

# POWERFUL PLAYGROUNDS

## THE THIRD TEACHER

JOSH ANDERSON, CLARENDON PRIMARY SCHOOL

Image by: Josh Anderson



### [ ABOUT JOSH ]

Josh Anderson is currently Principal of Clarendon Primary School, a small community school in the Adelaide Hills. As an educator he has nearly 20 years' experience from Reception to Year 7. Josh has been involved with the ECHO Re-imagining Childhood Project over the last two years and is a strong advocate for lifelong play. He has been closely involved with the Stephanie Alexander Kitchen Garden Program since its inception and considers gardens to be almost the ultimate classroom! Josh has a keen and active interest in bringing natural play spaces into education settings and has been collaborating on play space and school landscape design, construction and evaluation (playing) for a number of years in order to enhance and promote wellness, risk, achievement, engagement with nature and most of all lifelong learning in educational settings. He also advocates and enjoys playing with sticks, mud, rocks, branches and dirt.

*We know that research attests the benefits of nature play in terms of children's wellbeing. However, pedagogical experts challenge us to take this a step further and see our outdoor environments as a third teacher enabling powerful learning in our students. Clarendon Primary School principal Josh Anderson takes us on his own professional – and personal – journey of discovery of the potential of nature as the third teacher.*

As a school leader, classroom practitioner, teaching "nerd" and parent of three young children, I inevitably invest much time exploring the early childhood and primary educational zeitgeist in both theory and practice. One tangent of this exploration, drip-fed by an emerging interest in the provocations of Carla Rinaldi and research of Guy Claxton, has been much recent pondering on and research into the idea of powerful learners.

Combining my nascent thinking with our school's involvement in the ECHO Re-imagining Childhood Project and a long-standing interest in the way learning and play interact, I have come to believe that it is powerful play which forms the genesis of, and ultimately lies at the heart of, powerful learning and creates a solid foundation for [building learning power](#).

I also came to form the opinion that we can build learning power equally well outside of the classroom as in it, as well as potentially increase the learning power of students through the quality of the outside play spaces we provide for them. The notion of environment as a third teacher was being crystallised for me, and I embarked upon a deeper, personal exploration of the concept of powerful playgrounds. I went from initially being a loose advocate for free-range nature play and bespoke playgrounds to someone totally committed to the idea of outdoor play spaces being vital, powerful and important learning spaces for children.

In order to test and even expand my personal theory that powerful playgrounds create powerful learners, I had to take on the role of teacher as researcher and start observing and collecting evidence that would back this idea up. This was the fun part (for the teacher nerd and playground fanatic in me), and my ideas were galvanised as I started pulling together

the work of many people – Carol Dweck, Guy Claxton, Tim Gill, Adam Bienenstock, Evette Sunset, John Hattie, Sir Ken Robinson, Po Bronson, Jo Boaler, Pete Semple, Carla Rinaldi, Helle Nebelong, [Loris Malaguzzi](#), Rudolf Steiner, Richard Louv, Wilson McCaskill, Bruno Bettelheim, Jean Piaget – and explore the threads that exist between the work and philosophies of these academics, writers, landscape architects, artists, thinkers, designers, educators and doers and how they had influenced my own work as a teacher, parent and advocate for play. I realised that much of what we say about the preferred requirements for quality learning outcomes in curriculum and pedagogy for 21st century learners is just as relevant when we look at playgrounds, the pedagogy of play and the need for high-quality play spaces, especially outside ones.

Along the way I discovered a German word I like: *spielraum*, meaning "playroom" or, more precisely, the room to move your body and mind – a place to play around with ideas and provocations and take them somewhere. I came to believe that good learning environments, especially outside ones, provide *spielraum*, as do good curricula – space to stretch, explore and process new things and make meaning of them. Outside play also provokes all five senses, and I was soon seeing that kids who play naturally could potentially learn and play better as they have to constantly adapt and learn about their world. Play is how children make the imagined real; their play is a process of "realisation" – simply, the making real of the world around them.

It also came to mind that in the last five years, amongst a sea of plastic, metal and tacky primary colours (where the "stepping stones" are the same distance apart, never slippery, and always less than 300mm above ground level), we have begun to see an emergence of educational and public play spaces inspired by their local surroundings, featuring natural objects in naturalised spaces where children can embrace challenges, be self-directed and take risks, where the process of creation and destruction is important and where resilience is built. Why is this so? Because we are seeing that children actually love playing in them. Because children's voices are being heard in their design and construction. Because they promote learning in many ways, in environments children enjoy interacting with. Because they help build learning power. While there have been many stalwarts for outside nature play over the years,

particularly in the Steiner movement, it is pretty evident that the thinking in residence of Carla Rinaldi can be credited with inspiring much rethinking about our play spaces. In addition, the influence of the Reggio Emilia Approach has also empowered many education sites in South Australia to embrace the concept of nature play to the growing benefit of children who are being regarded as more capable and competent by those who are designing and building their play spaces. Thankfully, we have begun to see the return of the powerful playgrounds – places for children where their voices are heard.

It has become evident that things are moving in the right direction when we look at contemporary outdoor play spaces for kids, but why they had seemingly vanished for 20 years was a question I began to seek answers to. Reflecting on my own childhood provided an insight into where I want the future of childhood to go.

A generation ago, children's powerful playgrounds – my playgrounds – were the creeks, quarries, gullies, beaches, scrub, forest, junkyards and vacant blocks within a child's neighbourhood, which provided the loose parts, opportunities to build resilience and exercise autonomy and allowed for the experience and assessment of risk. The modern age has seen play radii for children shrink dramatically and the opportunities to experience free and powerful outdoor play spaces diminish accordingly, and this gap in the market is now increasingly being filled by schools, centres and public spaces which choose to provide for children and their need to play powerfully outside, consciously supporting the development of powerful learners.

**Guy Claxton**, whose work lies at the heart of the powerful learning curve, talks about powerful learning as mind stretching, not mind filling. Learning power relates to:

- feeling – the absorption, noticing, perseverance and perceiving in learning
- thinking – the questioning, connecting, capitalising and resourcefulness in learning
- strategising – the planning, revising, distilling and reflectiveness in learning
- the relating/social – the inter-dependence, collaboration, empathy, imitation and reciprocity in learning

In the classroom, powerful learning values the process, not the results. So why not in the schoolyard as well? If you have ever built a cubby or played in the sand pit, you will know that the fun is in the doing! But a question has to be asked here: how many of our play spaces for children offer a process? How much process was available to children in the grounds of my own school setting at Clarendon?

When we observe our children playing freely, notably in natural settings and particularly when engaged with loose parts play, we see many of the powerful learning actions listed above occurring. Collaborative play that involves building shelters and cubbies and the like offers these opportunities in so many ways. Powerful learners have resilience and resourcefulness which enable them to respond to real-world pressures and uncertainty. Good school curricula and pedagogy build resilience and resourcefulness – and so do good playgrounds. I had instinctively known for a long time that good play spaces were critical for the good development of children, and my understanding of why this was the case was starting to grow.

To me, good play spaces that allow children to be autonomous, take risks, be in charge, construct and deconstruct, collaborate, wonder and reflect not only help build learning power but offer the opportunity for the child to be respected as competent and capable. Many modern, "post-and-panel"-



Image by: Jason Tyndall

style, prefabricated playgrounds are one dimensional in the opportunities they offer. Their strictly foolproof (or fallproof) design does not always respect the competencies of children and can undermine the autonomy of children at play through their prescriptive scope for play. They often lack the graduated challenges that keep children working harder and harder for success, and as a result are often mastered once and ignored thereafter. Standardised to the point that boredom arrives sooner, they offer limited scope for anything other than physical, active play and children will often start to find their own ways to interact with them – think about the children underneath or on the roof of the prefabricated cubby house after quickly tiring of its uninspiring, prescriptive interior. Powerful playgrounds respect the competencies and capabilities of children. They ask of children; rather than just "giving" the user immediate success, they offer opportunity to expel effort and be rewarded. Powerful playgrounds encourage risk assessment before risk taking; they let kids test their boundaries in a safer and moderated fashion.

Good play spaces, both inside and out, should be provocative, not prescriptive: they give suggestions for play and use but are open ended. They seem to have more than one way to play with them and allow accessibility to people at different levels. They also let children of different ages play together. Powerful play spaces are often those that are bespoke and provide a range of play opportunities, including physical, gross motor, fine motor, artistic, active, passive, dramatic, imaginative, creative, large group, small group, solo and collaborative play. When we have playgrounds that only cater for children with an interest in organised ball games, like many schools do, we ignore and devalue the multitude of other ways children like to play. It is like a classroom that only ever does reading and maths – great for those kids that love reading and maths but not so engaging for those that like drama, science, music, visual arts, physical education, computing or writing. We need varied curricula so that children from a broad range of backgrounds can feel successful and excel. Playgrounds need to be the same.

Powerful playgrounds are provocative places that demand rigour but allow the learner to explore, tinker, adjust, reflect and revise. Powerful

playgrounds should be seen as learning areas. Loris Malaguzzi declared that children have a right to a quality environment which can do the work of the third teacher. He described the schoolyard as a pedagogical project – a dialogue between pedagogy and landscape architecture.

So how has all this thinking, observing, learning and dialogue influenced our journey at Clarendon Primary School? We have begun to embrace and plan for the further evolution of our playground into a powerful one with spaces for children to be all sorts of things, not just athletes. As all schools need to, we asked ourselves: beyond a supply of sand pit toys and sports gear, what loose parts do we provide? We now use everything from chalk, huge cardboard boxes, cloths, pallets, painting drop sheets, timber offcuts, milk crates and bricks to pavers, besser blocks, logs, branches, string, ropes, gum nuts, polished stones and rocks, soft coloured rocks for crushing, wax, water (the best loose part there is!), cans, pots and pans, plywood panels and even sticks. Yes, our children are allowed to play with sticks, but the key is playing safely. Our two main yard rules are:

1. "Play in such a way that everyone has fun," and
2. "Everyone is welcome."

Sometimes we have children pretending their sticks are guns or swords, opening another can of philosophical worms, but one worth grappling with: the issue of gender stereotyping and whether we have the right to exclude types of play that tend to be gender specific – should one child be allowed to pretend a stick is a magic wand in a make-believe fairy game but another not be allowed to pretend a stick is a gun in a make-believe army game? There is much that could be discussed about the need for children to have an outlet to make meaning of the vast amount of violence they are exposed to in their media worlds, especially in cartoons. Play can be a benign way to do this, if we have the confidence to allow it and the knowledge to support and manage it.

Being less prescriptive is part our emerging philosophy on outdoor play at Clarendon: we try not to dictate how our children play with the equipment they find but instead let them problem solve, process and produce ideas for their own play. The children are autonomous in how they interpret and interact with equipment and space – they need creativity to use these things and we let them exercise that creativity. As educators we intervene only if and when required to preserve the safety and inclusion rules.

So I advocate keeping your play spaces as natural as you can and ensuring there are loose parts. I advocate planting more trees, shrubs, herbs and flowers that will provide these loose parts and interesting objects. I advocate the ongoing assessment, evaluation and justification of the play spaces we provide in our schools and centres for the whole child. I advocate deep reflection about the quality of play we allow for. And I offer these ideas and questions learned from our own journey.

Perhaps most importantly, be okay with a bit of mess. See it as not really mess but a process, the eggshells and beaten eggs before the omelette – but designate areas in which children can do the messy stuff. Keep your local context in mind: what is doable; what can you leave outside and what needs to be packed away? Observe the end users in spaces they

already have: how are these spaces used? If we value a yard as a learning space, do we need more educators in it as observers, provocateurs and facilitators? Sometimes children are attracted to the quieter, more out-of-the-way places because they need some respite, so allowing for a number of tucked-away places, which seem private but are in fact still readily "supervised", is invaluable for certain children's wellbeing. Playing freely at lunch and recess time is sometimes the only time in a child's day where they are totally autonomous and in control – they can call the shots, set the tone, and be Wonder Woman for 30 minutes if they so desire.

I suppose my own learning journey has led me to understand that our play spaces have so much to offer our children in terms of building learning power and can be so much more than just practical, low-maintenance or attractive. They can be landscapes where innovation is encouraged

and minds are stretched, if we can only stretch our own minds and develop a new playground paradigm whereby we see the environment not as peripheral but as an essential element of a powerful learning space. Powerful play spaces foster growth mindsets and build resilience, as do powerful classrooms, pedagogy and curricula. They

encourage effort and risk taking through posing challenges and rewards, as do powerful classrooms, pedagogy and curricula. They encourage reflection, adaptability, flexible thinking, resilience, problem solving, patience and perseverance and they value process over results – as do powerful classrooms, pedagogy and curricula. In powerful classrooms and playgrounds, the learners are the protagonists. The journey towards these kinds of play spaces is an ongoing one in which schools and prior-to-school settings can play an active role. As Carla Rinaldi sagely points out, schools do not just transmit culture, they create it. ✦

*"Powerful play spaces foster growth mindsets and build resilience, as do powerful classrooms, pedagogy and curricula."*

JOSH ANDERSON

## FURTHER INFORMATION:

[Re-imagining Childhood: The inspiration of Reggio Emilia education principles in South Australia](#) Carla Rinaldi, Adelaide Thinker in Residence 2012–2013

[Dr. Dweck's discovery of fixed and growth mindsets have shaped our understanding of learning](#) Dr Carol Dweck

[Building Learning Power website](#) Guy Claxton, Professor of the Learning Sciences at the University of Winchester

[Building Learning Power](#) Professor Guy Claxton

Tim Gill's blog [rethinkingchildhood.com](#) and his publication [No Fear](#)

[John Hattie's High Impact Strategies for Teachers](#) via [evidence-basedteaching.org.au](#)

[Piaget's Cognitive Theory](#) explained via [simplypsychology.org](#)