



Thriving
Learners

Thriving Learners

Supporting Connection to Place at
Christie Downs Primary School



Connection to Place: Students explore the coastline at Hallett Cove Conservation Park.

Overview:

The purpose of the Thriving Learners program is to develop and implement nature-based play, and teaching and learning experiences that enhance student wellbeing and learner agency for improved student learning outcomes. Supported by the Department for Education, Thriving Learners strengthens the Areas of Impact by empowering teachers to implement co-designed, student-led outdoor learning in their context.

Christie Downs Primary School is a Category 2 site with 202 learners, including 31% Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students and 38% of students with disabilities.

This Thriving Learners partnership was a year-long pilot designed to support the school's innovative outdoor learning program, *The Odyssey Program*. Odyssey is a school-wide extension of the HPE curriculum, aimed at increasing time spent in nature by connecting students with local green and blue spaces under the theme *'It's Your Backyard'*.

The partnership enabled learners to explore spaces like Port Noarlunga Beach, Hallett Cove Conservation Park, and Kuitpo Forest, where they learned about the stories of flora and fauna and engaged in open-ended nature play activities.

“We want our students to be confident in their ability to deal with day-to-day stresses. We want to provide our students with the conditions where resilience, interpersonal skills, empathy, problem solving, creativity and all the rest can emerge.”

- Odyssey Coordinator



A photograph of a child sitting on a large tree branch in a forest. The child is wearing a purple bucket hat, a dark blue long-sleeved shirt, dark pants, and black shoes. The child is looking away from the camera towards the trees. The forest has many thin, light-colored tree trunks and some green foliage. A green banner is at the top left with the text "I feel free."

“I feel free.”

Wellbeing: *Learners from Christie Downs Primary School explore Kuitpo Forest as part of an innovative outdoor learning program aimed at strengthening wellbeing, resilience and belonging by connecting with local green spaces.*

Evidence suggests that regular time in nature and access to green spaces are linked to better mental health, emotional well-being, and prosocial behaviour (Carrus et al., 2015; McCormick, 2017). Exposure to green and blue spaces is also associated with improved behavioural development in school children. Studies have found positive impacts on cognitive performance, attention restoration, and reduced symptoms of ADHD (Amoly et al., 2014; Dadvand et al., 2015).

Adventurous play and healthy risk-taking can reduce anxiety and increase children’s ability to cope with challenges (Brussoni et al., 2015). Risky play has an anti-phobic effect, reducing fears and promoting mastery of age-adequate challenges in child development (Sandseter & Kennair, 2011).

A key outcome of the Thriving Learners and Odyssey partnership was to provide learners with opportunities and experiences that fostered dispositions like resilience and empathy, as well as capabilities such as interpersonal skills, problem-solving, and creativity.

By learning in, with, and through nature, learners at Christie Downs Primary School encountered challenges, engaged in healthy risk-taking, and experienced 'good stress,' helping them develop coping skills and resilience.

This partnership repeatedly highlighted that in rich natural environments, minimal equipment is needed, as the high levels of affordance naturally spark curiosity and provide ample opportunities for challenge and exploration. Giving learners time and space to engage with natural provocations within clearly established boundaries created a safe, calm, and engaging experience. As an educator commented:

”I observed pure curiosity from our students and an eagerness to question and find out at every turn. Students were thoughtful and generous with each other. Even those who had previously had difficulty interacting together in other settings. All staff noticed the effortless enthusiasm students had being in that outdoor space together.”



“I feel really calm in nature.”

Observational Stories provided educators with a meaningful way to record the impact of sessions. This tool also helped build their understanding and confidence in the Areas of Impact. The following is a snapshot example of practice from a whole-day visit to Kuitpo Forest.

Observation: Adventures in Kuitpo Forest

We arrived and explored the space. This was followed by discussions and then discoveries in the trees, with students using ‘detective skills’ to identify birds, feathers, fungi and explore ‘whose scat is that?’

Students were locked in on the discoveries and so eager to find treasures in nature. Kaurua language was woven through the session. Kids engaged with stories about rain moths, gum leaf skeletonizers, and measuring gum trees with a hug. Interpersonal skills and respectful relationships were practised.

Student conversations captured during the session revolved around how quiet the space was and how calm they felt:

"I felt calm, it is so quiet."

"I felt free."

"I feel really calm in nature."

"I really like it, I like that it is really quiet."

Reflection:

Students were safe, calm, and focused. I noticed that they were articulating and expressing their feelings, needs, and wants, as well as demonstrating help-seeking skills, such as saying, "Can I show you..." and "I feel...". Students had a voice in what they did, curiosity and meaning-making were everywhere, and inclusion, belonging, and safety were evident.



Our Thriving Learners and Odyssey partnership culminated in a year-end celebration in the Adelaide Parklands. Marshmallow Park/Pityarilla (meaning “marshmallow root place” in Kurna language) was chosen for its inclusive spaces, ensuring all children could participate.

Learners and educators from the school's disability unit had visited the park beforehand, building familiarity with the area and confidence in managing learners there. The celebration was a milestone for the school, marking the first time all students, regardless of age or ability, participated together in an out-of-school event.

Observation: Whole-School Celebration at Marshmallow Park/Pityarilla

During the celebration, children naturally gravitated toward activities that suited their preferences and needs. Over time, they engaged in various forms of play and rest, including chasing games, jump rope, and quiet moments under trees. Cubbies and marbles sustained engagement the longest, with large groups collaborating toward a shared outcome over the 90-minute observation.

Though used less frequently, loose parts and clay provided a valuable retreat for children who needed time alone to self-regulate. Problem-solving was evident, such as when children found shade under tables to paint. Throughout the event, children shared their hopes for the future, expressing a strong sense of identity and belonging.

Reflection:

The Odyssey Coordinator reflected:

"The partnership has considerably added value to our Odyssey program. Nature Play SA educators have modelled amazing ways to interact with, lead, and support students, demonstrating excellence in creating safe and supportive environments while providing appropriate challenges. The partnership also provided incredible opportunities for our students in the disability unit, offering sensory, artistic, physical, and social learning experiences. Observing Nature Play educators has improved my own teaching practice and my ability to give more space and ownership to students, which has led to happier and more engaged classes."

A child struggles on their own, they ask a nearby teacher for support. The teacher is helping a pair of children and says they will be there soon. One child overhears and says to them, "Do you want to join us? What do you think?" They combine ideas.

Cubbies

11.30 am - 27 children
12.00 pm - 21 children
12.30 pm - 20 children

A teacher shares about a student 11 years old: "Not typical for him to remain focused. Big difficulties when stuff gets hard. He's been here the whole time, sticking at it."

"It's very fun here!"

Child led and initiated play
12.00 pm: 5 children with large skipping rope

11.30 am - 12 chn.
12.00 pm - 15 chn.
12.30 pm - 11 chn.

Watercolour painting

Multiple children sit under the tables as a way to get out of the sun.

Child A: "I like to practice all the time, it's (painting) my favourite hobby."
Child B: "Yeah, you gotta draw everyday."

Child led and initiated play
12 to 12.30 pm: many running and chasing games initiated throughout

Rafts

11.30 am - 8 chn.
12.00 pm - 7 chn.
12.30 pm - 4 chn.

Rafts

Rafts

A small group are working to build a raft strong enough to hold pebbles.
"Keep trying 'til it's good."
"We have to keep trying."
It is successful, "It holds 7 rocks! 7 Passengers!"

A child shares with me while making potions about their day. "The paintings are really pretty and there's lots of paints. I like dot paintings like my Nana who's from bush. I'm Aboriginal. I dream of one day having a big giant dot painting from my Aunty. I'd like to be like her one day, or a singer."

Potions

11.30 am - 20 chn.
12.00 pm - 15 chn.
12.30 pm - 10 chn.

Potions

Potions

Child led and initiated play
11.50 pm: 6 children rolling down hill

Hill

Clay

11.30 am - 7 chn.
12.00 pm - 17 chn.
12.30 pm - 18 chn.

Clay

Clay

Teacher shares that a child who has been at the loose parts for majority of the session "prefers his own space so this is great for him to regulate." The child ventures to the potions, and brings something back for the teacher to smell. She takes a deep breath, "I can smell lavender and lemon. It's very calming, I think it's had an effect on you, too." They both breath in together.

Loose parts

11.30 am - 2 chn.
12.00 pm - 4 chn.
12.30 pm - 3 chn.

Loose parts

11.30 am - 15 chn.
12.00 pm - 21 chn.
12.30 pm - 20 chn.

Marble runs

Marble runs

Teacher comments on a large multi-age group working on marble runs that have extended down the hill, and connected at the bottom. "There are limited marbles but they are not fighting, or snatching them. So much resilience and focus. I haven't seen any arguments." A young child organises the group, "Ready, guys?!" he calls loudly. The teacher continues, "Like, he's 5 years old, this communication is incredible."

Child led and initiated play
12.00 pm: 3 children resting under trees
12.30 pm: 5 children. Some laying on grass

3 December 2024

Christie Downs Primary School

Whole School Play Celebration at Adelaide Parklands

Observation of children's play over 90 minutes.

- Teacher observations and comments.
- Time stamps and number of children indicate children's movement and engagement.
- Child initiated spontaneous play documented and indicates use of space over time.
- Children's voices recorded.



Time in Nature: Nature Play SA staff prepare for a program at Hallett Cove Conservation Park.

“The quality of the program improved because, previously, we were providing students with opportunities and experiences, but not necessarily the expertise—both in terms of understanding the natural world and knowing when to lead students and when to let them lead.” - Odyssey Coordinator

Overview Discussion:

The Christie Downs Primary School Odyssey program should be celebrated as an innovative initiative supporting the wellbeing of learners by blending nature-based learning, inclusivity, and student agency.

Through hands-on experiences in local green and blue spaces like Port Noarlunga Beach, Hallett Cove Conservation Park, and Kuitpo Forest, the partnership has connected students to their community, fostering a deep sense of place and belonging. By exploring these environments and learning about the local stories and ecosystems, students built meaningful ties to the community, strengthening their connection to the natural world.

This partnership has had a profound impact across all Areas of Impact. Nature-based

learning has not only enhanced students' emotional wellbeing—building resilience and confidence—but also empowered them to take ownership of their learning. By making meaningful choices in a supportive environment, students developed critical thinking, problem-solving, and collaboration skills. The program has ensured equitable access for all students, tailoring experiences to meet their diverse needs and helping them become effective, engaged learners.

Ultimately, this partnership has equipped students with the skills, mindset, and confidence to excel in their education and beyond, contributing to their personal growth and fostering a lasting sense of community.



Connection to Place: Learners become beach detectives at Port Noarlunga Beach.

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