



Photos by: Daina McCormack

# Nature play every day, every child

## HOW LISTENING TO CHILDREN CAN INFLUENCE AUTHENTIC OUTDOOR LEARNING EXPERIENCES

TRISH BOSCHETTI AND DAINA McCORMACK

With a whole-school approach in mind and an active student voice, Snowtown Primary School principal **Trish Boschetti** and upper primary teacher **Daina McCormack** share their school's nature play journey and explain how the site has evolved into a hub for outdoor learning. 2019 has seen collaborative learning across sites to evolve our nature play space. We have collaborated with Bute Primary School for Junk-Yard play sessions. The sessions have allowed our students, teachers and school community members to collaborate with other nature play focused schools and inspire an evolving nature play space. We have added rhythmic drums, rock crushing/digging stations, canvas mats and motorbike tyres. Collaborating with other sites focused in nature play can increase school community inspiration and evolution of the nature play space.

### OUR NATURE PLAY AREA

Our whole-school nature play area has evolved over a long period of time. It is nestled within a small pine forest with shade, a sand pit, a cubby structure, a frog pond (made by the Young Environmental Leaders), a mud kitchen, natural loose parts (such as pine cones, sticks, bamboo and other natural debris), and junk loose parts (such as crates, tyres, plastic chains, rope, material and pipes). Every year it takes on a different form with new elements added, new games invented and learning opportunities enhanced. The space is open for free play at lunch and recess where children of all year levels play together from kindy to year 7. We also involve our parent community who donate items to help our space grow and evolve.

The space was inspired by a staff member, Anne Jones, and professional development via a Nature Play SA Conference in 2016. Tim Gill, an advocate for risky play, was a keynote. Of particular interest to us was his focus on the benefit/risk approach which really enabled us to reflect on our spaces and perceptions. Initially we set up guidelines with the students that aimed to create awareness around safety such as knowing the boundaries, using sticks safely, dragging large materials, creation ownership and snake awareness.

As a staff group we nominated the first loose parts to go into the nature play area. These were then introduced by the Yard Action Learning Team – a team of volunteer students who dedicate their playtime to assisting with new additions to the space such as loose parts. They

help with governing the usual rush to the area when new things such as bamboo, rope and calico are introduced.

## OUR STUDENTS AS DECISION MAKERS

Our students are very active and have a strong voice in our school community. Students submit proposals to staff about new items they would like to see in the nature play area. In addition they have also attended staff meetings to discuss nature play options.

In 2018 we added a mud kitchen as a result of a proposal put to staff by students that included its location and items with which to equip the kitchen. They researched other mud kitchens and worked with our groundsperson on the design and plumbing.

## OUR APPROACH TO CURRICULUM THROUGH OUTDOOR LEARNING

The nature play area is open for free play every recess and lunchtime. We believe that free play in a nature play space is essential to ensure students have ownership and can utilise it to its full potential.

In addition to free play, we actively encourage intentional teaching in the space and want staff to celebrate nature play every day. The space has become a hub for curriculum-based learning in Design and Technology, Literacy, Numeracy, Health and Wellbeing and Arts across all year levels.

Nature-based learning at the school has included collaborative cubby building by the upper primary students with school-based preschool children, creating poetry visuals and props, using nature and being in nature for persuasive writing, mathematical problem solving, mindfulness strategies and visual art projects.

The benefits we have observed in our students as a result of the play space include:

- Increased collaboration and effective communication: we have noticed that activities such

as cubby building in free play and intentional learning have prompted a higher level of teamwork and communication. In these instances children work towards a common goal. As a result of their collaboration, effective communication and achievements they can confidently use collaboration, negotiating and communication skills in their classroom environments.

- Confident creativity with no boundaries: students have increased their ability to be imaginative, creative and inventive, for example using items such as sticks, pallets and tyres to create lunch-time musical performances.
- Inclusive social construction and play: In the nature play area age is not a barrier nor is physical ability. Students use the space as a common ground – they let go of perceived barriers and just play. Friendships are built and emotional regulation is improved as the children work through problems and, more often than not, find a collective solution. The group dynamics in the cubby-building space changes daily due to students feeling comfortable enough to join in and interact with others.

One of our main challenges was navigating what safety actually meant in the context of play and finding a balance between benefits and risk. For example, lifting heavy materials and introducing high-risk loose parts (i.e. sticks, chains, rope and bamboo). We have established some simple guidelines for the area and these are explicitly communicated to everyone who uses the area. Although it constantly evolves we continue to address issues or concerns as a staff unit to ensure we are all on the same page – this type of communication has been paramount to our site's culture of play.

Another challenge was the expense of introducing new materials to an ever-evolving space such as bamboo, crates, wooden reels, pvc pipe, a mud kitchen and loose parts. A constantly evolving, student-designed space means a high turnover of new materials and therefore high cost. The fact that funds are limited has created the opportunity to continually

involve our local community and to enhance our student nature space voice to help source new materials. This local community involvement has made it possible for student designs to become reality.

## OUR ADVICE FOR INTRODUCING A NATURE PLAY AREA

From our perspective there are a few things that have assisted us greatly:

- A whole-school approach: a whole-school approach ensures that we are exploring and sharing the same values around nature play.
- Developing a good play culture amongst staff: having staff buy-in and support is extremely important. Strong and meaningful PD around nature play as well as staff discussions is a good starting point.
- Involving the children and local community in decision-making: our children and local community have a great sense of pride and ownership in their space as they are able to determine and control how it changes. Sharing a constant student voice at staff meetings is powerful.

## OUR FUTURE DIRECTIONS

What we hope to achieve in the space is children reaping the benefits as they grow a connection to and appreciation of the natural environment. Children also develop their resilience, self-confidence, imagination, teamwork skills, initiative and creativity which aligns strongly with our approach to shaping conditions to develop powerful learners.

We hope to further enhance the area through the organisation by the Yard Action Learning Team of some themed approaches at break times and the increase of sensory items into the area. It is important for us to keep a flexible and fluid space with parts that can be configured in a multitude of ways to keep the area adaptive and responsive to inspired creativity. We will continue to collaborate with our children and the community about the development of the area and also provide professional learning for new staff each year. 🌱

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