

Alternative education in Aotearoa New Zealand: The politics and poetics of authorisation

Adrian Schoone

Auckland University of Technology

Secondary students who become disenfranchised from mainstream schools are directed to attend Alternative Education (AE) centres. AE was a grassroots' initiative in the 1990s led by youth organisations, iwi, community social service agencies and churches to meet the education and pastoral needs of rangatahi. Due to the tenuous links held between AE and the mainstream system and with no government policy work occurring within the sector for the decade prior to 2009, the sector struggled for adequate resourcing and professional recognition. Through a poetic inquiry approach this paper explores three key AE government policy directions over a ten-year period, from 2009 to 2019. Unbuckling prose found within official documents, concrete (visual) poems were created to perform a critical reading of policy. The policy poems form a narrative arc that show the discrediting of AE providers and demonising of students in AE has recently given way to more hopeful directions in policy.

Keywords: alternative education, education policy, poetic inquiry, concrete poetry

Introduction

In the mid-1990s, unauthorised providers of secondary education sprang up across Aotearoa New Zealand. Communities initiated Alternative Education (AE) centres in order to meet the education and pastoral needs of disenfranchised rangatahi (youth; young people) who they found arriving at their doorsteps. In the wake of neoliberal reforms brought about by Tomorrow's Schools, Gerritsen (1999) reported that in 1996 there were approximately 60 different settings catering for over 500 students, "none of which were registered schools and were therefore technically illegal" (para. 10). Largely due to the pressures of a competitive school environment and a breakdown in relationships between the rangatahi and their teachers and school personnel, these 13- to 16-year-old students chose not to attend school, or were unable to, due to having received multiple suspensions or exclusions. Approximately 60 percent of students in AE are Māori and male.

Today there are just over 170 AE settings that provide learning opportunities to approximately 3,500 students each year. There are a mix of contracted providers and school-based alternatives. Despite the longevity of AE provision and its ongoing demand, the sector has struggled for professional recognition and adequate government resourcing. AE was first provided government funding in 1999, yet it would take 10 years before any substantial policy work was undertaken by the Ministry of Education. As Higgins and Nairn (2014) remark, AE has "experienced significant policy neglect, with static funding levels and an 'out of sight, out of mind' approach to providers and their students" (p. 147). I draw from my experiences of living through some of these policy decisions as a past teacher, AE provider manager and chair of the AE National Body.

Policy foundations

When AE first appeared in the *New Zealand Education Gazette* in 1999, Ministry of Education project manager Gorham Milbank spoke of the new policy and funding approach, whereby AE students remained on a managing school's roll while attending AE provision offsite as "a combination of community approach utilising people who can work alongside these young people and the school's expertise and formal support" (Gerritsen, 1999, para. 14). This policy legalised the growing AE sector and formed the foundation to how AE operates to this day. It was hopeful rhetoric that AE providers and their communities could partner with mainstream schools in providing an equitable education option for vulnerable students. In practice, the unequal power relationship, whereby AE providers reported to schools (who were the contractors and fund-holders), along with colliding philosophies of education approaches (the cohabitation of non-formal and formal education) created a type of binary of AE versus mainstream. The managing school AE set-up resulted in vast differences in quality of provision, organisation and funding, reflecting the diversity of will and expertise inherent in school leadership and management. From the period of 1999 to 2008/9 the Ministry of Education kept an arm's length from AE, their absence exacerbated the binary created between AE and schools. Furthermore, as the Ministry of Education was not active in this policy area, it is surmised that Ministers of Education were not briefed regarding AE, which resulted in static funding and vast inequities in resourcing for vulnerable students.

Poetic methodology

In this paper I offer a series of four concrete (visual) poems to represent key AE policy directions over a roughly 10-year period, 2009 to 2019-2020. This period is when the Ministry of Education began to seriously reconsider AE policy after their long absence. In creating these poems, I played with the materiality of official documents, subverting the text to elucidate a critical reading. These are found poems; poems that are created from existing text. This work is an example of poetic inquiry, an approach in research that seeks ways to use poetry to collect 'data' and/or make sense of 'data' and/or present findings in artful ways. Poetic inquiry has been particularly effective in bringing the voices of the vulnerable to the fore and as Faulkner (2020) suggests, "can be an active response to social issues, a political commentary, and a call to action" (p. xi). My use of concrete poetry, through the inclusion of cutups and erasure, is emerging as a poetic inquiry method (Schoone, 2021). With erasure and cut-ups, a new reading of existing text is created by the poet who either erases or blacks out selected words and phrases or cuts up and rearranges text. In both cases, these concrete poems perform meaning through exploiting the use of space and offers the reader an experience in language directed by visual elements rather than conventional grammar. The poems aim to evoke an affective, rather than a solely cerebral, response and are an attempt to retell and reauthorise the policy narrative. Next, I will present each policy poem with a short introduction. The temptation would be to explain each poem's meaning, but I intentionally leave the poem to perform its expressive work.

2009: Discrediting the provider

The phrase “we recommend entering into discussions with schools to explore how we might disestablish current programmes” came from a Ministry of Education advice to the Minister of Education after a review of the sector as part of wider work the Ministry was undertaking at the time with the Schools Plus policy.¹ In this poem a thesaurus was used here to exemplify the word “disestablish” to capture the depth of reverberation felt across the AE sector at the time (Figure 1.). The list of synonyms brings gravity to a word written in passing and beckons the question, how can the Ministry of Education disestablish what they had not established? Subsequently, the concerned voices of the AE sector representatives and school principals were heeded (for example, how could rangatahi return to the very schools they felt alienated from?) and the advice from the Ministry was not accepted by the Minister of Education, although AE was left in a funding holding pattern there-on-in.

We recommend entering into discussions with schools to explore how we might

V. annul, cancel, destroy, abolish, abrogate, revoke, repeal, rescind, reverse, retract, recall; overrule, override; set aside; disannul, dissolve, quash, nullify, nol-pros [law, short for nolle prosecute], disestablish; countermand, counterorder, throw overboard. disclaim, deny, ignore, repudiate; recant, break off. dismiss, discard; turn out, cast off (or adrift, aside, away); send off, send away, discharge, get rid of, bounce [slang]; fire, sack [both slang]. cashier, oust, unseat, dethrone, depose, unfrock, strike off the roll, disbar.

current programmes

Figure 1. Disestablish. Thesaurus concrete poem

2016: Demonising rangatahi

The following concrete poem is an erasure poem, created from Ministry of Education documents released under the Official Information Act.² This erasure poem creates further redactions to an already heavily redacted document. The poem reflects the portrayal of rangatahi comprising a litany of risk factors. The social investment approach to

¹ Ministry of Education. (2009, May). Findings of review of alternative education and future directions.

² Ministry of Education. (2018, March 5). Factors associated with the risk of not achieving in education. Retrieved August 18, 2018, from <https://www.education.govt.nz/ministry-of-education/information-releases/information-releases-from-past-years/factors-associated-with-the-risk-of-not-achieving-in-education/>

policy making is evident here. Boston and Gill (2017) point out the shortcomings of such an approach, noting, “Our understanding of some things (e.g., risk factors and ‘deficits’ in people’s lives) is often greater than our knowledge of other things that matter (e.g., resilience factors)” (p. 21).

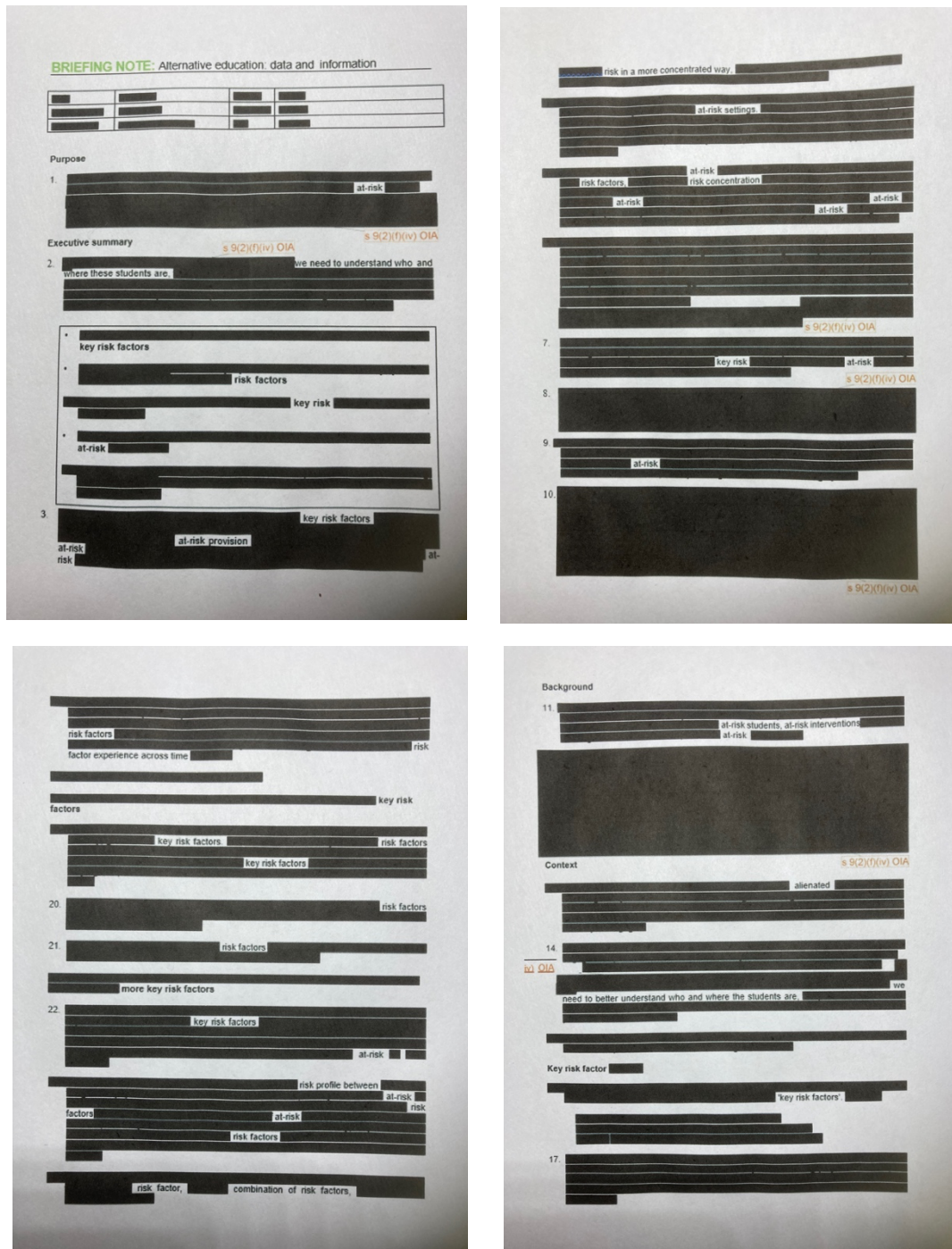


Figure 2. Unofficial Information Act. Erasure poem

2019: Hopeful rhetoric (Part A)

Cabinet papers proactively released by the Associate Minister of Education, Hon. Tracey Martin, revealed a new direction for AE, shifting the blame of disengagement from

rangatahi and AE providers to laying responsibility on the education system.³ The document came with very little redaction compared to other official information releases. The contents of this cabinet paper foregrounded a budget bid to reform AE to take a more formalised role within Learning Support (*Figure 3.*). Hopeful Rhetoric (Part B) (*Figure 4.*) spells out the results of that bid in a letter sent to the Sector in June, 2020 (personal communication, 26 June, 2020).

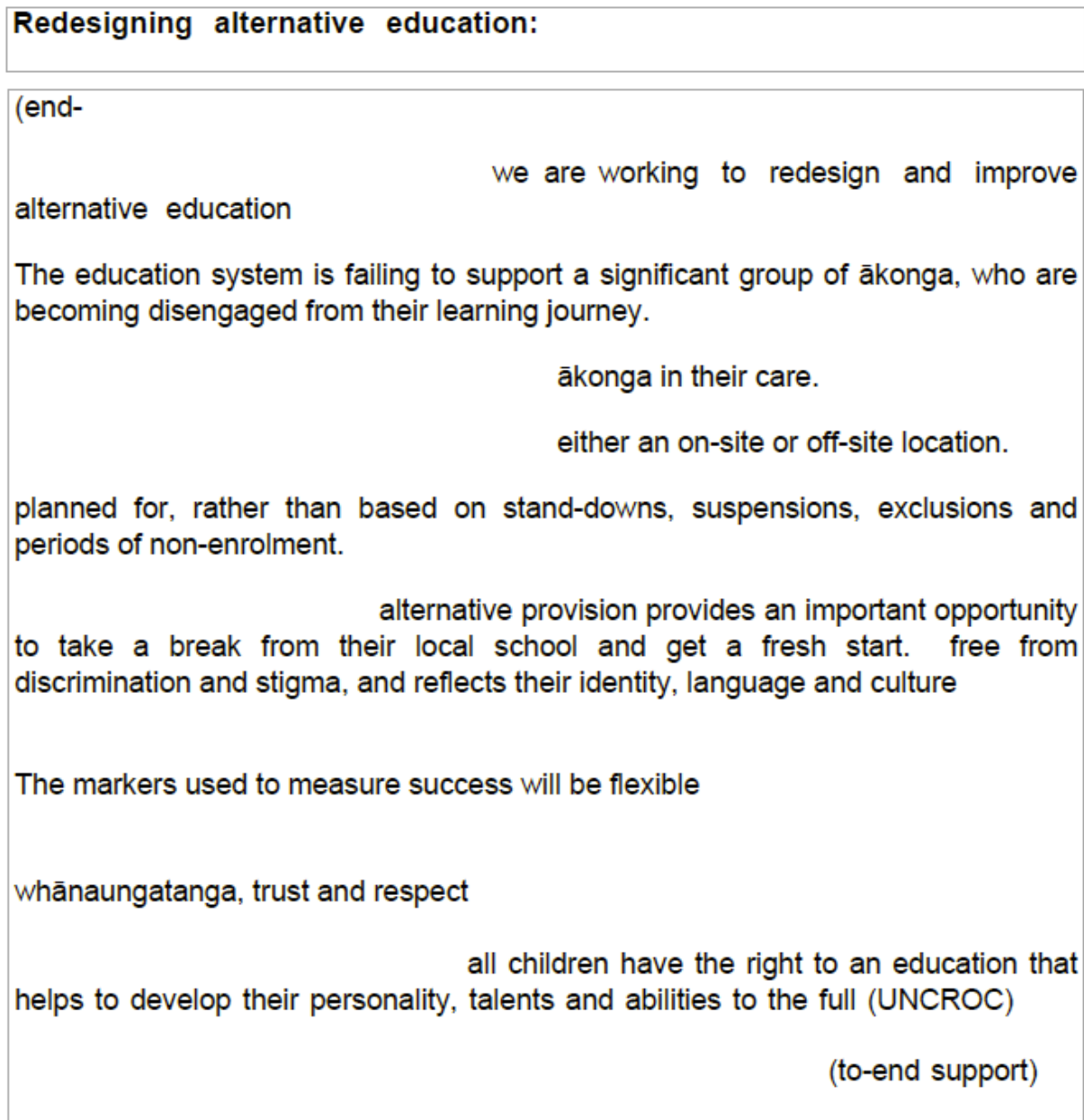


Figure 3. Hopeful Rhetoric (Part A). Erasure poem

³ Martin, T. (2019). Cabinet paper material proactive release: Redesigning alternative education: an end to end support for children and young people disengaging from education <https://www.education.govt.nz/assets/Documents/Ministry/Information-releases/2019-releases/R-134-138-Redacted.pdf>

2020: Hopeful rhetoric (Part B)

Hon Tracey Martin

Minister for Children
Minister of Internal Affairs
Minister for Seniors

Associate Minister of Education



26 June 2020

Kia ora,

I am writing to you to provide an update on the redesign of alternative education and the COVID-19 work that followed from the alternative education hui in 2019. Firstly I want to acknowledge the passion you have given in contrast to the system.

You may be aware that I submitted a bid for funding to support the full redesign of alternative education and to address the sector in Budget 2020.

As you will know, the Government must weigh up many competing priorities when making decisions about funding. The budget has been significantly impacted by the global pandemic and the public health and economic measures taken by the Government in response to COVID-19. For now, our more immediate focus must be on the response, and rebuilding Zealand in a post-Covid context which has meant that the redesign of alternative education bid was not successful.

While the COVID-19 situation has caused disruption to the intended timeline for this work, I remain committed to progressing work to redesign the alternative education system with the Ministry of Education and sectors.

COVID-19 will be disheartening news, especially in light of the real passion that all those who work with these people bring to it, so I am truly sorry that, for the time being, we are unable to implement our mutual wishes. However please be assured that the work done and progress made to date on redesigning alternative education will not be wasted and will continue to be used as the country recovers from Covid-19 and the challenges it has given us.

Yours sincerely,

Figure 4. Hopeful Rhetoric (Part B). Cut-up poem

Conclusion

AE policy forms a narrative arc beginning with the legitimisation of grass-roots AE by the government and the Ministry of Education in 1999 as a hopeful gesture of true partnership between schools and communities. Some 20 years later, the narrative returned to hope in that AE policy work had sought to strengthen the role of AE, acknowledging the unique contribution it plays in learning support. Yet Covid-19 has highlighted that it is the vulnerable who bear a disproportionate burden when it comes to times of crisis and hardship.

This poetic inquiry calls for a deeper returning. In its inception, AE was not a government initiative. Attempts to authorise AE through state policy has resulted in imagining rangatahi as 'at risk' and AE centres as of questionable quality. To guard against AE being at the behest of political and bureaucratic vagaries, the challenge facing the sector is to name itself, to negotiate its various connections and disconnections to schools and formal systems, so it can exist autonomously according to its mana.

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Adrian Schoone is a senior lecturer in Education at AUT. With a background in primary teaching, Adrian worked within alternative education centres for 14 years. As an academic, Adrian's research focuses on understanding social pedagogical approaches and teacher and tutor identity within alternative educational settings. Adrian is an arts-based researcher with expertise in poetic inquiry.

Email: adrian.schoone@aut.ac.nz

ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-7110-5016>