

PLAN BUILD PLAY

COLLABORATIVE NATURE PLAY PLANNING AT ST CATHERINE'S

JASON MITTIGA



Images by: Jason Mittiga and Pete Semple

Blessed with an enviable setting in the Adelaide Hills, St Catherine's School could have felt that it had ticked the nature play box. However, far from resting on its laurels, the school has embarked on an ambitious nature play space enhancement program that has empowered the whole school community. Jason Mittiga shares St Catherine's experience with us in this case study.

St Catherine's School is located in Stirling in the Adelaide Hills, nestled among tall trees in a sloping topography, with a creek line and range of settings for play. In 2017 St Catherine's embarked on a nature play master plan to add more spaces to the school's beautiful grounds. A master plan enables forward thinking whilst creating a realistic road map from a time and budget perspective. The children within our school have a real thirst for the outdoors, and as educators it is important that we respond to that need. The more authentic experiences and opportunities we can provide, the more engaged our children will be. We are fortunate that we have quite a bit of space that lends itself to rich nature play opportunities.

A key part of our journey was the consultation with our school community. We opted to engage external designers who could work with our staff and children on the planning process. We really wanted the children's voices to be a defining part of our play space redevelopment. As a leadership group we sat down and mapped our needs before sitting with our

designers to go through the "how". After much planning and discussion, our designers (Pete Semple Landscape Architects and Climbing Tree Consultancy) met with three children from each class to ensure we received input from a cross-section of our students. Together they ran a workshop with two components. The first was using small loose parts for children to use to express their ideas through small world depictions; the second was to express ideas through illustrative means. Their ideas were captured, summarised and presented to staff and parents at an AGM. Some key ideas from the children included climbing, height, building cubbies and water play.



In August 2017 construction commenced with friendly and professional landscapers (Landscape Construct). The children were able to see their ideas come to life, generating excitement across the school community. We officially opened our space on 6 November, and whilst the physical transformation was fantastic, the way children now play and interact is the real highlight. Children are more engaged in the yard and we are seeing an increase in the use of sticks, pots, pans, plants and gum nuts throughout their play. They are more creative, spontaneous and curious with their play and the level of yard issues is non-existent. Children are taking more risks through climbing and challenging themselves as the competent and capable learners that we view them as. In addition, the nature play spaces are bringing children together from all walks of life, and the children are now playing with a wider variety of playmates, collaborating, working as a team and building new relationships that would have previously been unlikely. Furthermore, two thirds of children are opting to play in our natural spaces, and the tennis court and library are noticeably less busy as the children are so engaged in their play.

From its early planning phases to our official opening, our project was a real success. A key reason for this was that we embraced a consultation strategy that allowed everyone the opportunity to express their thoughts and ideas. Seeing the children's ideas come to life and feeling their sense of pride and ownership was one of our objectives for transforming the spaces at St Catherine's, an objective that has been fully and enthusiastically realised.

This is only Stage One. In a few years we will embark on Stages Two and Three, and we can only imagine what benefits and opportunities will come out of these stages for our school community. *

"... children are now playing with a wider variety of playmates, collaborating, working as a team and building new relationships that would have previously been unlikely"

JASON MITTIGA

[ABOUT JASON]

Jason is Principal of St Catherine's School in Stirling in the Adelaide Hills.

