# The Growth of Independent Education Alternatives in New Zealand

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**Abstract**

The New Zealand schooling system is well-known for its progressive and innovative approach to education (Couch, 2012; Mutch, 2013; Wells, 2016). Their national curriculum is inclusive and flexible, allowing schools and teachers to select the content they deem necessary to meet the competencies in the designated learning areas (Ministry of Education, 2007). Additionally, the NZ education system provides choice to parents by offering a range of alternative approaches to schooling, such as Steiner Schools, Montessori Schools, Catholic Schools, or Kura Kaupapa Mãori (Mãori language immersion schools). Within such progressive public schooling system, one would not expect that there would be interest in alternative private schools. Yet, this study found the opposite. To examine the growing interest in independent alternative programs in New Zealand, this study uses a qualitative multiple-case study design of four independent educational programs in the North Island of New Zealand.

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**INTRODUCTION**

Alternative education is often used to describe approaches to education that are different from those offered in mainstream schools (Riddle & Clever, 2017, Woods & Woods, 2009). It refers to education programs funded by the government for students who have been alienated from mainstream education (Conley, 2002; Vaughan, 2002; Wasburn-Moses, 2011), and to schools (private or public) that use flexible and innovative approaches to curriculum and pedagogy, such as Steiner, Montessori, and democratic schools (Rudge, 2010). The New Zealand schooling system provides diversity and choice for parents and students through different pathways within the public system (Vaughan, 2002). Parents can choose to enroll their children in mainstream state school, state-integrated schools such as Steiner, Montessori, and Catholic Schools, or Kura Kaupapa Māori (Māori language immersion schools). The different pathways offered in the New Zealand schooling system reflects their progressive liberal ideas. New Zealand has a long history of progressive education. Some of the key tenets of progressive education, such as child-centered, experiential learning, emergent curriculum, and creativity are present in various classrooms in New Zealand schools (Mutch, 2013). With such progressive schooling system, one would not expect any interest in alternative private schools. Yet, this study found the opposite—a growing interest in this sector. To examine the increasing attention to independent alternative programs in New Zealand, this study uses a qualitative multiple-case study design of four recently-launched independent educational programs in the North Island of New Zealand.

The New Zealand schooling system is well-known for its progressive and innovative approach to education (Couch, 2012; Mutch, 2013; Wells, 2016). Their national curriculum is inclusive and flexible, allowing schools and teachers to select the content they deem necessary to meet the competencies in the designated learning areas (Ministry of Education, 2007). The curriculum provides guidance on effective pedagogy, frames teaching as an on-

going inquiry, and allows schools to determine their own assessment methods. NZ education system is at the forefront of innovation. Recently, the government has invested millions of dollars to change the architectural design of school buildings into open flexible spaces to encourage change and innovation in pedagogical practices (Fletcher & Everatt, 2021; New Zealand Government, 2018). When I moved to New Zealand in 2018, I was excited with the opportunity to learn more about their flexible learning environments and innovative pedagogical practices. I have always been interested in alternative approaches to schooling and was thrilled to be in a country that promoted such progressive approach to education at a national level. As I began my investigation, I was surprised to find a group of educators "working to revolutionize education in New Zealand" through alternative independent (private) schools and programs (Ed Innovators NZ). Why were they interested in creating alternative private schools in a country that already offered such innovative education to students? Why would parents be willing to pay for a private alternative school when the public system already offered a liberal and progressive education? What are these private programs offering that the public system is not delivering? These questions led to the present study, a qualitative multiple-case study design of four recently-launched independent educational programs in the North Island of New Zealand.

**Alternative Education, Alternative Schools**

Alternative education is often used to describe approaches to education that are different from those offered in mainstream schools (Riddle & Clever, 2017, Woods & Woods, 2009). Alternative education programs come in many varieties and can be found in public, charter, and independent schools, as well as home-based learning environments. In countries such as US, Australia, and New Zealand, alternative education has a twofold meaning. On one hand, alternative education refers to education programs funded by the government for students who have been alienated from mainstream education (Conley, 2002; Vaughan, 2002; Wasburn-

Moses, 2011). 'At-risk' and disadvantaged students are often sent to these programs as an 'alternative' to reengage them into the schooling system. On the other side of the spectrum, the term 'alternative schools' refers to schools (private or public) that use flexible and innovative approaches to curriculum and pedagogy, such as Steiner schools, Montessori schools, democratic schools, and open schools (Rudge, 2010).

The rise of 'alternative schools' is often traced back to Dewey and the progressive movement of 1920s (Conley, 2002), although others would argue that the movement has its roots in the educational theories of Rousseau, Pestalozzi, and Frobel (Miller, 1990; Forbes, 2003). Each alternative school has its own distinct profile, however, most of them embrace some of the following characteristics—they provide an option for students, parents, and teachers; they are committed to be more responsive to the educational needs within the community than conventional school; they have more comprehensive goals, are more flexible and responsive to feedback and change, and are smaller than conventional schools (Conley, 2002). Alternative schools also tend to be more attuned to the child's needs instead of following "narrow age-classified groups" (Kraftl, 2013), they value learning as "imminent to life itself" (Falk et al, 2009) and regard meaningful and personalized relationships as essential in education (Rudge, 2010, 2016). The most common and widely spread alternative approaches to schooling are Steiner schools, Montessori schools, democratic/free schools, Quaker/Friends schools, open schools, and homeschool (Rudge, 2010). Kraftl (2013) also includes forest schools, care farms, and human scale schools as alternative schooling contexts. Most of these alternative approaches to schooling are privately funded and independent from government control, however, in countries such as the US, Australia, and New Zealand, some of these alternative models of education have been incorporated into the public system.

**Alternative Education Pathways in New Zealand**

The New Zealand schooling system provides diversity and choice for parents and students through different pathways within the public system (Vaughan, 2002). The schooling system includes state[1] schools, state-integrated schools (formerly private schools), Kura Kaupapa Māori (Māori language immersion schools), senior school transition pathways (vocational pathways)[2], and alternative programs for 'at-risk students.' All children in New Zealand aged six to sixteen years old must either attend school or be educated at home. Most children start school when they turn five after attending some form of early childhood education. Children are usually expected to attend a school in the zone where they live but some schools, such as state-integrated schools and Kura Kaupapa Māori, accept children from other zones. All Catholic schools, most Steiner (Waldorf) and Montessori schools, and the 'short-lived' charter schools (2014-2018) are state-integrated schools. These schools were integrated into the system without compromising their philosophical and pedagogical approach to education. They are designated as 'special character schools.'

The different pathways offered in the New Zealand schooling system reflects their progressive liberal ideas. New Zealand has a long history of progressive education. Since 1930s, progressive education ideas have influenced education policy as well as the curriculum and pedagogy in New Zealand schools (Couch, 2012). Some of the key tenets of progressive education, such as child-centered, experiential learning, emergent curriculum, holistic pedagogy and creativity are present in various classrooms in New Zealand schools (Mutch, 2013). In the last decade, New Zealand has been through education policy reforms that

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[1] Public schools in New Zealand are called state schools. Both terms are used in this article interchangeably.
[2] The senior school transition pathway includes diverse vocational pathways. Schools often "steer low achieving students into vocationally, rather than academically, oriented programmes" (Vaughan, 2002, p.14).

threatened their progressive ideals, like Tomorrow's Schools[3] and the introduction of national standards[4] in 2010. Nonetheless, despite the changes many classrooms continued to exhibit the key tenets of progressive education (Mutch, 2013). This is due in part to the flexibility of the *New Zealand Curriculum* (Ministry of Education, 2007). The curriculum provides "descriptive statements about each curriculum area with a set of overarching achievement objectives but with freedom for schools and teachers to select the content that they felt would best help students achieve these objectives" (Mutch, 2013, p.108). Additionally, the curriculum provides guidance on effective pedagogy, frames teaching as an on-going inquiry, and allows schools to determine their own assessment methods. All state and state-integrated schools follow the *New Zealand Curriculum,* Kura Kaupapa Mãori have their own distinct curriculum, and private schools are not required to follow the national curriculum. About 95% of New Zealand children attend state or state-integrated schools or Kura Kaupapa Mãori. Under 5% attend private/independent schools and less than 1% are homeschooled (The school system, n.d.).

**Theoretical Framework**

The theoretical constructs of holistic education informed the data collection and analysis of this study. Holistic education emerged as a response to the dominant worldview of mainstream education (Rudge, 2010). Holistic educators advocate for an education that values the child's inner potential, nourishes its possibilities of development, and allows its "self-unfolding" to occur naturally (Flake, 1993; Miller, 1990). They recognize that every person is a unique being with inherent qualities, potentialities, and needs, and with a singular way to interact and respond to reality (Flake, 1993; Miller, 1990; Miller, 2006). Holistic educators

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[3] During mid-to-late 1990s, New Zealand education system changed from a centralized and democratic system of education to a decentralized system that fostered competition between schools (O'Connor & Holland, 2013). Although many schools continued to embrace progressive education ideals, others changed into more conservative institutions (McGregor & Mills, 2012; Nairn & Higgins, 2011).

[4] In 2010, the National party introduced a policy of National Standards in reading, writing, and mathematics for Years 1-8. In 2017, with the new government, the National Standards were removed.

focus on development of the whole child—cognitive, emotional, physical, social, aesthetic, and spiritual (Miller, 2014)—and regard caring and positive relationships as the foundation for learning, social life, and social justice (Noddings, 2005, 2013).

Proponents of holistic education argue for a curriculum that integrates the various domains of knowledge, fosters connections and relationships, and prepares students to live in a global interconnected society (Clark, 2001; Miller, 2019). They call for an education that nurtures authentic connections with the natural world, cultivates ecological awareness, and promotes sustainability (Clark, 1991; Miller et al., 2019; Nava, 2001). Furthermore, holistic educators reject any form of standardized approach to education and argue instead for an education that begins with the child, with the 'living reality' of each individual (Rudge, 2010). They believe children should have autonomy and freedom of choice in the learning process and be able to freely and safely express their thoughts and ideas (Forbes, 2003; Miller, 2002). Finally, advocates of holistic education refuse to accept a rigid authoritarian system ruled by economic, social, or cultural power (Eisler, 2000; Koegel & Miller, 2003; Miller, 1993, 2002; Nava, 2001). Instead, they call for 'participatory democracy,' where citizens are empowered to participate in meaningful ways in the community, society, and the planet. They argue for an education that values egalitarian, open, and democratic relationships (Eisler & Miller, 2004).

**Methods of Inquiry**

This study used a multiple-case study design (Yin, 2014). The design involved four case studies—two independent schools and two private outdoor programs. The main research question guiding this study was: What is motivating the recent growth of alternative independent schools and programs in New Zealand?

Criteria for selecting the case studies included: 1) the school/program is independent of the public system; 2) the school/program is relatively new (research was conducted in 2019); 3) the school/program has a holistic/progressive approach to education; 4) the school is

not affiliated with well-established holistic institutions[5] (e.g. Steiner or Montessori schools); and 5) the school/program is situated in North Island of New Zealand (convenience sampling). Three schools and two outdoor programs were invited to participate in the study. One school declined to participate. This research project was approved by the University of Auckland Human Participants Ethics Committee on July 4, 2019 (ref. 023246).

*Participants*

The four case studies included in this study were: Ako, a full primary[6] independent school for children 5-13 years old; AGE, an independent school for children 5-14 years old; The Forest School (FS), a One Day School designed for primary and middle school students (5-15 years old); and Conscious Kids (CK), a One Day outdoor program for children 5-12 years old. 7 founders, 2 principals, and 1 educational advisor participated in the focus groups: Ako founder (n=1) and principal (n=1); AGE founders (n=2) and principal (n=1); CK founders (n=2); and FS founder (n=1) and educational advisor (n=1). 50 students participated in the interviews: Ako (n=9), AGE (n=5), CK (n=12), FS (n=24). 70 parents completed the Qualtrics online questionnaire: Ako (n=7), AGE (n=20), CK (n=7), and FS (n=36). Letters of support from 20 CK parents, previously sent to the institution, were also included in the data analysis.

*Data*

Data was collected July-August, 2019 and included four focus groups with founders/principal (one in each institution), semi-structured interviews with students, online parent questionnaire, letters of support from parents (from one institution), school documentation, and observation notes. The semi-structured interviews with students were aimed at collecting their perspective of the program. The online parent questionnaire included demographic and

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[5] Steiner and Montessori schools have a long history in NZ education system and many of them have been integrated into the state system. The focus of this study is on the recent growth of alternative schools.
[6] The New Zealand school system is organized as: primary school (Years 1-6 =ages 5-11); full primary school (Years 1-8 = ages 5-13); intermediate/middle school (Years 7-8 = ages 10-13); and secondary school (Years 9-13 = ages 13-18).

open-ended questions related to reasons for choosing the selected program (see appendix A).

Focus groups and interviews were audio recorded and transcribed. Founders of the four

institutions gave permission to disclose their names and the institution's name in publications

of this study.

*Data Analysis*

Data were analyzed qualitatively using the grounded theory methodology (Glasser & Strauss,

1967). Data collected from each school/program unit (e.g. founders, parents, and students)

were analyzed separately and coded inductively generating a series of categories. Through

constant comparative analysis (Corbin & Strauss, 2008), categories were revised and refined

and then integrated into core categories. Once the core categories were defined, I revisited the

data and reviewed the coding for accuracy.

**Findings**

Analysis of the data resulted into 29 sub categories collapsed into six core categories: learning

environment, learning approach, agency, human development, relationship, and

dissatisfaction with public schools (see table 1). Findings of each case study is discussed

below.

Table 1 *Coding categories*

| CORE CATEGORIES | SUB CATEGORIES | | |
|---|---|---|---|
| Learning Environment | Indoor space
Mixed-age/flexible schedule | Outdoor/connection to nature
Low teacher/student ratio | Local community |
| Learning Approach | Ecological awareness
Real life learning | Play-based learning
Low tech | Creative arts
Academics |
| Agency | Freedom of choice
Problem-solving/innovation | Self-directed learning
Personalized learning | |
| Human development | Whole child development | Resilience | Social/emotional skills |
| Relationship | Peers | Teachers-students | School community |
| Dissatisfaction with public schools | Lack of support/resources; Standardized education
Large classrooms
Difficulties adapting to school | Old education model
Bullying
Rigid rules of behavior | Excessive sitting time
Not challenging |

**Case I – Ako**

Ako is a full primary independent school for children 5-13 years old located on the North Shore of Auckland. Ako opened in February 2018 in one of the classrooms on the Marae[7] grounds. The school had 12 children enrolled when data was collected (July, 2019). Ako prides itself for being a "future-focused primary school," that is play-based, child-led, passion-driven, and outdoor centered (https://www.akospace.com). The school offers a low teacher-student ratio in a mixed-age learning environment and uses the community as a learning space. Children spend two days a week in a bush site near the school, go to the local library regularly, use the facilities of the local YMCA, and visit local cultural spaces. Parents are encouraged to participate, contribute, and share their knowledge, skills and interests to the school community.

Ako was founded by Sabrina Nagel, an entrepreneur, lecturer and mother "who had a strong desire to create a space that would re-imagine learning for her twin daughters" (school documentation). Claudia Grey, Ako principal and lead teacher and former primary public-school teacher, was also involved in the early development of the school. Both Sabrina and Claudia were not satisfied with the state schools in New Zealand. They criticized the actual implementation of the innovative ideas promoted in mainstream education, arguing that the inquiry-based and self-directed learning encouraged in state schools are in fact very teacher driven. Claudia also pointed out that teacher-student relationships are still very top-down and hierarchical in state schools and teachers remain the 'bearers of knowledge.' Moreover, she condemned the excessive emphasis on academics and assessment, and the continuous comparison and pressure placed on students. In her view, NZ state schools place undue focus on cognitive, social and physical development, and neglect children's emotional and mental

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[7] A marae is a fenced-in complex of carved buildings and grounds that belongs to a particular iwi (tribe), hapū (sub tribe) or whānau (family) in New Zealand.

wellbeing. In response, both Sabrina and Claudia wanted to create a school that focused on the development of the whole child and its wellbeing, nurtured respectful, caring, and egalitarian relationships, and honored children's agency, creativity, and self-directed learning. Finally, Sabrina and Claudia wanted to have a school in an urban center with access to municipal resources and local parks to further children's connection with nature and the local community.

*Student Response*

Most students at Ako participated in the interviews (n=9). The majority of them were very young (5-6 years old) and had never been to NZ state schools. Only two students who participated in the interview had been to state schools prior to Ako. The themes that emerged most often during their interviews were—*relationship, learning approach,* and *agency*. Several students commented that everyone was friendly at Ako, that it was easy to make friends, and they loved playing with their friends. Others spoke fondly of the teachers, that they were very nice and caring. Students talked about their favorite activities at Ako—play, draw, paint, listen to stories, read, go to the library and the bush, and build huts with friends (*learning approach)*. *Agency* was another consistent theme in the interviews. Students liked the freedom of eating when they felt hungry (as opposed to mainstream schools), playing with objects and games they chose, and deciding the activities they wanted to do. Finally, students who attended public schools prior to Ako complained about the large size classes, 'boring' activities, and experiences with bullying.

*Parent Response*

Most parents at Ako responded to the online questionnaire (n=7). There were many reasons why parents chose Ako for their children, however the reasons most frequently cited were *outdoor/connection to nature*, *self-directed learning*, and *play-based learning*. All parents

cited the outdoor program as a reason for choosing Ako for their children. They valued nature and outdoor play in children's education and appreciated that Ako designated long periods of time for outdoor activity. As one parent commented:

> Ako recognizes the importance of nature - I strongly believe that the connection to nature will be key to changing the mindset of this generation in enabling them to care for the planet and develop an economic and lifestyle model that respects the world around us. Without the connection to nature, it becomes purely academic which holds less motivation.

Parents (n=7) were also interested in the s*elf-directed learning* offered at Ako. They appreciated the individualized and personalized learning environment, and the autonomy afforded to children to direct their own learning. Parents liked the *freedom* children have at Ako and the *choices* offered to them. Most parents (n=6) mentioned *play-based learning* as a reason for choosing Ako and several of them (n=5) commented on the attention to *whole child development.* They wrote, Ako provides "a truly holistic approach to education," focused on nurturing and developing "a well-rounded child" (Ako online questionnaire) Another theme cited frequently was the *school community.* Parents (n=4) appreciated being involved in the school, the support they received on parenting issues, and the close relationship with like-minded parents. Other themes that attracted parents to Ako were *low teacher-student ratio*, the development of *social and emotional skills*, the low focus on *technology*, the emphasis on *real life learning* and *problem-solving skills*, the respectful interaction between *peers*, and the *mixed-age* learning environment. Some parents were critical of the state system. They disliked the testing culture in public schools, the disregard for children's differences, and the standardized curriculum. Additionally, they argued that the NZ mainstream education is not equipping children for the future. As one parent wrote:

The more I learned about education for primary school children, the more nervous I felt about sending my child to the local school. I believe that the current school system is not providing our children the skills they will need to be successful in the future.

**Case 2 – AGE**

AGE is an independent school for children 5-14 years old (Year 1-10) located in a large two-story building in Takapuna, north of Auckland. AGE was established in February 2017 with 12 students enrolled. Their enrollment quickly increased to 38 in the first year. In 2018, they restructured the school and reduced the enrollment to 20 students, which remained the same till data was collected (August, 2019). The learning space is beautifully decorated, warm and inviting, and organized into mixed-age groups. AGE prides itself in offering a "revolutionary approach to education" focused on the development of skills needed "for a changing future" (https://www.age.school.nz/vision). The program has a strong emphasis on entrepreneurial learning, innovation, environmental awareness, community participation, and wellbeing. They offer a low teacher-student ratio and provide individualized learning plans for children according to their needs, strengths, and passions. All outdoor activities and sports are provided in partnership with the local industries. Students engage in long-term community-integrated projects and individual 'passion' projects.

AGE was founded by Evan Christian and Katherine Allsopp-Smith. They envisioned a school where "children fall in love with the thrill of learning, find the magic in making mistakes, and have the confidence to dream and master new technologies" (school documentation). Similar to Sabrina and Claudia, Evan and Kat were dissatisfied with mainstream education in New Zealand. They criticized the purpose-less activities, the lack of relevance to real life, the excessive stress on academics and sports, and the competition to be at the top of the chart. They condemned the 'one-size-fits-all model' and the rigid rules of

behavior in NZ schools and argued, "kids have to fit in, those that not fit in, they get detention or they get expelled, or they get to the bottom of the class" (focus group transcript). They were also critical of the early childhood centers and kindergartens in New Zealand, calling them "babysitting centers" with old fashioned traditional methods that fail to engage kids in effective learning. Evan and Kat wanted to create a school that promoted active learning, innovation, entrepreneurial thinking, and engaged students in authentic and meaningful real-life projects. They envisioned an education that nurtures students' wellbeing, fosters caring relationships, encourages personalized learning, and supports the local community.

*Student Response*

Only 5 students at AGE participated in the interviews, 2 young children (ages 5-6) and 3 teenagers. Students' stressful experiences in previous schools might have contributed to parent reluctance to give consent for their children to participate in the study. Analysis of the interviews show that young children appreciated the flexibility of the *learning environment,* the possibility to move around the building instead of just sitting in one classroom, the freedom to play with Lego at certain times of the day, and the opportunities for active learning (*play-based learning).* The older students also appreciated the open space that allowed them to move around, and the opportunity to work in the community instead of being confined to a school building (*learning environment).* They enjoyed the *freedom* to choose their passion projects and cherished the *creative arts* and *real-life learning activities*. As one student commented, "at this school we get to learn differently. It is a good thing. I feel much more happy learning this way" (interview transcript). The older students reported feeling safe, respected, and happy at AGE, as opposed to their previous schools, where they were bullied, unmotivated, and unhappy. Finally, students reported working well with adults, and having good relationships at AGE (*relationships),*

*Parent Response*

The majority of parents at AGE responded to the online questionnaire (n=20). *Dissatisfaction with public schools, low-teacher student ratio, personalized learning, and teacher-student relationship* were the most common reasons parents gave for enrolling their children at AGE. Most of them (n=17) wrote about their *dissatisfaction with public schools*. They criticized the *standardized system of education* and the *lack of support/resources* to cater to student individual needs, which they argued, resulted in their children being unhappy, bored, and disengaged at school. A few parents mentioned that the learning environment was *not challenging* enough for their son. Others commented on how *bullying* in the school was affecting the mental health of their kids. A parent stated that his son was suffering from "anxiety, stress, severe loneliness, and lack of self-esteem because he was being picked on by other kids in the class" (online questionnaire). Parents were also dissatisfied with the *large and overcrowded classrooms* and the *old education model* of state schools.

Many parents (n=14) cited AGE *personalized learning* approach and its *low-teacher student ratio* as a reason for choosing the school. They also commented on the flexibility of the curriculum, the self-pace learning environment, and the opportunity given to students to follow their interests. As one parent wrote, my son "is often described as 'outside the box' and the teachers at AGE seem to understand him and what is required to get the best out of him" (AGE online questionnaire). Overall, parents seemed very pleased with the teachers at AGE. Half of the parents in the study (n=10) identified the positive *teacher-student relationship* as a distinct feature of AGE. They commented that teachers were caring, kind, positive, and nurturing; they understand students' needs and know how to respectfully relate with them. Parents also were also pleased with the positive *school community* and the welcoming environment for families.

Several parents (n=7) cited *real-life learning* and the focus on *whole child development* as reasons for choosing AGE. They appreciated the interactive and more 'hands on approach' to learning and the emphasis placed on the wellbeing of the child. Two parents commented that their children's confidence have grown at AGE as they felt valued, understood, and free to be themselves. Some parents (n=6) cited *self-directed learning* as a positive feature of AGE. They appreciated that students had the opportunity to explore their interests and passions. Finally, parents were also pleased with the *indoor space,* the *outdoor learning* opportunities, the use of the *community* as part of the learning environment, and the *mixed-age* groupings offered at AGE. They liked that students were grouped based on their skills and competencies rather than separated by age.

**Case 3 – The Forest School (FS)**

The Forest School is an independent One Day School located in a beautiful wooded property by the beach in the North Island of New Zealand. FS provides "learning opportunities that connect children with nature in bush, shoreline, island, and ocean environments" (school documentation). It is designed for students 5-15 years old, who are either homeschooled or enrolled in a state or private school. In New Zealand, "One Day Schools are independent education providers that offer specialized learning. The Education Act 1989 allows for this provision, and in 2016 The Forest School became the first nature-based One Day School in New Zealand" (https://www.theforestschool.co.nz/). Students at FS attend once a week, regularly every week. Students enrolled in regular schools need an approval letter from their teacher and principal to participate in the program. Students spend 100% of the time outdoors, regardless of the weather. They engage in discovery learning, free play, and in authentic, real-life learning opportunities. FS approach is flexible, adaptive, and responsive to the needs of the child (school documentation). It is grounded on six education propositions—emergent

curriculum, place-based education, education for sustainability, te Whare tapa Whã (Mãori concept of health and wellbeing), free-play, and relationship-based learning.

FS was founded by Gavin and Tennille Murdoch, two experienced educators. The school started with a small class of six children in 2016 and rapidly grew to over a hundred students. 54% of the students enrolled had some kind of learning disability. Tennille had been a teacher in the public system for over 20 years before starting the FS. She too was critical of NZ state schools. She mentioned the excessive focus on testing and benchmarks and the pressured placed on young children. She criticized the absence of engaging activities in public schools and their inability to cater to every child. As a response, Gavin and Tennille wanted to create an alternative pathway for children with learning opportunities that were more holistic, experiential, and engaging; a space where children felt safe, valued, and empowered. They envisioned a school where children would enjoy freedom of choice, engage in self-directed learning and real-life learning opportunities that connects them with the natural environment and the working world. Nonetheless, instead of opening a full-time school, they opted for creating a One Day School.

*Student Response*

24 children at FS participated in the interviews, 17 young children, ages 5-9 and 7 older kids, ages 9-12. Some students were homeschooled while others attended a regular school the other four days of the week. Six children expressed *dissatisfaction with the regular school*. Two of them mentioned being bullied at school while the other four disliked the *rigid rules of behavior* and the lack of freedom in schools. FS *learning approach* was the theme that emerged most often in the interviews. Several children mentioned that they like to engage in *real life learning,* such as building huts, working with tools, making materials, cooking, and building fires. The young children loved the *play-based learning* approach at FS. They talked

about their favorite activities, like playing in the mud, at the beach, climbing trees, swimming, and playing games. Playing with friends (*relationship with peers) w*as also among children's favorite activities. As one child commented, "I like to come here more than my school because at my school, I don't have any friends…but at Forest School I made more friends" (FS interview transcript). Having *agency* in the learning activities was an important factor for the older kids while the young ones appreciated the freedom of choice offered at FS. The teenagers talked excitedly about the problems they had to figure out by themselves. One of them noted, "at school they give you examples of problems, here you actually face them." Another one commented, "we do a lot of trial and error, we go through, do a problem and if someone does something bad, we slack a rule on it. Like the knife example we had before, we did a rule for that" (FS interview transcript). Finally, children reported great enjoyment for being *outdoor and connecting with nature.*

*Parent Response*

36 parents at FS completed the online questionnaire. 25 parents cited the *outdoor* environment and *connection to nature* as reasons for enrolling their children at FS. Parents' explanations included—a desire to provide their children "with real authentic connection to nature," give them "a chance to be outdoors, away from devices and traditional structured learning," and "extend [them] physically in a way that is not constrained by or structured like traditional physical and sports activities carried out at school" (FS online questionnaire). *Agency* was also important for FS parents (n=19). They liked the ''free range learning," the opportunities for free play, self-discovery, outdoor exploration, and creativity. One parent wrote, at FS "they can express themselves in more spontaneous ways and engage with information without having to produce written reports about it" (FS online questionnaire). Parents also appreciated the opportunities for *self-directed learning* and *problem-solving* to help "build independence, confidence, creativity, and problem solving" skills (FS online questionnaire).

Several parents (n=26) chose FS because of its focus on *Human development.* They commented on the opportunities afforded to children to develop self-confidence, *social and emotional skills* and *resilience.* One parent noted, "what Forest School has done for our son, we cannot put into words. He is completely able to be himself. Present, not rushed, not compared to others with unachievable deadlines" (FS online questionnaire).

Many parents (n=17) appreciated the FS *learning approach.* They liked the *real-life learning* activities, the opportunity for *outdoor play-based learning*, and the prospect for developing *ecological awareness*. They (n=9) also valued the positive *teacher-student relationship* at FS and the opportunity for their children to make new friends. Finally, several parents (n=10) expressed *dissatisfaction with the public system.* Five of them reported that their children had *difficulties adapting to school;* they struggled, misbehaved, were bullied, and in the end, dreaded to go to school. Other parents criticized the *rigid rules of behavior* of public schools, the *old educational model*, and the excessive time that children are expected to be *sitting in classrooms*.

**Case 4 – Conscious Kids (CK)**

Conscious Kids is a One Day Outdoor Program for children 5-12 years old. CK does not have a permanent location, instead it offers the program in public parks across the North Island of New Zealand. Their aim is to connect "children and families with the natural world right outside their doorstep" (school documentation). CK started the One Day Program in 2016 for homeschoolers but quickly atracted families with children in regular schools. At the time of the interview (July, 2019), CK was operating in 8 different locations. CK provides a full day, 9am-3pm, nature-based experience through unstructured free play. They offer a low adult to child ratio in a mixed-aged setting. Students attend regularly once a week. Children have "the opportunity to make their own choices and follow their own interests and curiosities within a

framework of respect for those around them and the environment" (https://www.consciouskids.co.nz/one-day-programmes). They engage in a variety of activities throughout the day, such as building huts, starting a fire, climbing trees, cooking, carving, playing games, exploring the surroundings, and engaging with arts. Educators observe, extend children's thinking, and document their learning through photos and stories. They recognize the natural environment as the 'third teacher' with endless opportunities for problem-solving, creativity, risk-taking and increased self-confidence.

CK was founded by three moms, Maria Mariotti, Rita Pontes, Harriot Brown (deceased), "who wanted to give their children a free-range childhood" experience in nature (school documentation). Maria is an Italian-born experienced yoga and mindfulness teacher and Rita a Brazilian-born graphic and interior designer. Maria and Rita wanted to create an outdoor program where children would connect with nature, engage in free play, be encouraged to take risks, and be creative. They envisioned a program that would promote self-awareness and awareness of the community, the natural environment, and the world. CK grew naturally and organically, attending the needs of the community. Yet, it expanded grew rapidly and today, CK offers a One Day Program, a Holiday Program, programs for public schools, and professional development for educators.

*Student Response*

12 children age 5-9 participated in the interview. *Relationship with peers* and being *outdoors* were the themes that most frequently emerged during the interviews. Children loved to be in the nature, build huts, climb trees, and play in the mud; they treasured talking, playing, and being with their friends. They also liked to invent different imaginary scenarios, have *freedom* to choose their own activities, engage in *self-directed learning,* and have the autonomy to test their own abilities and limitations. As one child commented, "they tell me where the

boundaries are and show me what I can do. I can climb high if I really know I can do it…it is annoying at school because you are only allowed to climb as high as **they** seem safe" (bold added, CK interview).

*Parent Response*

Data collected from CK included response to the online questionnaire from 7 parents and letters of support from 20 parents that were previously sent to the institution. These letters of support, written in November 2018, were addressed to Auckland City Council to support the continuation of CK programs in public parks. Data analysis show that most parents (n=21) regard the *outdoor* environment, *connection to nature*, and development of *ecological awareness* as very important to their children's education. Parents wrote:

> "In a time of increased screens and digital babysitters, Kiwi kids are at risk of losing touch with nature and their place in it."

> "We are part of nature after all, and what better way to preserve that connection than to get our children involved in nature from literally the grass roots up. We need to make sure that as many children as possible feel a visceral bond with the land and this comes from first-hand experience of the mud, the plants, the magnetism of life that can be felt in a field, a tree, a pond."

> "This programme has taught him so much about the environment and how to protect and learn from it. He has begun to appreciate nature in a way that he never did before" (letters of support)

Parents (n=9) were also very supportive of *play-based learning*. They believed "learning happens in every situation and all through life," and regarded unstructured and nature-based play as key elements in children's development (CK online questionnaire). 10 parents cited

*agency* as an important feature of CK. They appreciated children having the freedom to explore the environment, engage in self-directed learning, and solve problems. They valued that their children were "learning skills that are practical for life, in a non-threatening, inspiring environment" (FS letters of support). 9 parents chose CK for the opportunities afforded for *self-development* and *resilience*. They noted that at CK, children have greater opportunity to develop self-confidence, self-esteem, and resilience as they are encouraged to be themselves, take risks, and challenge themselves. Finally, 4 parents reported that their children were struggling in their regular school because of the school's *rigid rules of behavior*. One parent wrote:

> We have had issues with Ben (pseudonym) at school since he started in 2016…There is nothing in place to make allowances for Ben or children like Ben. If you don't fit in the mold then your child is going to struggle. After 3.5 years at school, Ben's self-esteem was at his lowest…We wanted to avoid rock bottom, so I decided to try a 1-day programme which I had researched…Ben has been attending Conscious kids for 3 weeks and is a much happier child on pick-up and actually talks about having an epic day. Ben has even gone the whole day while at Conscious kids with no medication…Ben's school experience is doing more damage than good expecting the same from him as they expect from other children with no mental disability (online questionnaire).

**Discussion**

This study explores some of the motives driving the growth of alternative independent schools and programs in New Zealand in recent years. Findings of this study indicate five key themes as motivators for parents and founders to seek alternative educational options for their

children—dissatisfaction with public schools, learning environment, learning approach, agency, human development, and relationship.

*Dissatisfaction with Public Schools*

Despite New Zealand's progressive and innovative approach to education (Couch, 2012; Mutch, 2013; Wells, 2016), founders and parents in this study were not happy with NZ state schools. Ako, AGE, and FS founders were quite critical of NZ state schools. They argued that the current system focused too much on academics and assessment at the expense of the child's wellbeing, causing growing anxiety and mental health issues. Founders were also dissatisfied with the learning approach of mainstream schools. Although they recognized the efforts of NZ schools to promote inquiry and project-based learning, they argued that the projects promoted in schools are still very teacher driven and students have limited opportunity to engage in authentic self-directed learning. In their view, despite all innovation, NZ public schools still regard teachers as the bearers of knowledge and the chief authority in the room. Finally, founders and parents alike criticized the one-size-fits-all-model of education and the rigid rules of behavior in NZ public schools. As AGE founders commented, "kids have to fit in, those that not fit in, they get detention or they get expelled, or they get to the bottom of the class" (focus group transcript). Many parents stated that the public system was failing their children, causing them to be stressed and anxious about school. They argued that public schools do not have adequate support and resources for 'kids that do not fit into their system.' Findings from this study corroborate with Kearney's (2009) research, who found that many students with special needs were being excluded from and within the NZ school system in a number of ways. Other studies show that many students experience alienation in NZ mainstream schooling and end up either outside the public system, if they are in Years 1-8 or in alternative education programs for 'at-risk' students (Kearney, 2009; Nairn & Higgins, 2011; Schoone, 2017).

Every year approximately 3500 young people aged 13–16 years access alternative education in New Zealand. Access to alternative education occurs through a formal process of alienation, a term used, and underscored on official forms, by New Zealand's Ministry of Education (2012). This process triggers after students receive multiple suspensions, are excluded due to gross misconduct or demonstrate continued truanting behaviours (Schoone, 2017, p.810).

As noted in this study, many students had stressful experiences in mainstream schooling, which led parents to look for alternative education programs. Thus, alternative education programs, be them public or private, in the end, they tend to become refuges for students dealt poorly by mainstream schools (Nairn & Higgins, 2011).

*Learning Environment*

The outdoor learning environment was a distinct feature across the institutions.[8] Ako, FS, and CK programs (and AGE to a certain extent) were designed to nurture children's authentic connections with the natural world, foster ecological awareness, and promote sustainability (Miller 2019; Nava, 2001). The outdoor learning environment offered by these institutions appealed to many parents, who were unhappy with the rigid rules of public schools where children had to sit for extended periods of time. Parents wanted their kids to have the opportunity to play and connect with nature, disconnect from screens, and move freely outdoors. As one parent noted, "children should be moving their bodies, shouting, swinging, climbing, painting, and not sitting still on a mat being quiet" (online questionnaire). Parents were also interested in the benefits usually associated with outdoor learning, like risk-taking, team working, social skills (Harris, 2017), competence, autonomy, and resilience (Egan, 2020). The interest in outdoor programs found in this study follows the growing trend of

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[8] Students at AGE went to Forest School once a week during summer term.

families seeking outdoor learning opportunities for their children. The growth of Forest Schools worldwide (Forest School Foundation, 2020), the spread of Free Forest Schools across the US (Free Forest School, n.d), the rise of Green Schools in other countries (www.greenschool.org), and the countless number of outdoor programs around the world reflect this growing trend.

*Learning Approach & Agency*

All founders were committed to offering an education that promoted meaningful and authentic learning opportunities through real-life experiences. They endorsed a holistic approach to learning that values community participation, nurtures connections and relationships, and prepares students to live and actively participate in a global interconnected society (Miller, 2006; Miller 2019). Founders and parents alike viewed children as naturally curious and regarded play as a legitimate way of learning (Taylor & Boyer, 2020). Similar to holistic educators (Miller, 1993, 2002; Flake, 1993), Ako, AGE, and FS founders rejected any form of standardized education and believed instead in an education that valued and nurtured the uniqueness of each child. Their programs offered personalized learning opportunities to students and used their low teacher-student ratio to cater to student's individual needs. The personalized program offered at these schools attracted many parents, especially those who were dissatisfied with the standardized system of public schools. The possibilities for self-directed learning and the freedom afforded in these institutions were features that also interested parents. Many of them sought these programs to give their children a space where they could discover and pursue their interests, freely be themselves, speak their mind, and explore their passions. In other words, parents saw in these programs an opportunity for their children to exercise agency in their own learning (Reeve & Tseng, 2011).

*Human Development*

Similar to proponents of holistic education (Miller, 2014; Miller et al., 2019), founders and parents valued an education that focused on the whole development of the child. They disliked the narrow focus of public schools that prioritized cognitive and physical development. In response, the founders were committed to providing an environment that nurtured children's psychological, emotional, cognitive, social, and physical wellbeing. They offered an education that valued children's wholeness (Miller, 2014), recognized their multiple intelligences (Gardner; 2011; Goleman, 2013, 2020), and nurtured their strengths as opposed to focusing on their weaknesses. The holistic approach provided by these institutions attracted many parents, especially those whose children were struggling in the public system. Several of them reported improvements in their children's anxiety, level of stress, self-confidence, and self-esteem after participating in these programs.

*Relationships*

Founders, parents and students recognized the importance of caring and positive relationships in education (Noddings, 2005). Ako, AGE, and FS founders disapproved the strict rules of behavior and the top-down relationships in public schools. They argued that schools should be a space where students feel safe and cared for and not afraid to speak up. They believed in an education that nurtures respectful and egalitarian relationships between teachers, students, and families and values everyone's contribution. (Eisler, 2000). Parents and students alike were pleased with the safe and caring learning environment provided at these institutions. Students reported making friends easily and feeling respected by them. Parents felt valued and welcomed, appreciated the sense of community promoted by the schools, and were pleased with how the teachers interacted with their children. As an AGE parent comment, "We found

the teachers to be the most caring, academic and insightful we have ever met… [our son's] confidence is growing and he now loves school" (online questionnaire).

## Conclusion

This study explored the motives that led NZ founders and parents seek education alternatives for their children. Findings suggest that the 'progressive' schooling system of New Zealand has its pitfalls as any other mainstream schooling. Participants in this study—founders, parents, principals, and students—were unhappy with NZ state schools. They condemned the excessive focus on academics, the lack of attention to children's wellbeing, the 'one-size-fits-all model that excludes students that 'do not fit in,' the hierarchical structure, and the teacher-centered approach. Findings also suggest that NZ state schools, despite their progressive and innovative reputation, are not attending the aspirations of parents who wish for a more holistic and democratic approach to education. Those parents yearn for an education that focuses on whole child development, caring relationships, and experiential/self-directed/outdoor learning; and they are willing to pay for it, either full-time or one day a week.

To conclude, the increasing interest in alternative independent schools and programs in New Zealand indicates a growing dissatisfaction with its mainstream schooling, despite its reputation of being the "learner's paradise," as Wells (2016) would call it. It also suggests that the NZ state system may not be as progressive and holistic as some parents would expect.

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**APPENDIX A**

Online Parent Questionnaire – Ako & Age Schools

*Demographics*

1. What school do your child/children attend?
2. How many child/children do you have at this school?
3. What is the year level of the child/children enrolled in this school?
4. Were your child/children enrolled in a state school prior to this school?

*Open-ended questions*

5. If you answered yes to the previous question, why did you withdraw your child/children from the state school?
6. Why did you choose this school for your child/children?
7. What does this school offer that is not offered in state schools?

Online Parent Questionnaire – Forest School & Conscious Kids

*Demographics*

1. What outdoor program do your child/children attend?
2. How many child/children have you enrolled in this program?
3. What is the year level of the child/children enrolled in this program?
4. Which school do your child/children attend, state, private, or other?
5. Which school do your child/children attend? Please specify if you have child/children in different schools.

*Open-ended questions*

6. Why did you choose to enroll your child/children in this program?
**7.** What does this program offer that is not offered in your child/children's schools?