

The evolution of alternative: 120 years of experimental schooling in New South Wales, Australia

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Brett Rolfe

The University of Sydney, Sydney, Australia

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Abstract

Purpose – Since 1900, most schools in Australia’s largest state, New South Wales (NSW), have operated within a set of normative practices prescribed by government regulation, pedagogical convention, and community expectation. Outside of these norms have been small numbers of experimental schools that offer an “alternative” to this “mainstream”. This article is the first attempt since the 1970s to systematically map the establishment of experimental alternative schools in NSW. In doing so I sought to identify large patterns over this period and establish a baseline for future research.

Design/methodology/approach – Through triangulation of current and archival data sources, I compiled a list of 92 experimental alternative schools established in NSW, between 1900 and 2020.

Findings – As anticipated, a modest first wave of schools was aligned with the global Progressivism of the 1920s and 1930s, followed by a larger second wave associated with the counter-cultural movements of the 1970s. Interestingly, the language of these earlier periods has been adopted by a third wave of schools over the past two decades, where alternative approaches are being used to address the social issue of young people disengaging from school. I argue that these waves have been produced by a combination of broader sociocultural trends, government funding, and compliance requirements.

Originality/value – The history of alternative schools informs our understanding of how education has developed, and provides insight into contemporary opportunities for educational innovation. Despite this, there has been little historical research beyond studies of individual schools since the 1970s. This article addresses this historiographic gap by presenting a statewide overview and extended history of the establishment of experimental alternative schools.

Keywords Alternative education, Experimental schools, New South Wales, Progressive education

Paper type Research article

Introduction

“For the good of the majority of Australian children, let us hope that the long-term future of these schools is doomed! For their passing will occur when improvements elsewhere render such alternatives as no longer necessary.” (Cohen, 1975, p. 116)

While the practice of education has evolved significantly since the introduction of compulsory schooling in the late 19th century, it has been observed that the grandparents of 21st-century children would find much that is familiar in contemporary classrooms, largely impervious to many years of structural and other reforms (Collins, 2009; Cuban, 2013; Kemmis *et al.*, 2014). The overwhelming majority of the 3,125 primary and secondary schools (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2023) in Australia’s largest state, New South Wales (NSW), conform to a set of norms making them part of an educational “mainstream”. This paper focuses on the handful of schools that sit outside of these norms, “alternative schools” that are defined not by a single approach or set of shared beliefs, but rather in opposition to the mainstream, to which they provide an alternative.

In contemporary Australia, the differences in pedagogy that students might experience between one school and another are relatively minor. Schools are constrained by regulations



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that explicitly dictate their form and function (NSW Education Standards Authority, 2023b), by mandated curricula they must teach (Council of Australian Governments Education Council, 2019, p. 15), and by community expectations of what constitutes a school education (Anderson and Scheider, 2023). Educational norms are comprehensive and pervasive, creating a homogeneous and consistent “mainstream” educational experience. This consistency is an important objective, in particular for a state system that strives to deliver a universal experience of equitable, quality education. As a counter to this, alternative schools can play an important role in the broader education system, as catalysts for change. This paper focuses on those schools that were not only alternative, but also “experimental” (Petersen, 1968), foregrounding the potential for these schools to introduce new and innovative ideas.

My aim is to perform a historical survey of experimental alternative schools in NSW established since 1900, by which time compulsory schooling had embedded a certain set of “mainstream” practices and pedagogies. Between 1900 and 2020, I suggest that it is useful to identify three historical waves of alternative schooling, each with a specific social context that led to a climate of experimentation supporting the creation of particular types of alternative schools.

One of the challenges facing any attempt to study schools that fall outside of mainstream education is the clear articulation of a useful definition. As the mainstream is constantly in flux, the nature of those schools set up in opposition to it is also constantly shifting. The term “alternative” will be used here to encompass any schools “designed to provide special pedagogy, programs, activities, and settings for children and families seeking experiences other than the ‘traditional’ ones offered by the standard ‘public’ or ‘state-controlled’ schools” (Husén and Postlethwaite, 1994, p. 260). This may involve “teaching and learning in non-traditional, new, or non-standard settings, or the teaching of an unorthodox curriculum” (McNeese, 2008). Such a definition “encompasses a diversity of schooling types and organisations” that, while very different from each other, all “point [...] to the possibility that school can be done differently” (Mills and McCluskey, 2018, p. 233).

Despite the variability of origin and purpose, there do appear to be some commonalities that connect many of the schools that describe themselves as alternative. Writing in the 1970s, King suggested that alternative schools at that time rejected both the “extreme regimentation of students” and “a view of learning that places the teacher constantly in the central, mediating position” (King, 1975, p. 57). More recently, Mills and MacGregor observe that in alternative schools “[v]alue is often given to personalized learning, small classes and small school rolls, student choice, voice and agency, active engagement in learning, informal relationships between teacher and student, and flexible, local systems of governance” (Mills and McGregor, 2018, p. 1). In identifying and examining those schools that have offered alternatives to mainstream education in NSW over the past 120 years, we can examine whether such generalisations remain valid – and whether there may be other threads that tie these schools together.

Alternative schooling in Australia is of interest in part because of the relative lack of focused study it has received, particularly in recent years. Alternative education is generally an under-researched area, and this is particularly the case in NSW, an educational system broadly regarded as conservative and prescriptive (Scott, 2020); less adventurous and more intellectually timid (Clarke, 1934). The most comprehensive review of non-mainstream Australian schools was conducted by R.C. Petersen in the 1960s, resulting in his doctoral thesis and a number of articles on “experimental schools” (Petersen, 1968, 1969, 1970a, b, c). John Cleverley extended this work in a chapter on “Non-denominational and Alternative Schools” published in 1978 (Cleverley, 1978). Both Petersen and Cleverley take a national perspective, and while they do include numerous references to NSW schools in their work it is clear that the state appears to be underrepresented given its population. In the mid-1970s several publications documented alternative schools that were active at that time (Musgrave and Selleck, 1975a; Smith, 1973; Smith and Crossley, 1975). Since then, academic work on alternative schools in Australia has primarily explored particular schools of interest (Bak, 2018, 2021; Gerrard and Proctor, 2025; Hughes, 2015; McLeod, 2014; Mowday, 2004; Rolfe, 2024), or been brief asides in broader narratives about Australian education

(Barcan, 1988, pp. 210–212, 295–296; Campbell and Proctor, 2014, pp. 131–132, 231–232).

To explore the nature and trajectory of the sector, I needed to identify specific instances of experimental alternative schools being established in NSW since the beginning of the 20th century. As no comprehensive dataset exists of schools whose pedagogy has been significantly different from the mainstream at that time, the task presented similar challenges to those experienced by researchers in the compilation of an index of Australian corporate secondary schools (Sherington *et al.*, 1987). Following their method, I approached the problem through the aggregation and culling of schools listed in a number of disparate and incomplete sources. I acknowledge, as they did, that the creation of such a list must, to some degree, be subjective. Furthermore, I echo their injunction that readers should be aware that this list is compiled based on documentation rather than personal inspection, and that the results presented here should not be taken as a final list of such schools (Sherington *et al.*, 1987, p. viii).

In approaching this task I prioritised non-government schools, as government schools are part of a large, centralised system overseen by an education department that seeks to ensure homogeneity of pedagogy through “uniformity, efficiency, inspection and examination,” an approach that has “largely precluded experimental work in schools” (Turney, 1972, p. 55). Religious schools were also not included at this point, as their focus on catering to a particular faith-based population often limited their scope for alternative pedagogy. Having said this, later stages of research described below identified a number of government and religious schools that have been included and are discussed.

Initial research drew on lists of schools that were compiled under the Public Instruction Act. In 1916, this Act was amended to “enforce” school attendance for children aged seven to fourteen, something that would necessitate the accurate tracking of student enrolments. This, in turn, required the certification of non-government schools, and that the NSW minister for education keep a list of these schools, and “from time to time publish such list” (NSW Government, 1916, s. 10.8). From 1918 through to 1977, lists of non-government school were consequently published in the Government Gazette of the State of New South Wales. When the federal government began providing funding to non-government schools in 1976, further amendment to the Act required the federal minister for education maintain a list of these schools, and publish this list in the federal Gazette (Australian Government, 1976, s.17:4). From 1978 through to 2003, such lists were published on 28 occasions. Since 1990, the NSW Education Standards Authority (NESA) has been responsible for the registration and certification of non-government schools. NESA publishes a current list of non-government NSW schools on their website, as well as a list of all non-government schools that have been established or closed since 2005. This was augmented by a summary of registrations (personal correspondence) through to 2023.

By aggregating these sources, a reasonably comprehensive list was compiled of non-government schools existing since 1916. This list included Catholic schools until 1978, as well as duplication of schools due to geographical movement, name changes, clerical errors and so on. To refine this list to a set of potential alternative schools, a series of heuristic processes was used to remove schools deemed least likely to be alternative. Apparent duplicates, name adjustments and campus relocations were removed. Any Catholic, Christian, Jewish or Islamic schools were removed where the name of a faith or denomination was incorporated in the school name. Schools named in accordance with established traditional structures were removed, including Convent Schools, Grammar schools, Preparatory schools and Private schools named for the proprietor.

As a result, a list of approximately 600 candidate schools was produced. These were divided into those opened before 1960 and those opened later. For schools opened before 1960, these data were used to corroborate lists published by Petersen (1968) and Cleverly (1978), which were then combined and taken to be an authoritative set of relevant schools. To augment the list of schools opened from 1960 onwards, an additional search process was conducted of

academic journals and Australian media from 1960 to the present, using the terms “alternative education”, “alternative school” and “experimental school”. The articles identified through this search were reviewed to find individual school names, which were then added to the list of candidate schools. As a consequence of this process, several more recent alternative government and religious schools were included. Each candidate school on this list was then researched to determine the nature of the school. This research included reviewing school names and registration details, correspondence between schools and the department of education, websites for more recent schools and printed publications for older schools. Schools that did not describe a meaningful divergence from the mainstream were removed from the list.

This approach focused on those schools that were established to be alternative as a whole. The list does not include schools that have implemented specific programmes of innovative pedagogy within a broader mainstream environment. This maintains the distinction used by Petersen between “experimental schools” and “experiments in schools” (Petersen, 1968). Similarly, this approach has not encompassed home schooling, a growing form of alternative educational provision in NSW (NSW Education Standards Authority, 2023a). Special attention was paid to Steiner schools and Montessori schools, which in recent years have continued to offer an alternative to mainstream schooling but do so within well-established guidelines, and with local and international support in terms of materials, educator training and curricular content. As this structure and support makes them significantly less experimental (Bak, 2023; Eacott and Wainer, 2023), later Steiner and Montessori schools have been excluded from further analysis.

This methodology produced a final list of 92 experimental alternative schools that were established between 1900 and 2023. These schools will be my focus of analysis for the remainder of this paper. Given the process described above, while additional schools have been added through further research and correspondence, I recognise that there may remain instances of alternative schooling that have been neglected.

The number of experimental alternative schools operating in NSW at any time is shown in Figure 1. While the total number of students enrolled in government schools steadily increased over this period, this was accompanied by a rationalisation that resulted in fewer, larger government schools. Conversely, after an initial decline in the face of freely available public schooling, the number of non-government schools saw modest growth, as a larger portion of families chose to send their children to independent schools. The dramatic growth in experimental alternative schools since the 1970s stands in stark contrast to the sector more broadly, though this still constitutes less than 5% of non-government schools, and less than 2% of all schools in the state.

The number of experimental alternative schools established in NSW each decade is shown in Figure 2. The first quarter of the 20th century saw an initial wave of activity contemporaneous with global Progressive movements and attitudes. There was then a second wave of activity in the 1970s and 1980s, as a worldwide alternative education movement coalesced within the broader cultural movements of that time (Sliwka, 2008, pp. 94–95). After a second lull there has been a third wave of experimental alternative schools, from the first decade of this century through to the time of writing. Much of this third wave has been made up of schools adopting aspects of earlier alternative models to create environments conducive for students who are otherwise disengaging from institutional education (Raywid, 1983).

The following sections explore these three waves of activity. Each section provides a necessarily brief survey of the schools that opened during that period, with a focus on identifying commonalities and trends. The sections also explore the social and educational drivers for change in each period, as well as the government policy and funding legislation that enabled or constrained the establishment of experimental alternative schools at that time.

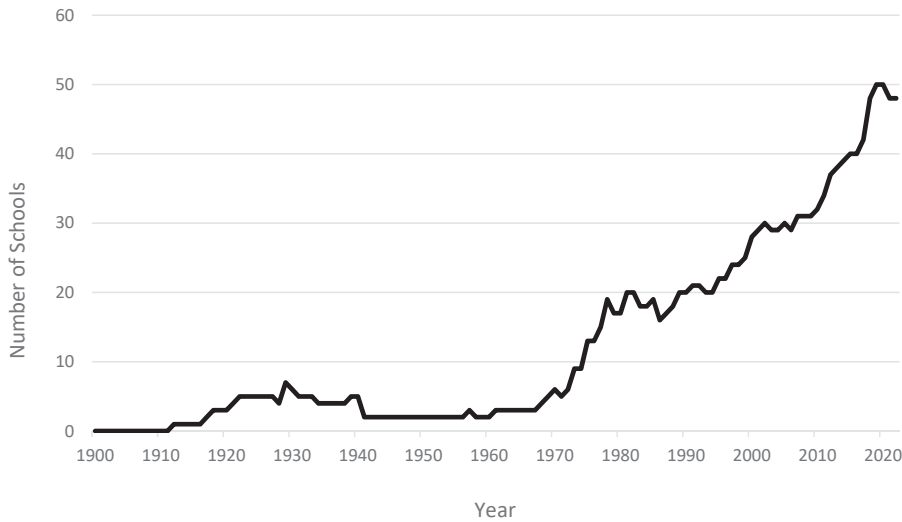


Figure 1. Experimental alternative schools in NSW from 1900 to 2023

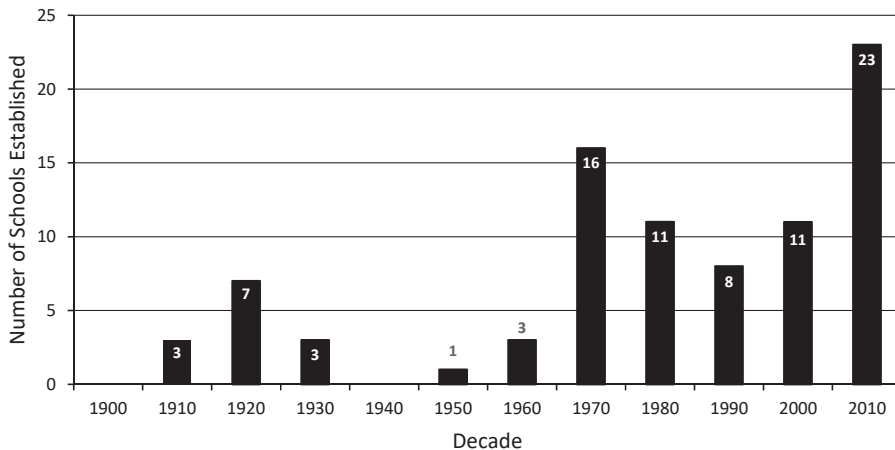


Figure 2. Experimental alternative schools opened each decade in NSW

Three waves of experimental schools

The First Wave: New Education comes to NSW (1910-1935)

Schools in the first wave included The Blackfriars School (1912-1933); Frensham School (1929-present); Brighton le Sands (1917-1927); Froebel School (1929-1934); Morven Garden School (1918-1923); The Garden School (1929-1934); King Arthur (1921-1922); Enmore Activity School (1935-1957); Ascham (1922-1930); Quest Haven (1935-1940); Croydon PLC (1923-1940); Dunlea Centre (1939-present); and Turramurra School (1924-1929).

Observers have described the early decades of the 20th century as a period of dramatic change in teaching, with a growing appreciation of developmental psychology (James, 1899),

the introduction of more practical activities (Cox, 1906), the study of a wider range of subjects (Barcan, 1965, pp. 210–212) and the increasing professionalisation of teaching (Barcan, 1988, p. 191). The progressive education movement, championed by the New Education Fellowship (Brehony, 2004), was at the vanguard of many of these changes. Pioneering educators such as Francis Parker, John Dewey and Homer Lane experimented with new ways of teaching in and beyond the classroom as periodicals of the time discussed everything from the Gary Scheme and the Howard Plan to the Play Way and the Winnetka Technique (Petersen, 1968, p. 141). While historians of Australian education have observed that ideas from overseas were always “a significant stimulant to educational reform” (Barcan, 1988, p. 220) with existing educational practices from England and the United States being “applied and adapted to colonial conditions and problems” (Lawly, 1972, p. 2), they have also cautioned that “one must not exaggerate the impact of progressive education in Australia” (Barcan, 1988, p. 273) and that “the movement in general found the Australian educational soil somewhat infertile” (Connell, 1964).

This early period saw some of the most progressive of the state’s very limited number of experimental government schools, encouraged by NSW director of education Peter Board. Perhaps the most intentionally experimental was Brighton-Le-Sands Public School (est. 1917) (Petersen, 1970c), which implemented a bespoke approach created by Board, integrating many aspects of New Education including the use of specialist subject teachers, allocation of half the school’s time to practical and manual activities, and provision of greater student freedom and responsibility (Turney, 1972, pp. 64–65). The government system also experimented briefly with a less punitive approach to students at risk of disengaging with school, establishing the Enmore Activity School (est. 1936) for boys in danger of “becoming educational misfits” (Hughes, 2015). Maria Montessori’s work became a topic of discussion in Australian educational discourse in the 1910s (“The Montessori System of Education,” 1913), and her ideas caught the attention of Peter Board and Alexander Mackie, head of the newly established Sydney Teachers College (Petersen, 1970c, p. 296). Pioneering kindergarten educator Martha Simpson was dispatched to study in Europe, returning in 1915 to found Blackfriars Practising School as one of the first Montessori schools in the world (Eacott and Wainer, 2023, p. 552).

The very first experimental alternative school in NSW was Frensham Girls School (est. 1913), a “practical protest against the inadequacies of the ‘conventional’ education available to girls in Australia” (Emilsen, 1988, p. 19). It eschewed competition, gave no prizes and minimised the profile of external examinations. Students were offered considerable freedom, playing an active role in the democratic operation of the school (Petersen, 1968, p. 38). Several other experimental non-government schools were established by the Theosophical Society, a group closely connected to the New Education Fellowship (Lawson, 1981), espousing a mix of spirituality, metaphysics and cosmology that appealed to a growing educated middle class increasingly disengaged with the Church. In 1917, members proposed establishing a school in Sydney where “cramming [was] eliminated, and each individual child [was] studied with a view to unfolding its own particular genius” (“Easter Convention, 1917,” 1917, p. 39). Lily Macdonald and Jessie Arnold, who had been running their own school “approaching the Theosophical ideals of education” (“The Outlook,” 1918, p. 281) were recruited as principals. The Morven Garden Theosophical School (est. 1918) was part of an “educational experiment” (“Morven Garden School,” 1922, p. 388) to “theosophize” education systems through successful schools (“Australian Convention of the Theosophical Society,” 1920). Despite this ambition, the school was running at a substantial loss by 1923, and the decision was made to close (“Outlook,” 1924). Shortly thereafter, Macdonald and Arnold established The Garden School in Mosman, which continued to operate along similar lines until financial pressure forced its closure in 1934 (Petersen, 1969, p. 243).

The publication of The Dalton Plan in 1922 made the work of American educator Helen Parkhurst accessible to a global audience. Parkhurst had integrated a range of progressive ideas into a comprehensive model that used individualised, project-based learning to foster

independent learners. In NSW the Dalton Plan was quickly adopted by a number of schools including Ascham ([Simpson et al., 1986](#)), which had displayed progressive leanings from its beginnings in the 1880s. Contrary to the practices of the time, Ascham employed university-educated specialist subject teachers ([Nicholas, 2007](#), pp. 41, 44), and girls enjoyed a range of sports including rowing and cricket, often playing against local boys' schools ([Simpson et al., 1986](#), p. 4). The Dalton Plan was also adopted by Turramurra College (est. 1921), inspired by the educational ideas of Homer Lane and the psychological theories of Freud. Freud also provided the ideological foundation for one of the most radical alternative schools of this period, Quest Haven (est. 1935), established by prominent psychologist Mary Sheridan ([Petersen, 1970b](#)).

While a handful of experimental alternative schools such as these existed, the appetite for such schools was limited. As was observed in 1925, "upon New South Wales the sun of scientific experimental education shines far from its zenith" ([Turney, 1972](#), p. 41). By the late 1930s, enthusiasm for progressive educational ideas was fading. Despite initial interest, schools implementing the Dalton Plan moved away from it over time, with the exception of Ascham, which continues to promote it as a point of difference today, many years after the eponymous Dalton School in New York City had ceased using it. While Frensham still exists, by the 1940s it was becoming accountable to "an ever-increasing number of government bodies" in a growing educational bureaucracy ([Emilsen, 1988](#), p. 219), on its journey to becoming a "far more ordinary institution" ([Emilsen, 1988](#), p. 220). The experiment at Enmore Activity School was also relatively short-lived and appears to have been broadly conventional with a "only veneer of progressivism" ([Hughes, 2015](#), p. 123). By the 1950s it had been reclassified as a standard school.

The Depression and Second World War brought both fiscal and social conservatism, which was accompanied by a further decline in progressive education ([Eacott and Wainer, 2023](#), p. 553). Even the 1937 New Education Fellowship conference, lauded by many as a watershed moment in Australian education ([Godfrey, 2004](#)), could not reverse this trend and there followed a prolonged lull in experimentation with alternative ideas.

The Second Wave: Alternative schools of the counterculture (1960-1990)

Schools in the second wave included Glenside Rudolf Steiner School (1957-present); Dillon House School (1961-1970); Lorient Novalis Rudolf Steiner School (1968-present); Currambena School (1969-present); The Australian Internat. Indep. School (1970-1993); Woollahra Demonstration School (1972-1982); Kamaroi Rudolf Steiner School (1973-present); The Devonshire Street School (1973-1979); West Head Independent School (1973-1978); Guriganya Community School (1975-1975); Kinma School (1975-present); Sirius Community School (1975-1978); Sunrise Progressive School (1975-1985); Lismore Community School (1976-1982); Nimbin Community School (1977-1986); The Learning Community Centre (1977-1985); Birchgrove Community School (1978-2000); East Sydney Comm. Based High School (1978-2018); Korowal School (1978-present); Yinbilliko School (1978-1985); Alternative Learning Centre (1980-1981); Forestville Montessori School (1981-present); Odyssey College (1981-present); Tunttable Falls Community School (1981-present); Kalang Community School (1982-1997); Yanginook School (1985-present); Tambelin Independent School (1987-present); Vistara Primary School (1987-present); Byron Bay Community School (1988-present); Bundagen Community School (1989-1992); and Margaret Jurd College (1989-present).

Without government funding, educational entrepreneurs in the first wave relied heavily on fees paid by families. By the 1960s, the post-war baby boom was placing additional demand on the school system and Catholic schools were struggling to draw staff from dwindling religious orders. In 1964 the federal government bowed to pressure and began providing financial assistance to non-government schools ([NSW Government, 1964](#)). This funding expanded rapidly from one-off, targeted federal grants, to include recurrent state

grants in 1967 and general purpose “per capita” federal grants in 1969 (Ryan and Watson, 2004, p. 8). The Whitlam government and the “Schools in Australia” report (Interim Committee for the Australian Schools Commission, 1973), brought a more systematic, needs-based approach to funding, with non-government schools receiving an amount per student based on their level of assessed need (NSW Government, 1973). From 1964 onwards, this funding would provide a more conducive environment for a second wave of experimental alternative schools.

The educational philosophy of many of these schools grew out of the overlapping countercultural movements of the 1960s and 1970s, including the women’s liberation movement, anti-racist movements, anti-war movements, rising interest in Eastern spiritualism and environmentalism (Smith and Crossley, 1975). Some approaches to alternative schooling were also informed by political desires to locate power and responsibility for learning within the student as an individual (Cock, 1975, pp. 60–61), to resist pressures to conform that “stifle . . . self-actualisation and creativity” (Mills, 1975, p. 70), and to reject censorship inherent in a mandated curriculum (Milliken, 1975, p. 68).

Many of the disparate schools of this second wave were connected by the shared beliefs of the communities that created them, and implications those beliefs had on education. These ideals were articulated in Abraham Maslow and Carl Rogers’ work on “humanistic education” (Maslow, 1971; Rogers and Freiberg, 1969), which they defined as profoundly student-centred, “educating the whole child and treating children and their own unique personal goals, dreams, and aspirations as valuable, regardless of how tightly aligned they are to the teacher’s curriculum” (Kaufmann, 2020). Humanistic approaches to education were shaped by the work of philosophers and proponents for social change, such as Rousseau (1962), Illich (1974), Freire (1970), Neill (1968) and Holt (1968). The early 1970s were a critical time for this educational movement, with global thought-leaders Ivan Illich and Paolo Freire visiting Australia (Musgrave and Selleck, 1975b), and alternative education conferences in Sydney (Hokin and Thorpe, 1973) and Melbourne (Musgrave and Selleck, 1975a). Journalist Elizabeth Wynhausen observed that “[f]ive years ago the only time people in Australia talked about ‘progressive’ education, they were likely to be talking about schools and colleges in Britain and America. Things have changed – there are now 11 private progressive schools spread over five Australian states and three more are taking shape” (Wynhausen, 1973).

One of the first was Currumbena (est. 1969), an integrated pre-school and primary school established as a co-operative by “a group of about a dozen teachers, university educators, and parents” (Cohen, 1975, p. 114). Disillusioned with “the inadequate range of alternatives available within the school systems in Australia” they sought a coeducational, non-denominational school autonomous enough “to adopt innovations . . . without the need for centralised permission” (Cohen, 1975, p. 107). Other schools followed a similar narrative. Yinbiliko (est. 1978) opened after a visitor to Currumbena was inspired to work with parents in her area to create “a similar type of school” (Cohen, 1975, p. 114). Being established by a group of parents often put schools at risk of closure when that group moved on. Lismore Community School operated in the family home of two founding parents, and was closed when they decided to travel around Europe in a Kombi (Browne, 2022).

This period also saw the growth of the Steiner and Montessori traditions (Bak, 2023; Eacott and Wainer, 2023), two forms of schooling in existence globally since the first wave. While later instances of these approaches have not been included in this analysis, early examples were definitely experimental. Steiner education in Australia began with the establishment of Steiner’s Anthroposophical Society in Sydney, in 1922. Society member Sylvia Brose travelled to Edinburgh for training, and returned to take three pupils as the foundation class of what would become Glenaeon, Australia’s first Steiner school, in 1957. It would be another 11 years before a second Steiner school, Lorien Novalis (est. 1968), would follow. There was also renewed interest in the Montessori approach, which aligned

with a growing discourse around child-centred education (Eacott and Wainer, 2023, p. 553). While the focus was on pre-schools, Elonera School (est. 1978) was established as the first Montessori primary school in NSW and now caters for students through to Year 12. The following decade saw five more Montessori schools open, all of which continue to operate as primary schools today.

The importance of the social context can be seen in the geographical dispersal of this second wave. While counterculture movements were widespread, the north coast of NSW proved particularly fertile soil. A review of alternative Australian lifestyles described many initiatives in this region, from communities and festivals to vegetarian restaurants and food co-ops (Wigham, 1975). Encompassing Nimbin, Mullumbimby, Lismore and Bellingen, the area was home to almost all second-wave schools outside metropolitan Sydney, as well as several Steiner schools.

The public system was not immune to countercultural trends. Some state teachers brought these ideals into their classrooms, within the constraints of the system. Woollahra Demonstration School removed walls to create open classrooms and took out desks. Students and teachers agreed on weekly contracts, and time was given to imaginative play (Hokin and Thorpe, 1973; Merrill, 1973). Baulkham Hills Public School invited parents into the classroom for reading programmes, employed team teaching, and did away with timetables, streaming and examinations (Hokin and Thorpe, 1973, p. 274).

While the appetite for alternative schooling aligned with countercultural ideals continues to the present, by the late 1970s the movement was fading, and neoliberalism was on the rise (Dow, 2020; Suri, 2009). Australia had ousted Whitlam and returned a conservative federal government, Thatcher was elected in 1979, and Reagan in 1981. Some second-wave schools such as Curambeena remain today, however many of them were closed by the mid-1980s. Growth of alternative schooling was also curtailed by federal legislation when the 1985 New Schools Policy brought a more centralised approach to the rapid expansion of the non-government sector. Applications for new schools were reviewed cognisant of geographic demand, impact on existing schools and cross-sector strategic government objectives (McKinnon, 1995, p. 9). The minimum number of students for new schools was increased to 50 for primary schools and 20 per year for secondary schools (McKinnon, 1995, p. 11), unattainable expectations for many small, community schools. The radical nature of experimental schools also brought them into conflict with government requirements regarding staffing, operations, policy and curriculum. Schools that remained were forced to soften their more radical edges to comply with restrictive bureaucracy. Those that still exist feature a prominent declaration, usually on their homepage, of compliance with government regulations (Tuntable Falls Community School, 2022).

Growth of the non-government sector as a whole, and alternative schools in particular, slowed dramatically in response to the introduction of the New Schools Policy (Ryan and Watson, 2004, p. 11), effectively bringing the second wave to a close. While experimental alternative schools were established sporadically during the late 1980s and early 1990s, it was only after the policy was repealed in 1996 that the sector regained its momentum (Eacott, 2024), ushering in a third wave of activity.

The Third Wave: Alternative schools as social panacea (1990-present)

Schools in the third wave included Key College (1991-present); Hawkesbury Independent School (1994-present); John Colet School (1995-present); Young and Powerful (1995-2005); Blacktown Youth College (1997-present); Matthew Hogan School (1997-2016); MET School (1998-2005); Satha Sai College (1999-present); Berne Education Centre (2000-2002); Exodus House (2000-2004); Kindleshill School (2000-present); Macleay Vocational College (2001-present); Toogoolawa School (2001-2014); Alesco Secondary College (2002-present); Eagle Arts and Vocational College (2005-2020); TLK Youth College (2005-present); Alesco Learning Centre (2006-2020); Hunter Trade

College (2007-present); Warakirri College (2007-present); Indie School (2010-present); Alpha Omega Senior College (2011-present); Novo Education Space (2011-present); Craig Davis College (2012-present); EDEN College (2012-present); St. Philips Young Parents' School (2012-2015); Wollongong Flexible Learning Centre (2013-present); Ngaruki Gulgul (2014-present); Skillset Senior College (2015-present); Waranara School (2015-present); GOAL College (2016-present); Allegra School Coffs Harbour (2017-present); Nautilus Senior College (2017-present); The Lakes College (2017-present); Oasis College Surry Hills (2018-present); Port Macquarie Steiner School (2018-present); The Bowen College (2018-present); The Central West Leadership Academy (2018-present); The Nature School (2018-present); Western Riverina Community School (2018-present); Shoalhaven River College (2019-present); The Alpine School (2019-present); The Small School (2019-present); CathWest Innovation College (2020-present); Living School (2020-present); Pambula Beach Flexible Learning Centre (2020-present); Gateway Community High (2021-present); Richard Gill School (2021-present); Blue Gum Community School (2022-present); and North Academy (2023-present).

Some schools established since 1990 have followed the model of the second wave. Hawkesbury Independent School (est. 1995) was started in a farmhouse by five families, while the Small School in Murwillumbah (est. 2018) was established by a group of parents to offer “a holistic, project-based learning program in a democratic, playful, non-competitive and family friendly educational environment” ([The Small School, 2023](#)). There has also been a resurgence in innovative pedagogy, with Central West Leadership Academy (est. 2018) catering to rural high potential learners, and Alpha Omega Senior College (est. 2005) integrating effective technology use with contemporary learning theory. Other schools like MET School (est. 1998) and IndieSchool (est. 2010) have employed techniques from adult vocational education to provide learning environments offering “choice, independence, mutual respect and accountability” ([Indie School, 2020](#)).

Contrary to expectation, only a small amount of recent activity was accounted for by this continuation of previous approaches. Much more significant has been an explosion of schools that cater specifically to disengaged students, and a reframing of the term “alternative school” in academic writing and the media. While previously it referred to the types of schools discussed to this point, “there is a new focus on alternative schooling that is subsidized by the state and is designed to meet the needs of young people who often come from marginalised backgrounds, sometimes referred to as second chance or flexi-schooling” ([Mills and McGregor, 2018](#), p. 66). In large part as a result of “A Nation at Risk” and “No Child Left Behind” policies in the United States, alternative education has been redefined “as schooling that benefit[s] special populations, typically in secondary settings” ([Meador, 2020](#)).

There is a long, problematic history of dealing with students whose behaviour is an issue when they attend school, or who fail to attend school altogether. For much of the 20th century this was done punitively, through truancy programmes and schools for juvenile offenders. By 1904, NSW boasted a “reformatory” school and two “industrial” schools, for over 600 children often referred to as “inmates” ([Coghlan, 1906](#)). The Enmore Activity School mentioned earlier was seen as an innovative development in this area. Several non-government schools also addressed student disengagement and non-attendance, although the inability to charge fees meant heavy reliance on philanthropy. Boys’ Town Engadine (est. 1939) was established by parish priest Thomas Dunlea as a residential school for “homeless and friendless boys”. It continues to operate today as the Dunlea Centre, providing “therapeutic support and education services to young people ... who are experiencing emotional, behavioural, and social difficulties” ([Dunlea Centre, 2024](#)). More recent discourse frames alternative schools as schools of last resort, or more critically as “‘dumping grounds’ for unwanted students” ([Mills and McCluskey, 2018](#), pp. 232–233). Students are generally placed in these schools “because they were at risk of failing, as defined by poor grades, truancy, disruptive behaviour, suspension, pregnancy, or other factors known to be indicators of leaving school early” ([Aron and Zweig, 2003](#), p. 13).

This development can be traced back to reports that alternative schools of the 1960s and 1970s enjoyed “impressive success, often with youngsters who had previously detested school” (Raywid, 1983, p. 192). In following decades, alternative models were adopted in the United States as a solution to “a variety of the nation’s ills . . . juvenile crime and delinquency; school violence and vandalism; the demands of inner-city minorities; anti-institutionalism; resentments against public bureaucracies; racial segregation; youth unemployment; declining school enrolments; and demographic changes in school populations” (Raywid, 1983, p. 192). Schools servicing disconnected young people found that they could “better meet the needs of some students through individualized instruction, personal attention, and a modified or innovative curriculum” (Gregg, 1999, p. 107), as well as building a strong sense of community through remaining small and offering student choice (Gregg, 1999). A similar process has occurred in Australia, where both federal and state governments identified school retention as a priority (McGregor *et al.*, 2012), and responded to increased expectations of school completion with “targeted programs to assist young people to remain in or return to education” (Riele, 2007, p. 54). Government-funded initiatives to address the disengagement of young people from mainstream education have included NSW Community Grants and the Youth Connections programme. This funding was generally short-term and contingent on working toward specific government-defined objectives. As a result, schools like Blacktown Youth College (est. 1997) and Key College (est. 1991) run by Youth Off the Streets were vulnerable, financially insecure and dependent on volunteers and donations (Riele, 2007, p. 61).

Mapping the space of alternative education for marginalised youth, Kitty te Riele observed that common use of the term “youth at risk” in media and policy served to “other” young people who were disengaging with school, locating deficiency within students and their families (Riele, 2007, p. 55). Policies have targeted the small number of “at risk” young people through programmes, in-school units or special schools “which aim to ‘fix’ [them] in some way” (Riele, 2007, p. 56) rather than seeking to change educational provision more generally. Riele warns against creating a dichotomy between a “successful mainstream” and a “problematic alternative minority”, pointing out that many of “the reforms that make schooling work better for marginalised students in alternative programs can improve schooling for most students in regular schools as well” (Riele, 2007, p. 64). In the 2010s, researchers articulated the benefits of alternative “second chance” schools, “offering choices to those young people for whom . . . mainstream schooling has failed” (McGregor and Mills, 2011, p. 20), where students could benefit from flexible attendance, an absence of uniforms, participation in decision making and the ability to call adults by their first names (McGregor and Mills, 2012, p. 859). Enthusiasm was tempered by concern that “the creation of more second chance schools may lead to a further differentiated system that works against severely marginalised students” (McGregor and Mills, 2011, p. 23) and that “by maintaining and expanding the existence of these ‘different’ schools, mainstream schools are let off the hook in terms of meeting the needs of their often most marginalized students” (McGregor *et al.*, 2012, p. 57).

The landscape for schools supporting “at-risk” young people in Australia changed dramatically in 2013. Funding for non-government schools is dependent on the financial capacity of the school community. Where families are deemed able to pay higher fees, the government reduces the level of support accordingly. Historically, “special needs” schools for students with physical disabilities and specific psychological diagnoses were fully funded to the amount necessary to educate students. In 2013, the Australian Education Act extended this concession to “special assistance” school for students “with social, emotional or behavioural difficulties”, a definition encompassing a wide range of young people previously described as “at risk” (Australian Government, 2013, s.4:54). This change saw the number of special-assistance schools double nationally in the eight years from 2014 to 2022 (Independent Schools Australia, 2023, p. 2). Older second-chance schools were generally created by existing youth initiatives; examples of this include Odyssey College (operated by Odyssey House drug and alcohol rehabilitation program since 1981), and Key College (operated by Youth Off the Streets non-profit since 1991). By contrast, newer entrants were often

established by adult education providers already supporting adolescents outside of school. Atwea College has offered adult education since 1903 and established Alesco Secondary College in 2002 as “a secondary school, set within an adult learning environment” (Atwea College, 2018, p. 2), “a special assistance school that primarily caters for students who have disengaged from a traditional learning model, usually as a result of social and emotional difficulties, or family breakdown” (Alesco College, 2023, p. 43). Similar narratives describe the creation of Nautilus Senior College (est. 2017) by Mid North Coast Community College and Western Riverina Community School (est. 2018) by Western Riverina Community College. At the time of writing, it does not appear that this third wave of experimental alternative schools has reached an end. Recent years continue to see further “second chance” schools opening, as well as schools more reminiscent of the first and second waves.

Conclusion

Even within the relatively conservative context of NSW education, the past century has seen experimentation resulting in the establishment of a diverse array of alternative schools. Some have been short-lived, some have sustained, and some that set out to break new ground have mellowed with age and become part of the educational mainstream.

The trajectory of experimental alternative schools in NSW has been driven by global sociocultural trends, while being enabled and constrained by federal and state government policy. An initial wave of activity in the 1920s and 1930s was driven by the broader progressive movements of the United States and the United Kingdom. During this time, the NSW Department of Education launched several experimental schools, and progressive educators were able to establish independent schools that embodied the pedagogical innovations of the time. A second, larger wave of humanistic schools in the 1970s and 1980s emerged from countercultural movements, as communities of like-minded parents and teachers sought to create schools aligned with their social and political beliefs. Many of these schools have disappeared, but some remain. Over time they have been joined by a steady flow of schools in the Steiner and Montessori traditions. A third wave in recent decades has seen a dramatic increase in the number of schools catering to young people who are being failed by mainstream schooling, and who are at risk of disengaging. These schools draw on the learnings of alternative education and are often spun out of existing adult education providers. These successive waves of activity have produced over 100 individual campuses across NSW currently offering educational experiences distinct from “mainstream” schools. The changing size and shape of the sector has been a consequence of sociocultural trends, government funding, and compliance requirements – three considerations identified by Roger Dale as “a pervasive ideological presence”, “favourable economic circumstances” and “licensed autonomy” in his analysis of progressive education in the United States (Dale, 1979, p. 192).

For many involved with alternative education, the existence of this relatively small sector is not enough. Describing the role of alternative schools in maintaining diversity within an otherwise increasingly standardised educational ecosystem, Richard Waters (2018) suggests that like bio-diversity, “edu-diversity” is critical to the health of the system. Advocates believe that “many of the practices in these schools have a place in mainstream schools and . . . would be beneficial to all students” (McGregor and Mills, 2012, p. 860), and that models and innovations incubated in the “rich laboratories” of alternative schools can then be replicated in the mainstream to generate system-wide benefits (Eacott and Wainer, 2023, pp. 551–552). There is some global evidence of ideas being diffused in this way. In Germany, ideas drawn from alternative education about student-centred teaching and the role of the teacher have become part of mainstream discourse about excellent schooling, though many educators may be unaware of their origin (Sliwka and Klopsch, 2018, pp. 224–229). In recent decades, mainstream schools in the United States have pursued reforms pioneered by alternative schools, from downsizing high schools and empowering staff to active learner engagement and building the school as community (Raywid, 1994, p. 26). Some mainstream schools are

also benefiting from lessons learned by alternative schools in avoiding disengagement and disconnection, as discussed toward the end of this paper (Aron and Zweig, 2003, p. 21).

Examples of the mainstream impact of experimental alternative schools in NSW are harder to find. Further research in this area might approach this challenge not by searching for the emergence of those ideas, but by following the potential paths of transmission of practice. Innovative schools are often active in training teachers who then move on to more traditional schools; facilitating open communities of practice that cut across traditional barriers; and agitating for legislative change that has repercussions beyond an individual school.

From the evidence of the past 120 years, it appears the potential for establishing experimental alternative schools will continue to be driven by broader social trends, while being enabled or constrained by government regulation and funding. The high levels of funding for “special assistance” schools in NSW still provide an opportunity for educators seeking to explore innovative ideas, perhaps at the expense of those ideas finding a broader audience. Unfortunately, government policy more broadly appears to be running counter to enabling alternative approaches, with a focus on standardisation and “back to basics” teaching. Despite these challenges, the continued appearance of, and demand for, experimental schools across the independent, Catholic and government sectors suggest that this is a moment where social forces are once again coalescing around ideas for educational change.

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Corresponding author

Brett Rolfe can be contacted at: brett.rolfe@sydney.edu.au