uncertain and volatile worlds of the future.

The barriers to building a more future-oriented education system that were identified earlier in this thesis would *not* be addressed simply by importing ideas and practices from alternative education into mainstream contexts. This has of course been done, many times. What usually happens when this is done is that the ideas are swallowed up and assimilated into the mainstream context. Separated from their original context, they lose their meaning and, if they survive, they are reduced to little more than slogans.

The ideas themselves aren’t what matter here, it’s what lies underneath. Change of the kind discussed in this thesis doesn’t happen by adding new ideas into an existing meaning-making system: change to the meaning-making system itself is required. Education’s meaning-making system is made up of—and ‘works’ via—the thoughts and actions of a multiplicity of agents, of which teachers are a key group (Biesta, 2016). System change will only happen when the thoughts and actions of these agents change, and this in turn will only happen when a critical mass of agents is willing to look below the surface, to question, and to be open to ‘not-knowing’. This is not what we see now. As Peck (2009), paraphrasing Howard Zinn, argues:

The whole schooling ethos, it can be argued, has become an unquestionable assumption; and once something becomes ‘unquestionable’, people stop thinking. By this very ‘non-thinking’, we keep ourselves enslaved by the obedience and blind allegiance we give to powers whose true motivation we do not always understand (Zinn, 1997). (p.36)

The ‘surprising’ finding of the study described here was that it seems that alternative education contexts *either* support those working in them to be open to disruptive thinking *or* they attract people who already have this capacity. From this study it is obviously not possible to say which of these is the case. However, interestingly, in the literature on transformational learning, there are indications that, where there is *constructive engagement with difference*, people from marginalised groups or who are in marginal situations find transformational learning more straightforward than do those in more mainstream contexts. As Parks Daloz (2000) puts it, it seems that central to transformation is a “series of cycles of engagement with the other”, “the rhythmic dance of differentiating and integrating” (p. 110). (See also: Parks Daloz, et al., (1996). This seems an interesting question to follow up on, both from the point of view of fostering transformational learning, and from the point of view of people in marginalised situations.

During the writing of this thesis, the New Zealand General Election was held and a new coalition government was established. The Labour-NZ First-Green Party coalition wants to set a new direction for New Zealand education. In terms of the issues raised in this thesis, this could be positive or negative. For example, abolishing National Standards could allow a move away from measuring children’s progress based on pre-set standards, and acknowledging their progress more holistically. The re-thinking of the partnership schools concept, and the likely conversion of the existing partnership schools into special character schools, will bring these schools more clearly into the state system. This could produce homogenisation and stifle innovation, or it could produce greater engagement with difference. It is possible that the Education Summits to be held in May 2018 (Ministry of Education n.d.) may provide the new direction the government wants. However, in these national discussions of public education’s future, it is important that those involved have access to information on alternatives, and opportunities to hear from and work with different approaches.

For those who are open to it, the findings described here could have something to offer. In particular, allowing time – time to converse, time to build relationships, and time to consider alternatives to the “used futures” (Inayatullah, 2008) we see put in front of us. The findings from this study show that this is what those involved in alternative education do. Noticing what is happening in these settings is one way to “use the present”. Following Nagata (2000), we could see alternative education as a slightly

open window through which the system can be exposed to surprise and novelty.

Alternative education can leave

some space open in the system in order to allow a certain degree of adventure and unconventionality, or moderate discretion, even if this strays from a standard, [...] Rather than that, it is exceedingly important instead to keep the capacity, as part of the wisdom of society, to maintain an open space of about 10% at all times. Through that guaranteed opening there will be gentle breezes blowing and the entire room will be refreshed... The breeze that is let into the room does not have to be so wonderful that it refreshes every corner of the room, but we must be able to say of it at least that it feels rather good. (pp.205-207).

For me as an outsider looking in, it was clear that the study centres meet the needs of the families who choose them. However, they also meet the needs of those working in them. The adults in these centres work with a sense of joy, pleasure and commitment. They want to be where they are. There is a sense of contentment and lightness, balanced with determination, focus and self-belief. I have found it difficult to convey adequately here the feeling of joy and happiness I felt in these spaces, but it was incredibly powerful and apparent. While I have seen happy, joyful students in mainstream schools, this was on a different level. It is a challenge to me personally to ignore this. For me the challenge with which I end this thesis is to ask myself how important is it for me as an educator, but also as a parent and a researcher, that children throughout their whole day, not just break times, are happy? How important is it that they are being challenged, that they are growing, that they are trusted and listened to? How important is it that they feel able to create happy, productive, fulfilling futures for themselves?

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Appendices

Appendix A
Ethics approval

Appendix B
Participant information sheet

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Participant interview questions

Appendix A Ethics approval

The logo for Auckland University of Technology (AUT) is displayed in white capital letters on a black rectangular background.

AUTEC Secretariat

Auckland University of Technology D-88, WU406 Level 4 WU Building City Campus T: +64 9 921 9999 ext. 8316 E: ethics@aut.ac.nz www.aut.ac.nz/researchethics

6 December 2016

Jane Gilbert

Faculty of Culture and Society

Dear Jane

Re Ethics Application: **16/415 Present day utopias? Listening to the voices of alternative possibilities in educational futures scenarios.**

Thank you for providing evidence as requested, which satisfies the points raised by the Auckland University of Technology Ethics Committee (AUTEC).

Your ethics application has been approved for three years until 6 December 2019. As part of the ethics approval process, you are required to submit the following to AUTEC:

- A brief annual progress report using form EA2, which is available online through <http://www.aut.ac.nz/researchethics>. When necessary this form may also be used to request an extension of the approval at least one month prior to its expiry on 6 December 2019;
- A brief report on the status of the project using form EA3, which is available online through <http://www.aut.ac.nz/researchethics>. This report is to be submitted either when the approval expires on 6 December 2019 or on completion of the project.

It is a condition of approval that AUTEC is notified of any adverse events or if the research does not commence. AUTEC approval needs to be sought for any alteration to the research, including any alteration of or addition to any documents that are provided to participants. You are responsible for ensuring that research undertaken under this approval occurs within the parameters outlined in the approved application.

AUTEC grants ethical approval only. If you require management approval from an institution or organisation for your research, then you will need to obtain this.

To enable us to provide you with efficient service, please use the application number and study title in all correspondence with us. If you have any enquiries about this application, or anything else, please do contact us at ethics@aut.ac.nz.

All the very best with your research,

Kate O'Connor
Executive Secretary
Auckland University of Technology Ethics Committee

HA Potter

Cc: gpotter@epsomnormal.school.nz

Appendix B

Participant information sheet



Participant Information Sheet

23 August 2016

Re: Research Project

Present day utopias? Listening to the voices of alternative possibilities in educational futures scenarios.

Dear (insert name)

My name is Gina Potter and I am a Master of Education student at Auckland University of Technology. I am interested in finding out how non-mainstream education centres are preparing their learners for the future and the potential for these ideas to inform mainstream schools. I would like to conduct some interviews to inform this research and hope you are able to be part of this. The findings of this research would inform my thesis which I would submit as part of my Master of Education qualifications.

Why am I doing this research?

I have had a long-standing interest in alternatives to traditional schooling in New Zealand. This research project is an opportunity to explore what actually happens in those centres that take a different approach to teaching primary school aged students. It will be through a sharing of stories between home schooling¹, un-schooling and democratic schools, that I hope to uncover similar themes or concepts. My initial investigation into non-mainstream education has also identified some interesting similarities between ideas promoted for 'future focused education' and '21st century learning' and those mentioned in democratic schools, home schooling and un-schooling. Some examples include the presence of collaboration, teachers in the role of a guide/mentor, critical thinking and self-direction in learning. It is these connections that I am interested in finding out about more.

How have I selected the research participants?

I have chosen you as your centre is listed as a (democratic school/home schooling network/un-schooling network) on (insert website).

What happens if you agree to participate in the research?

If you agree to participate, we would need to arrange a mutually suitable time and place to hold the interview (1 only). The interview is likely to take between 1-2 hours and can be held after normal school hours or during school holidays. I will ask you to talk about your centres philosophy, approach to learning, the future needs of your students and how you perceive this to be different to what occurs in a mainstream setting. I may need to contact you to clarify statements or opinions and this may involve an additional phone call, Skype call or email.

¹ Gray & Riley (2013) define un-schooling as '... a branch of homeschooling. While other homeschoolers may do "school at home" and follow a set curriculum, unschoolers learn primarily through everyday life experiences – experiences that they choose and that therefore automatically match their abilities, interests and learning styles.'

How do you agree to participate in this research?

Your participation in this research is voluntary (it is your choice) and whether or not you choose to participate will neither advantage nor disadvantage you. You are able to withdraw from the study at any time. If you choose to withdraw from the study, then you will be offered the choice between having any data that is identifiable as belonging to you removed or allowing it to continue to be used. You will also have an opportunity to review the transcripts prior to their use in the data analysis process. However, once the findings have been produced, removal of your data may not be possible.

Is there any risk or cost involved?

Participating in this research project will involve you giving up 1 to 2 hours of your time. However, this would be at a time that is convenient to you. There are no associated costs involved in participating and no perceived discomfort or risk involved for you.

What are the benefits?

You will have the opportunity to have your positions and viewpoints of future focused education listened to, and shared with, others. The research will help me to complete my Master of Education.

How will my privacy be protected?

The research findings may be used for academic publications and presentations. You will not be identified by name in the research findings unless you specifically request this to be done. Your name and details will not be included in any reports or other documents and will be kept confidential. I will take all practical steps to ensure confidentiality, however due to the small number of alternative education centres currently operating in New Zealand, it is possible that others may identify your centre in the research findings. Where a teacher or other staff member is selected by the principal to participate, they will be acting in the role of a representative of the school. Their views and comments should be a reflection of the schools philosophies and practices rather than their own personally held views and opinions.

What opportunity do I have to consider this invitation?

If you are willing to be a participant in this research, please sign the attached Consent Form and return to me. I would appreciate it if you could do this by xx/xx/xx (2 weeks from the date of the letter).

What do I do if I have concerns about this research?

Any concerns regarding the nature of this project should be notified in the first instance to the Project Supervisor,

Jane Gilbert, jane.gilbert@aut.ac.nz +64 9 921 9999 ext 8159 Concerns regarding the conduct of the research should be notified to the Executive Secretary of AUTEK, Kate

O'Connor, ethics@aut.ac.nz , 921 9999 ext 6038.

Whom do I contact for further information about this research?

Please keep this Information Sheet and a copy of the Consent Form for your future reference. You are also able to contact the research team as follows:

Researcher Contact Details: Gina Potter gpotter@epsomnormal.school.nz 021 511 497

Supervisor Contact Details: Jane Gilbert jane.gilbert@aut.ac.nz +64 9 921 9999 ext 8159

Approved by the Auckland University of Technology Ethics Committee on 6th December 2016, AUTEK Reference number 16/415.

Appendix C

Consent Form



Consent Form

Project title: *Present day utopias? Listening to the voices of alternative possibilities in educational futures scenarios.*

Project Supervisor: *Professor Jane Gilbert*

Researcher: *Gina Potter*

- ☐ I have read and understood the information provided about this research project in the Information Sheet dated (day/month/year).
- ☐ I have had an opportunity to ask questions and to have them answered.
- ☐ I understand that notes will be taken during the interviews and that they will also be audio-taped and transcribed.
- ☐ I understand that taking part in this study is voluntary (my choice) and that I may withdraw from the study at any time without being disadvantaged in any way.
- ☐ I understand that if I withdraw from the study then I will be offered the choice between having any data that is identifiable as belonging to me removed or allowing it to continue to be used. However, once the findings have been produced, removal of my data may not be possible.
- ☐ I agree to take part in this research.
- ☐ I wish to receive a summary of the research findings (please tick one):
Yes ☐ No ☐

Participant's signature:

Participant's name:

Participant's Contact Details (if appropriate):

.....

Date:

Approved by the Auckland University of Technology Ethics Committee 6th December 2016 AUTEK Reference number 16/415.

Note: The Participant should retain a copy of this form.

Appendix D

Participant interview questions

1. Can you please tell me a little bit about your school's philosophy.
2. Has the school maintained this philosophy since it was established or has there been changes along the way?
3. If yes, what instigated those changes? (Try to determine if this is an internally motivated direction, or influenced by external factors).
4. Could you tell me about what I might see when I walk through one of the classrooms in the school?
5. What is your understanding of how that may differ in a mainstream classroom?
6. What might I see when I walk through the school at break times? Again, what is your understanding of how that may differ to a mainstream classroom?

Additional questions: - Has the school maintained these environments since it was established or has there been changes along the way? If yes, what instigated those changes? (Try to determine if this is an internally motivated direction, or influenced by external factors).

7. As per the previous question could you tell me about the people that work here at the school? What teacher qualities do you seek when hiring people to work here? Again, what is your understanding of how that may differ to a mainstream classroom?

Additional questions: - Has the school maintained this approach to employing staff since it was established or has there been changes along the way? If yes, what instigated those changes? (Try to determine if this is an internally motivated direction, or influenced by external factors).

Thinking now about a specific field of educational research – educational futures research. I'm interested in hearing about how your centre prepares their students for the future.

1. Could you tell me, in your opinion, how you believe your centre prepares young people for the future.
2. In what ways do you feel this differs from mainstream schools?