



Thriving Learners

Transformative Co-Design at
Hallett Cove South Primary School

Overview:

The purpose of the Thriving Learners program is to develop and implement nature-based play, teaching, and learning experiences that enhance student wellbeing and learner agency for improved 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 contexts.

The year-long Thriving Learners program at Hallett Cove South Primary School transformed how Year 5 and 6 learners engaged with their environment through student-led, co-designed projects. Four project teams investigated:

- Increasing opportunities for loose parts play.
- Creating sustainable animal habitats.
- Greening the schoolyard with native plants.
- Developing a bush tucker and edible plant garden.

Staff at the school focused on supporting two specific Areas of Impact: student agency and wellbeing. The teachers wanted the program to foster self-regulation and co-regulation, helping children build resilience, emotional intelligence, and social skills while laying the foundation for a closer connection to nature.

Research has shown that nature-based learning benefits disadvantaged students (McCree et al., 2018; Sivarajah et al., 2018), increases engagement among uninterested learners (Dettweiler et al., 2015; Truong et al., 2016), improves some academic outcomes (Camassao & Jagannathan, 2018), and reduces disruptive behaviour and dropout rates among at-risk students (Ruiz-Gallardo et al., 2013).

Evidence suggests that regular time in nature and access to green spaces are linked to improved mental health, emotional wellbeing, and prosocial behaviour (Carrus et al., 2015; McCormick, 2017). Additionally, exposure to green and blue spaces is associated with enhanced behavioural development in school-aged children (Amoly et al., 2014; Dadvand et al., 2015). Time in nature has also been linked to the development of stronger pro-environmental attitudes and behaviours (DeVillie et al., 2021).

For context, Hallett Cove South Primary School is a small Category 5 site with 96 students, including 20% Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander enrolments and 33% of students living with a disability.



Learner Agency: Learners design and build bird boxes from reclaimed materials based on student-led, place-based projects.

Assessments:

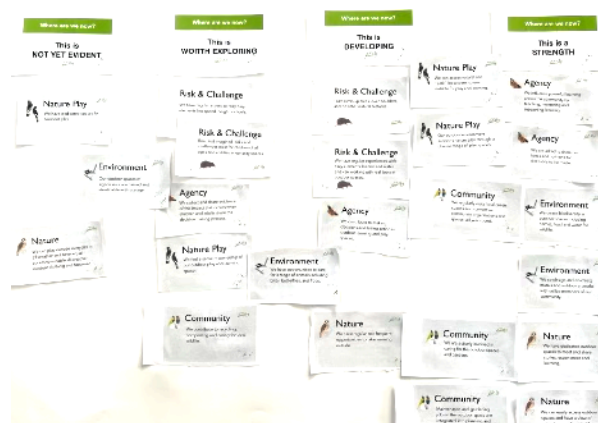
At the start of the program, students completed the *Children's Environmental Perceptions Scale* (Larson, Green, & Castleberry, 2011) to assess their personal interest in nature (*eco-affinity*) and their attitudes toward and concerns about environmental issues (*eco-awareness*).

In addition, learners collaborated with Nature Play SA to prototype a nature-inspired auditing tool, adapted from the *Teaching for Effective Learning* (TfEL) Student Voice Audit and Action Card* set. The tool challenges learning communities to ask, "Where to next?" This audit sparked meaningful dialogue about the role learners play in shaping how and where they learn and play.

The nature-based audit card set features six categories, each containing four provocations:

- Time in Nature
- Student Voice and Agency
- Contributing to the Community
- Caring for the Environment
- Managing Risk and Challenge
- Opportunities for Nature Play

Learners identified areas they perceived as strengths and areas still developing within the school. The cards deemed "worth exploring" became the foundation for forming project teams.



***Learner Agency:** Learners are part of the planning process with peers and educators.*

These cards included statements such as:

- **Agency:** We contribute to making decisions and taking action in outdoor learning and play spaces.
- **Nature Play:** We feel a sense of ownership of our outdoor play and learning spaces.
- **Environment:** We have opportunities to care for a range of animals, including birds, butterflies, and frogs.

With these statements in mind and guided by the provocation, "How can we make our spaces healthier?", learners initiated four projects aimed at creating meaningful change within their school environment.



"We cleaned, we gardened, we made kids happy, we made us happy." - A student's reflection on upgrading a mud kitchen space for International Mud Day.

"I think we need to make play more fun for kids and create more spaces for them to go. After prototyping the play, we realised we needed cubbies and blocks in the yard." - A student's reflection on loose parts play.

Program Examples of Impact

Throughout the program, an observational tool developed by Nature Play SA was used to document and assess play. The *Observational Story* tool highlights the *Areas of Impact* and the Australian Curriculum *General Capabilities* evident in play, while also capturing children's voices and encouraging reflective practice among educators.

Observation: Engagement in Imaginative Play
International Mud Day aims to connect children across the world through play with mud. To celebrate the event, the loose parts play project team coordinated a student-led update of the mud kitchen space which had become overgrown and neglected. The group then facilitated a loose parts play session during lunch break which included mud play, small wooden loose parts play, and cubby building.

During the play break, a student constructed a cubby and created a bed inside. They excitedly announced, "A storm is coming!" and began role-playing various weather and natural disaster scenarios. Although playing independently, the student appeared to be imagining a group around them, using phrases such as, "Guys, we need to rebuild the house." Their play continued for 45 minutes, an extended period of engagement, particularly for a learner who typically wanders the yard and rarely engages in structured play. Over time, they began inviting others to observe and participate, leading to moments of parallel play as they enacted their evolving storyline.

When asked about the experience, the student expressed enthusiasm, stating, "That was so much fun! Can we play again tomorrow?" They also highlighted the storytelling aspect, noting, "It was fun because it told a good story. I like telling stories. It is better inspiration outside."

Reflection

In nature, this child had the space, time, inspiration, and flexibility to engage in play not yet seen at school. This revealed a truer picture of the child to their teacher and deepened their understanding. The classroom teacher reflected:

"I was surprised to see this learner engage in imaginative play, as they usually wander the yard and prefer speaking with adults about facts. Storytelling has often been a challenge for them, making this experience particularly significant. They not only sustained play for an extended period but also created a narrative and eventually invited others to participate. Moving forward, [the learner] will be given time and space to engage in play, with their engagement documented to support literacy learning. Further opportunities will be explored to encourage play-based learning and help develop their storytelling and social play skills."

Areas of Impact: Observational Story	Age of student:	Date:
Student's name:	Age of student: 10	Date: 2/24/22
Session: After school	Observer: Lane Bailey	
Areas of Impact: An application	Learned things:	Observation Record: What happened?
Wellbeing - Being safe and healthy - Being socially and emotionally healthy - Being physically healthy	- Learner engaged in role-play - Learner engaged in storytelling - Learner engaged in social play	Student built cubbies, played with loose parts in the mud kitchen. They spent a long time in the mud kitchen engaged in role play about cooking/chefs. It was good to see neurodiverse students engaging successfully in this play and collaborating with others successfully.
Effective Learning - Changing and learning - Being creative - Being engaged - Being curious - Being confident	Endurance and Resilience - Persistence - Knowledge, skills, competence and understanding - Problem-solving - Resilience - Self-regulation	Student played during set-up, turned cleaning mud kitchen supplies into a game. Student voice: It was very exciting in their own play and there were all different things, I enjoyed the different things as we were able to build things outside which we don't usually get to do. The mud kitchen was my favorite as there were all sorts of things to play with. We usually sit down a table but instead we got to role play being chefs/customers, instead creating things. We all played together and did not fight, I enjoyed play as we have been fighting lots & did not fight today!
Personal and Social Capability - Understanding and managing emotions - Understanding and managing relationships - Understanding and managing the world - Understanding and managing self	Intercultural and Understanding - Understanding and managing emotions - Understanding and managing relationships - Understanding and managing the world - Understanding and managing self	Teacher/Educator/Facilitator reflections: - How did you notice or learn? (Or anything unexpected observed and what might you like to change? How will this change your practice going forward? Can you extend on this student's learning with this information? What next? Anything to read, source, explore, reflect?) - Please fill out after you have collected student's feedback. - Group of girls have been having extreme social issues, fights, subgroups requiring adult intervention every day, they engaged in role play/ construction play collaboratively with each other's arguments.
Personal and Social Capability	Play Types: How often do you play?	
	Solo <input type="checkbox"/> One-on-one <input type="checkbox"/> Parallel <input type="checkbox"/> Collaborative <input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	

Observation Story: Educators make links between play and the Areas of Impact.



Experiential Learning: *It's possible to create meaningful and memorable experiences that impact the community and cover the curriculum.*

“We learnt about communities, biodiversity and symbiosis - we can use this knowledge to help us create a more biodiverse environment when planning what to do next.”

The Power of Experiential Learning

After completing the research and design phase, learners transitioned from planning to action through an experiential visit to community experts at The Forktree Project. To celebrate National Tree Day, students planted hundreds of native trees and plants, contributing to the 20,000 that have been restored to the space in recent years.

This hands-on experience was an inflection point that allowed students to apply their learning in a real-world setting before bringing their knowledge and skills back to their own school environment.

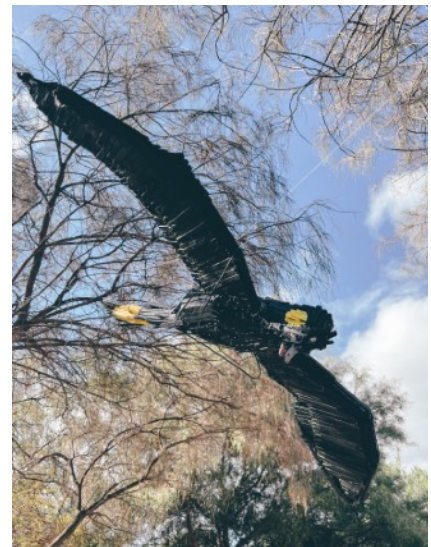
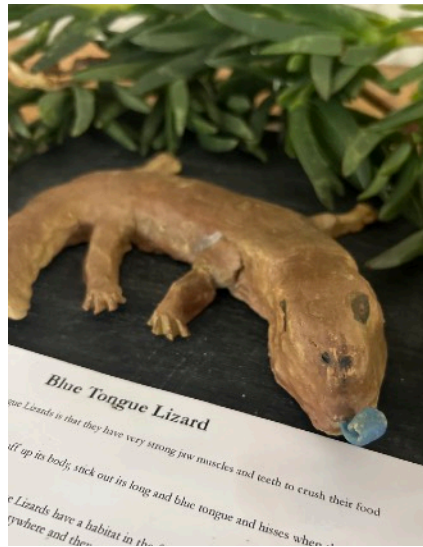
During the action phase, students planted native species and constructed nest boxes from reclaimed materials to support local wildlife,

including Rainbow Lorikeets and Micro-bats. Through guided, experiential learning, they developed a deeper understanding of native planting techniques and habitat restoration.

Students successfully transferred their learning back to school by independently introducing missing plant species to the school's butterfly garden. Their ability to apply these skills in a familiar setting demonstrated not only their growing confidence in environmental stewardship but also the tangible impact of their work in making the school a healthier, more biodiverse space.



Restoring Habitat: *“I hope to expand this project and make lots of bird boxes for our butterfly garden.”*



Exhibitions of Learning

In 2021, Hallett Cove South and Nature Play SA collaborated to create a student-designed and built outdoor classroom. The project transformed a polluted, neglected, and out-of-bounds space into a bright, flexible, and sustainable garden, purpose-built for student-centred learning.

The nature-inspired audit tool identified students’ desire for a greater sense of ownership over their outdoor spaces and more opportunities to care for birds, butterflies, and frogs. Motivated by these insights and inspired to build on the legacy of those who came before them, learners made plans to update the garden space.

Using a Nature Play SA-designed native plant identification sheet, inspired by Green Adelaide resources, learners explored the diversity of plants in the garden and the creatures those native plants supported. The project teams used this information to guide their investigations, which included creating sustainable animal habitats, greening the schoolyard with native plants, and developing a bush tucker and edible plant garden. Missing and desired native plant species were identified, and each learner adopted a plant or animal to investigate and support in the space.

Exhibitions of learning were held in the school garden and at a Nature Play SA bush kindy workshop (2024) to showcase the learners’ work. Students created bird, microbat, and possum boxes to increase habitat for local creatures. Others crafted artworks from clay and papier-

mâché, including a life-sized Yellow-Tailed Black Cockatoo made from wooden pop sticks.

Exhibitions of learning in nature-based education deepen understanding, boost engagement, and foster learner agency. By presenting their work to an authentic audience with real deadlines, students take greater ownership of their learning. Exhibitions allow schools to share and celebrate learners, connect with families, and inspire younger students, positioning senior students as aspirational peers.

The artworks, habitats, and animal boxes were created and presented with a real sense of pride and care, knowing the audience would include family and loved ones. The investigations went far beyond a standard information report, resulting in actionable change that met the projects aim of improving the health of the outdoor space.



Nature Nurture: Knowing the stories of flora and fauna in a space fosters a deeper sense of belonging and connection to place.

Showcase: A student shows stewardship by designing a habitat for a local frog species, demonstrating connection to place and knowledge of biodiversity and ecosystems.



Spotted Marsh Frog

I chose the Spotted Marsh Frog because I think frogs are cute and this frog is local to Hallett Cove. I decided to research the habitat of the Spotted Marsh Frog and work out how to create a biodiverse environment full of plant communities and symbiosis that will support and nurture the frog effectively.

Here is my list of plants in my Spotted Marsh Frog habitat and why I have placed them into my habitat:

Scaevola Albida

I've put Scaevola Albida in my habitat because it creates a nice border wall to protect the habitat.

Mat Rush

Provides a food supply for frog and other species, also attracts insects for the frog to eat.

Flax Lily

Provides a food supply, brings in insects.

Tussock Grass

Provides a nesting place and shelter.

Nardoo

Provides shelter for when the frog is in the water.

Creeping Boobialla

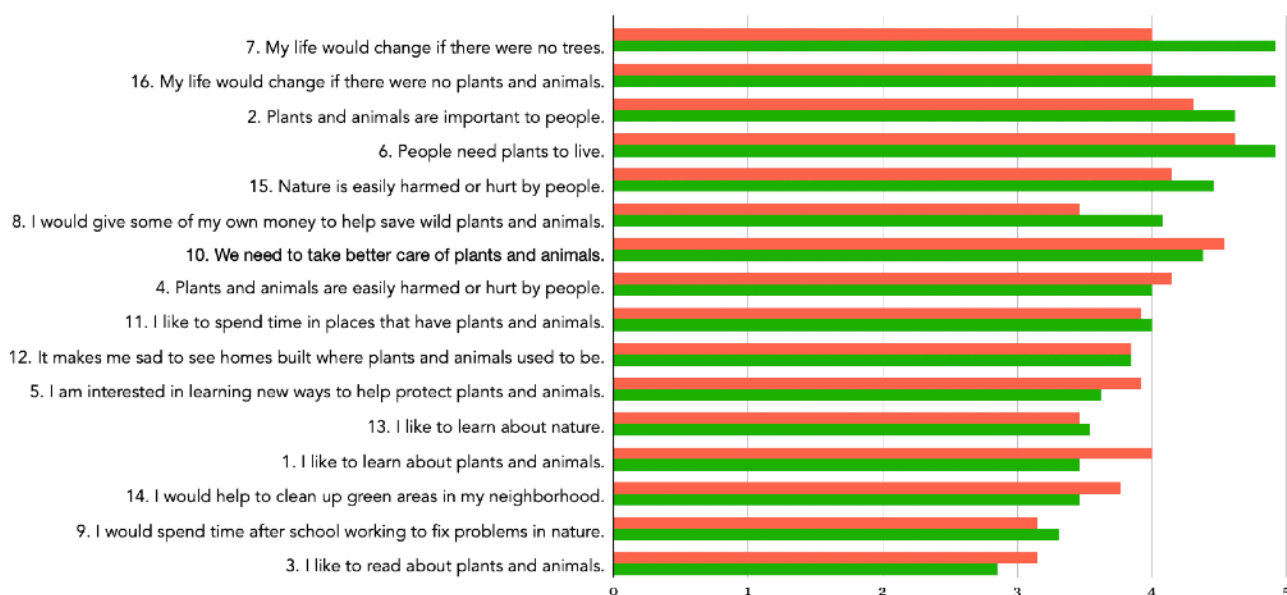
Creates a border to keep things out of the habitat, also acts as a cover/hiding spot for the marsh frog.

Sphagnum Moss

Provides good soil, mushy and is easy for frogs to camouflage and maneuver in.



Children's Environmental Perceptions Scale - Hallett Cove South Primary School



Outcomes and Post-Program Results

After the event, learners completed the *Children's Environmental Perceptions Scale* again, revealing a strong awareness of nature's importance.

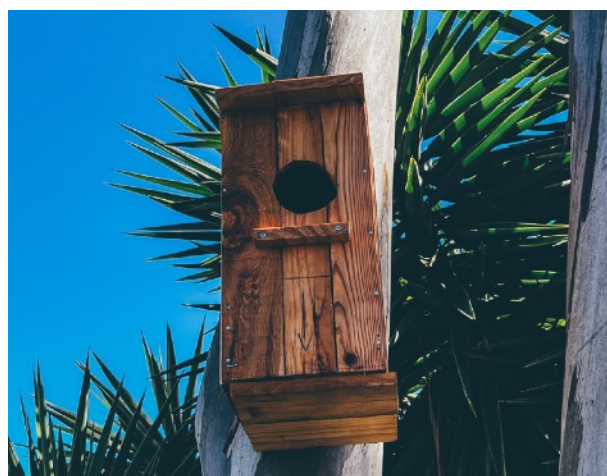
Students overwhelmingly recognised the essential role of plants and animals, with high agreement on statements such as *"People need plants to live"* and *"My life would change if there were no trees, plants, or animals."* They also demonstrated an understanding of environmental vulnerability, acknowledging that nature is easily harmed by human actions. This suggests that the school's focus on nature-based learning effectively fosters ecological awareness and a connection to place.

Interestingly, while students strongly believe in the need to care for the environment, their willingness to take direct action varies, mirroring trends seen in other Thriving Learners programs. Statements related to personal stewardship, such as *"I would give some of my own money to help save wild plants and animals"* or *"I would spend time after school working to fix problems in nature,"* received lower agreement compared to general statements about environmental concern.

This highlights an opportunity to foster active engagement through hands-on conservation projects that emphasise the benefits of developing reciprocal relationships with nature. Educators also play a vital role in instilling hope in children and supporting them to take meaningful action in their local environment, reinforcing that even small changes matter.

The Thriving Learners project at Hallett Cove South Primary School successfully deepened students' connection to place, fostered environmental stewardship, and empowered them as active participants in shaping their learning spaces. Through hands-on experiences, students moved beyond awareness to meaningful action. Their engagement in exhibitions of learning further reinforced their agency, allowing them to share knowledge with peers, families, and the wider community.

The project not only revitalised outdoor spaces but also cultivated a lasting culture of care, curiosity, and responsibility for the natural world, demonstrating the power of student-led, nature-based learning.



Reciprocal Relationships: A student-constructed bird box is mounted in a gum tree.

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