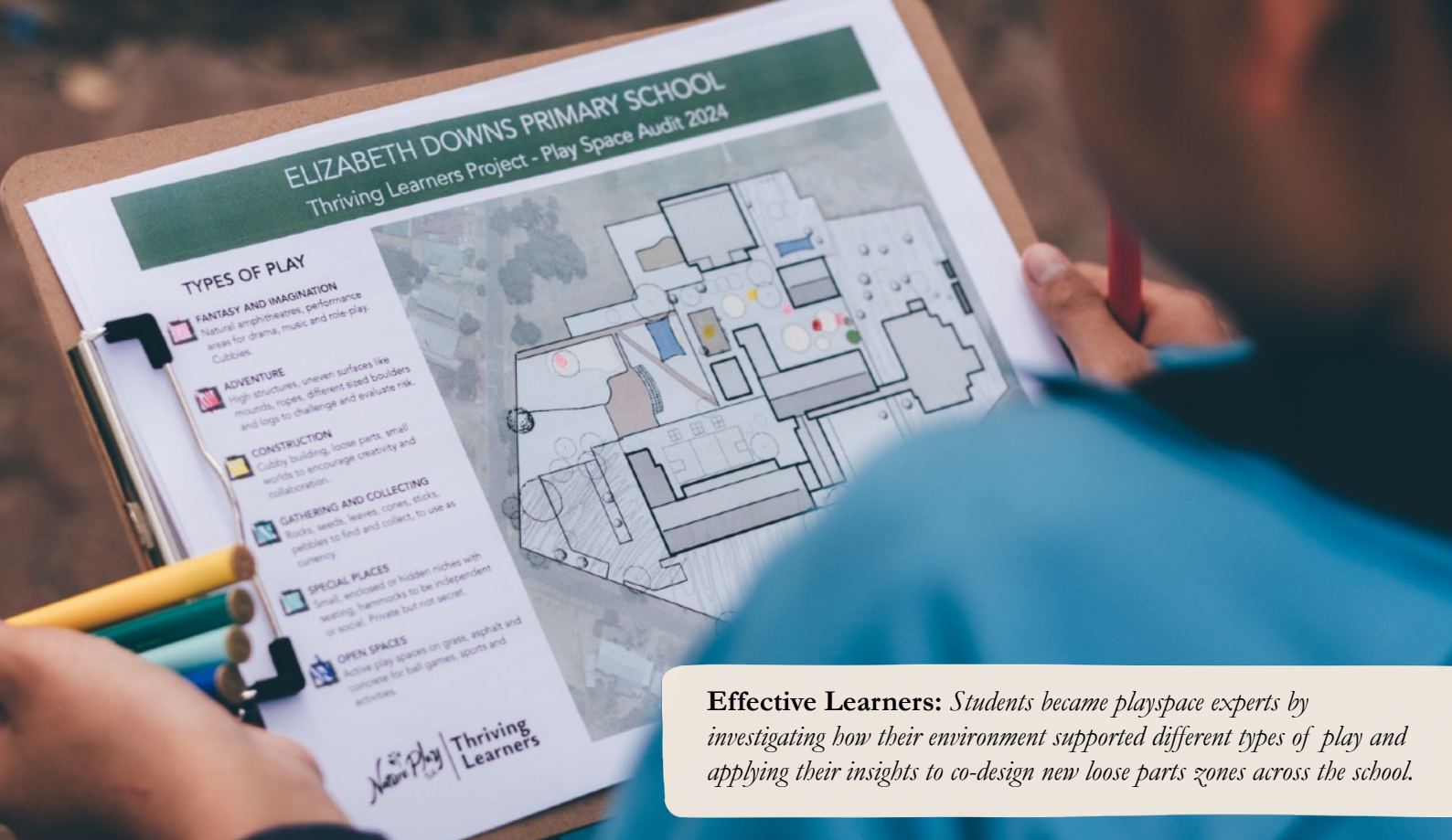


## Thriving Learners

Reimagining Free Play at Elizabeth  
Downs Primary School



**Effective Learners:** *Students became playspace experts by investigating how their environment supported different types of play and applying their insights to co-design new loose parts zones across the school.*

### Overview:

Elizabeth Downs Primary School is a Category 1 site with 396 students from preschool to Year 6. The school community includes 15% of students who identify as Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander, and 109 students enrolled in the Intensive English Language Program.

The school's Student Wellbeing Leader submitted a Thriving Learners expression of interest, aiming to create more opportunities for adult-supported loose parts play during recess and lunch breaks. By supporting self-regulation and co-regulation through play, educators can help children build resilience, emotional intelligence, and social skills, laying the foundation for lifelong learning and wellbeing.

*"My vision is to design dynamic environments for the children at EDPS that inspire curiosity, collaboration, and creativity through play and nature-based activities. I aim to create spaces that support both wellbeing and learning, encouraging teachers to extend lessons beyond traditional classrooms. The Thriving Learners program supports this vision by guiding and assisting both children and teachers in exploring various aspects of nature play. Through professional development, the program helps staff to begin to explore how nature play can enhance wellbeing and enrich the learning experience."*

- Student Wellbeing Leader, EDPS

After consultation with the school, a Year 6 class with 25 learners was identified to lead the co-designed, 8-week outdoor learning project.

### Supporting Research:

Research consistently shows the powerful benefits of outdoor and inclusive play for children's development. Kemple et al. (2016) highlight that outdoor play supports self-regulation, wellbeing, and social development, while also fostering curiosity. Complementing this, Bristow and Atkinson (2020) found that play environments designed with student input positively influence children's social, emotional, and mental wellbeing. Importantly, the availability and variety of play experiences shape how supported and included children feel during playtime. When play options are diverse and engaging, students experience stronger social connections and improved emotional wellbeing, whereas limited play choices can lead to boredom and social tension.

Building on these insights, Mann et al. (2022) demonstrate through a systematic review that nature-specific outdoor learning enhances cognitive skills, resilience, and social-emotional development. Their findings further support the value of experiential, student-centred learning approaches that foster connection to place and holistic growth in school-aged children.

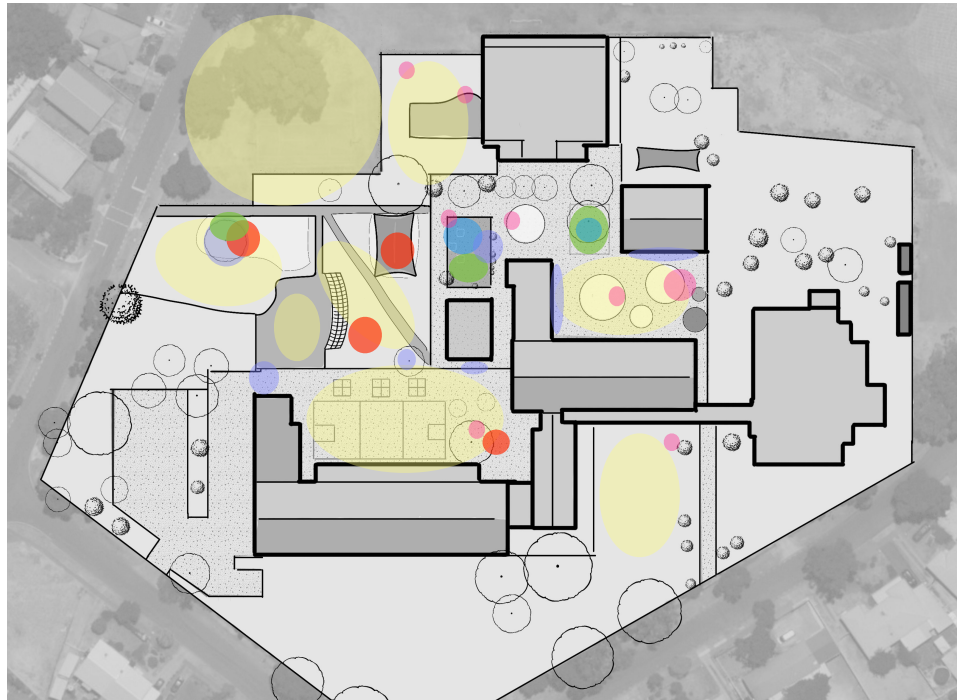
Our playspace audit was inspired by the work of David Sobel (2008), who identified play motifs that are "common among all children regardless of socioeconomic status, ethnicity, or ecosystem, when they have safe, free time in nature." These motifs informed our exploration of the school grounds and the development of a play opportunity incidence count.

# ELIZABETH DOWNS PRIMARY SCHOOL

## Heat Map - Learner Play Space Audit 2024

### TYPES OF PLAY

- **FANTASY AND IMAGINATION**  
Natural amphitheatres, performance areas for drama, music and role-play. Cubbies.
- **ADVENTURE**  
High structures, uneven surfaces like mounds, ropes, different sized boulders and logs to challenge and evaluate risk.
- **CONSTRUCTION**  
Cubby building, loose parts, small worlds to encourage creativity and collaboration.
- **GATHERING AND COLLECTING**  
Rocks, seeds, leaves, cones, sticks, pebbles to find and collect, to use as currency.
- **SPECIAL PLACES**  
Small, enclosed or hidden niches with seating, hammocks to be independent or social. Private but not secret.
- **OPEN SPACES**  
Active play spaces on grass, asphalt and concrete for ball games, sports and activities.



*Partners in Learning:* A heat map shows the diversity of play opportunities for children based on play space audit data collected by students.

### Pre-Program Assessments:

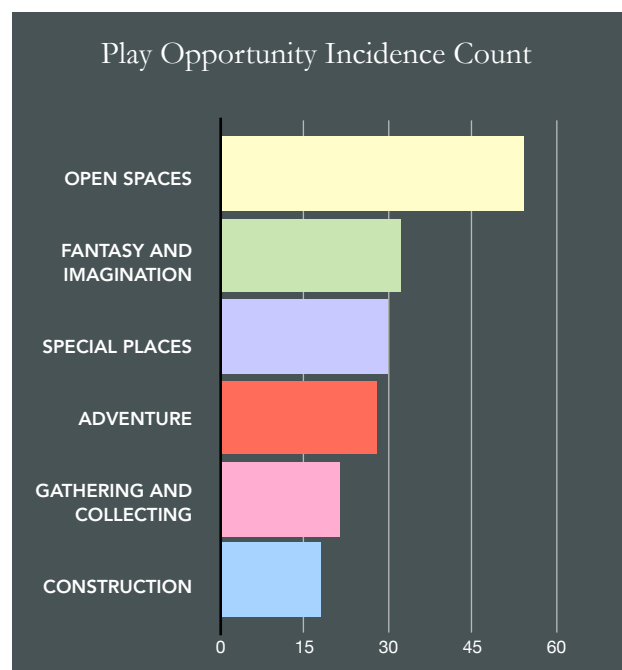
Students began by investigating the diversity of play opportunities available to all children during free play breaks. A student audit of the school produced a heat map (above) which guided project decisions about the types of play to introduce and prototype in different spaces around the school.

Learners identified abundant opportunities for ball games, sports, and activities in open grass, asphalt, and concrete spaces. However, there were far fewer spaces to support play involving construction, gathering and collecting, as well as special areas for socialising and fostering imaginative play for younger children.

Some appealing “out-of-bounds” spaces, featuring established trees and well-shaded green areas, were identified as desirable locations to prototype different types of play away from the noise and bustle of the main yard play space.

Using Play Opportunity Incidence Count data (right) collected from the play space audit, a program outline was co-created with students. Eight 90-minute sessions were planned across Terms 3 and 4, focusing on boosting curiosity, creativity, and engagement.

Some sessions were designed to include peers from other year levels. The project would conclude with a student-designed, whole-school event showcasing different types of play during free play breaks. A whole-staff professional development session was held to outline the learning and explore the wellbeing benefits of time in nature.





“It made me happy and gave me something to look forward to.”

Pre-program surveys were collected, including the *Children’s Environmental Perceptions Scale* (Larson, Green, & Castleberry, 2011), which measures personal interest in and attitudes towards nature, and the Teacher Confidence Survey, used to measure educator confidence in applying the Areas of Impact and engaging in nature play.

An Areas of Impact *Observational Story* tool (NPSA, 2024) was also used to measure students’ connection to nature and engagement with the program. Educators collecting this data were encouraged to capture meaningful moments, student voice, and reflect on the implications for their context.

Areas of Impact: Observational Story	Date	Observation Record: What happened?
<p><b>Area of Impact: Ecological Literacy</b></p> <p>Ecological Literacy: Understanding the relationships between living organisms and their environment, including the flow of energy and cycling of matter.</p> <p>Ecological Literacy: Understanding the relationships between living organisms and their environment, including the flow of energy and cycling of matter.</p>	<p>2/24/24</p> <p>Area of students: /10</p> <p>Observed by: Jane Ashley</p>	<p>Student built cobbles played with loose parts in the mud kitchen.</p> <p>They spent a big time in the mud kitchen engaged in role play about cooking/chefs. It was great to see neurodiverse students engaging successfully in this play and collaborating with others successfully.</p> <p>Initial physical setup: turned clearing mud kitchen supplies into a cove.</p> <p><b>Student's voice:</b></p> <p>It was very exciting cos there was play and there were all different things. Enjoyed the different things as we were able to build things outside which we don't usually get to do.</p> <p>The mud kitchen was my favorite as there were lots of things to play with. Usually sit down a table but instead they let us role play from across/corners instead cooking things. We all played together and did not fight. I enjoyed play as we have been fighting lots &amp; did not fight.</p> <p><b>Teacher/Educator/Facilitator reflections:</b></p> <p>Group of girls have been having extreme social issues. Girls' relationships requiring adult intervention every day. Support in role play/collaboration play collaboratively with social issues/arguments.</p>
<p><b>Area of Impact: Cultural Understanding</b></p> <p>Cultural Understanding: Understanding the diverse cultures, traditions, and practices of different communities and the role of culture in shaping identity and behavior.</p>	<p>Area of students: /10</p> <p>Observed by: Jane Ashley</p>	<p>Initial physical setup: turned clearing mud kitchen supplies into a cove.</p> <p><b>Student's voice:</b></p> <p>It was very exciting cos there was play and there were all different things. Enjoyed the different things as we were able to build things outside which we don't usually get to do.</p> <p>The mud kitchen was my favorite as there were lots of things to play with. Usually sit down a table but instead they let us role play from across/corners instead cooking things. We all played together and did not fight. I enjoyed play as we have been fighting lots &amp; did not fight.</p> <p><b>Teacher/Educator/Facilitator reflections:</b></p> <p>Group of girls have been having extreme social issues. Girls' relationships requiring adult intervention every day. Support in role play/collaboration play collaboratively with social issues/arguments.</p>

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


**Rhythm of the program:**

Each week, we followed a consistent outdoor lesson framework to transition to the learning space, gather, tune in, connect to the whole group focus, and reflect on the learning and plans for the following week. Each lesson included:

- An Acknowledgement of Country and links to the Kaurna language.
- Stories of significance about flora and fauna found in the space, such as identifying local bird calls or exploring the life cycles of rain moths and gum leaf skeletonisers observed in the area.
- A focus on a suitable disposition, including playfulness, curiosity, resilience, adventure, nurturing, and mindfulness.
- Open-ended play provocations, providing various levels of challenge, risk, and choice, regardless of age or ability.
- A reflection and farewell.

During the program, five different spaces were activated with play experiences, which included:

- **Cubby building:** large loose parts play, risky play.
- **Natural pigment painting:** gathering and collecting, creativity.
- **Sensory play:** playfulness, imaginative play.
- **Whittling:** risky play, mindfulness.
- **Loose parts Play:** Small loose parts, natural elements like sand, mud and water.



“I felt relaxed and calm most of the time but sometimes I had to really focus and think.”

**Multiage Play:** A play session involving reception and year 6 learners resulted in a mix of students Collaborating to create an elaborate marble run from 'junk' materials. After several iterations, the learners pooled their resources and combined their efforts to build a single track. Cries of “Send it!” signalled the start of each run, followed by cheers and high-fives each time they succeeded. These learners shared a common interest and were able to connect and creatively tackle challenges as equals in the play, demonstrating key aspects of effective learning such as problem-solving, persistence, and collaboration in a hands-on, engaging context.

### Program Observations:

At the end of the play sessions, which involved prototyping different spaces around the schoolyard, students shared reflective feedback about the program's impact. Many described feeling calm and relaxed during the sessions. Anecdotally, the classroom teacher noticed that this sense of calm often carried into the rest of the day, and sometimes even into the next.

Throughout the sessions, the *Observational Story* tool developed by Nature Play SA (2024) supported our reflections. It helped capture the play as it unfolded, making visible the Areas of Impact and General Capabilities, highlighting children's voices, and prompting thoughtful educator reflection.

In one observation, the Student Wellbeing Leader noted that a student with regulation challenges, who normally moves around a lot, was calm and focused for an extended period during a sensory play activity involving crushing ice and scented native plants to create perfumes. Even as their friends moved on to other activities, the student remained deeply engaged in the task and happily chatted with peers. The educator, who works extensively one-to-one with this learner, made a plan to incorporate more sensory experiences during their sessions to help the student self-regulate and express themselves.



**“The best part of the Nature Play SA project was getting to learn new things through nature, and being able to connect with the area surrounding us.”**

Data collected from the *Observational Story* tool was used to inform future sessions, particularly when students requested opportunities to repeat activities they enjoyed or found challenging. The observational tool also supported educators in building their understanding and confidence in the Areas of Impact.



***Observational Story:*** "I like this because it's relaxing and it helps me take out my anger on the ice. I like thinking about what I was doing. I didn't care my friends moved on because I was too busy in my own world thinking about this. It was all I was thinking about."



**Outcomes and Post-Program Results:**

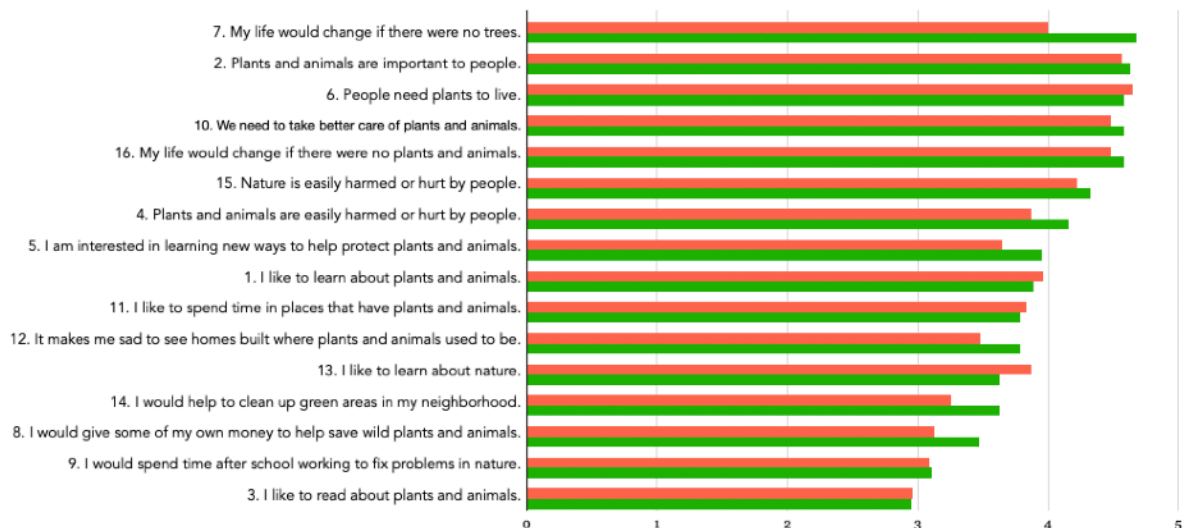
To complete the program, students were invited to design a whole-school event that would make their learning visible and accessible to the wider school community. They reflected on the activities that resonated with them and selected complementary spaces to host the play.

The event aimed to demonstrate how the schoolyard could be better utilised for adult-supported play during recess and lunch, aligning with the goals of the program. On the day, Nature Play SA staff, students, and SSO staff co-facilitated a range of activities, many of which took place in areas typically considered “out-of-bounds” for play.

Approximately half of the school’s nearly 400 students engaged with the open-ended, accessible experiences during breaks. Because the activities offered choice, support, and opportunities for age-appropriate challenge, the event was warmly received. Many students asked if it could be repeated the next day.

Following the event, Year 6 participants repeated the *Children’s Environmental Perceptions Scale* (below). Results showed an increase in both eco-affinity and eco-awareness. The question “*My life would change if there were no trees?*” showed the most significant increase, likely because most sessions were held under and around significant trees, which provided shade and served as provocations for storytelling and connections to local flora and fauna.

**Children’s Environmental Perceptions Scale**





“I felt grateful that we got this experience where we learnt so many new things about nature and the wildlife that surrounds us every day.”

Beliefs about the importance of plants and animals scored highly, but questions inviting direct action, like *“I would spend time after school working to fix problems in nature,”* had lower scores. *“I like to read about plants and animals”* scored the lowest, whereas *“I like to learn about nature”* had a much higher positive response, possibly highlighting the importance of multi-modal opportunities to learn about plants and animals through storytelling and experiential learning.

Pre- and post-program, a *Nature Impact Survey* (below), designed by Nature Play SA, found an increase in teacher knowledge and confidence in using the Areas of Impact, particularly when incorporating nature play into their lessons and identifying evidence of impact.

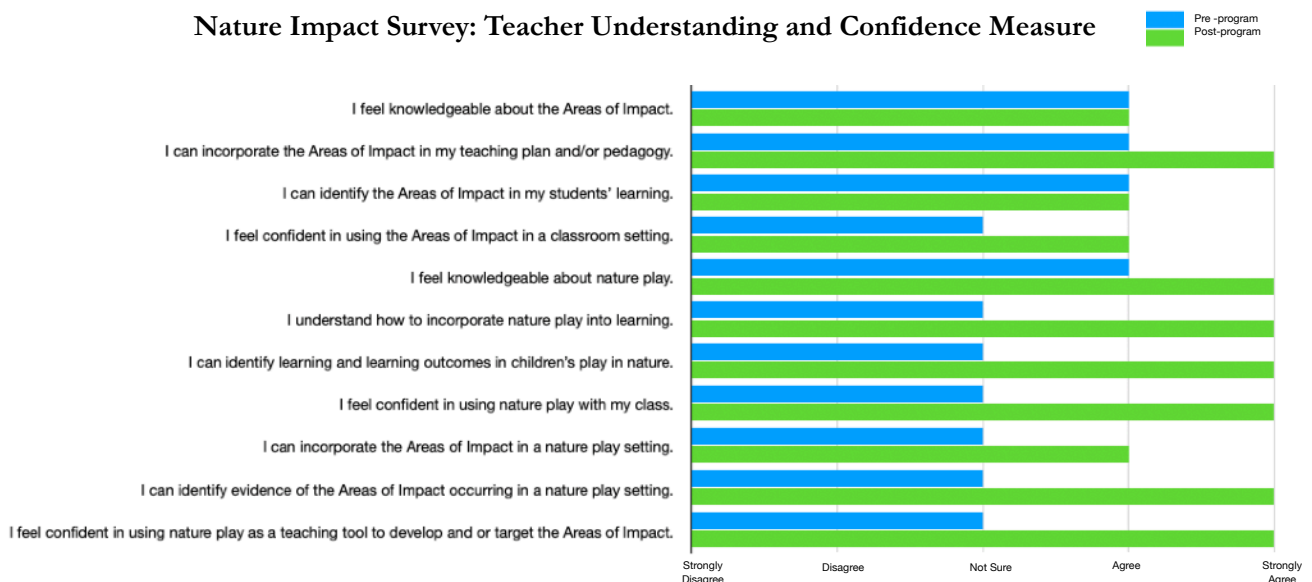
Moving forward, the Student Wellbeing Leader secured funding to extend and enhance nature play experiences during free-play breaks. The school is investigating possibilities for enhancing play spaces and creating a Palti Circle (yarning circle) as a place to meet for outdoor learning and connection.

Nature Play SA will continue to support the school with its vision for improved outdoor spaces and to create pop-up nature play kits for SSOs to use during free play breaks, providing more opportunities for adult-supported loose parts play during recess and lunch breaks.

“The students and staff have learned so much, and we are so excited to continue this journey next year. [Thriving Learners] brought joy and exploration to our Year 6s, helping them find fun in nature and embrace the present moment. I feel these skills and memories will serve them well as they transition into their high school years.”

- Student Wellbeing Leader

Nature Impact Survey: Teacher Understanding and Confidence Measure



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