



Nature Play SA | Thriving Learners

Thriving Learners

Supporting Cultural Connection and
Belonging at Aberfoyle Park High 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, leading to 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.

Aberfoyle Park High School is a Category 6 school for Years 7 to 12, located in the southern suburbs of Adelaide. The school expressed interest in participating in Thriving Learners with the goal of creating a cultural garden space where students could meet, connect, and feel a sense of belonging. Educators were motivated by a desire to improve student wellbeing by prioritising opportunities for cultural and community connection in green spaces.

The program focused on the school's Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander student cohort. Twelve students from Years 7 to 11 had the option to join a weekly, hour-long session, supported by the school's Aboriginal Education Community Officer. The Thriving Learners program was delivered during this time, with Nature Play SA educators working in collaboration with school staff and members of the Aboriginal community.

Research suggests that when adolescents have fewer opportunities to play, particularly outdoors, they are more likely to experience poor mental health outcomes such as depression and anxiety (Gray, 2011). Nature play has been shown to reduce symptoms and

behaviours such as suicidal ideation, self-harm, worry, low self-esteem, social isolation, disengagement from school, and a loss of hope (Gray, 2011; Tillmann et al., 2017). Play supports mental health by encouraging the development of interests and problem-solving skills, fostering autonomy, strengthening emotional expression and regulation, and building social connection and belonging.

Emerging research highlights that adolescents benefit from play and playful learning. Teenagers report greater engagement when learning is fun, hands-on, imaginative, and novel. They also experience a stronger sense of independence and improved content recall through these approaches (Johnston et al., 2023).

A learning framework that centres relationships with the community and connection to Country, while valuing diverse knowledge systems and ways of learning, fosters cultural safety and belonging for Aboriginal children (Burgess et al., 2022). Aboriginal adolescents pursuing higher education describe the importance of cultural security and the need for their cultural knowledge to be respected and recognised in their education (Wilks et al., 2020).

These principles were embedded in the co-design of the cultural garden space at Aberfoyle Park High School. Through nature-based playful learning, the Thriving Learners program honoured students' voices, celebrated cultural identity, and created a space where diverse ways of knowing were respected. The project embodied a collaborative, place-responsive approach that centred Country, community, and creativity in learning.

Opportunity: Before the project began, the space was a largely undefined patch that held great potential. A mural by Arrernte artist Scott Rathman and a 300-year-old River Red Gum were features that offered a strong cultural and ecological foundation for what would follow.



Program Impact: Key Takeaways

The Cultural Garden project at Aberfoyle Park High School offers valuable insights for educators interested in nature-based, culturally grounded learning. Key impacts include:

- **Supporting Aboriginal students** to strengthen cultural identity and connection through engagement with Elders, artists, and Country.
- **Enhancing wellbeing** by creating calming, natural spaces for reflection, regulation and social connection.
- **Fostering student agency** by engaging students as co-designers and co-creators in all stages of the garden's development, encouraging ownership, pride and belonging.
- **Strengthening community relationships** by partnering with Elders and incorporating cultural knowledge and language.
- **Enriching curriculum connections** by blending hands-on, experiential learning with cultural and environmental education.

This section shares reflections from students, educators, and school leadership, illustrating how these outcomes were achieved in practice.

Growing Cultural Connection Through Nature-Based Learning

Our *Thriving Learners* partnership with the school began when the Wellbeing Leader responded to a state-wide expression of interest with a proposal to collaborate with the school's Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students. The aim was for students to co-design and co-create a native garden at the front entrance of the school, near a feature mural painted by Arrernte artist Scott Rathman.

Working alongside the Wellbeing Team and the Aboriginal Community Education Officer, we collaborated with Aboriginal students from Years 7 to 11 during their weekly cultural sessions. These sessions typically focused on cooking or creative activities and had varying levels of participation. From the outset, we recognised the importance of strengthening relationships with Kaurna Elders and Aboriginal artists to deepen student engagement and embed cultural knowledge into the project.

An early session was led by Kauwanu Tamaru, a Kaurna/Narungga Elder, who respectfully opened new conversations with students about their culture, language, and Country. He then led a smoking ceremony on Country at the site of the proposed garden. This reflective and grounding moment instilled a sense of pride and belonging in the students, helping to establish trust and safety as we worked together. It also marked the beginning of a stronger focus on building relationships with Kaurna Elders and Aboriginal community members, supporting deeper cultural connection within the school community.



Connection: A smoking ceremony led by Kauwanu Tamaru, Kaurna/Narungga Elder.

Student-led, Culture-rich, and Grounded in Place

“This all started with just planning, drawing on a piece of paper and simple ideas,” one student reflected. “I had no idea how big and how good it would be until we really started working on it.”

Cultural knowledge was embedded in the learning, with Aboriginal perspectives on plants, meeting places, shelter, animals, language, and history flowing through each session. These were all centred around the students' vision of creating a Palti Circle, or yarning space, an idea originally explored with Kauwanu Tamaru.

The same student continued, “The Palti Circle was all about inclusivity. We wanted to make a place where everyone could be included, and that was our underlying goal throughout the whole process. Not once did that change.”

In addition to strengthening their cultural connections, our weekly sessions were led by students' varied interests, from exploring the role of art and design in garden spaces to planning and construction. As part of this, a public artist was invited to speak with the students, followed by Kaurua landscape designer Ross Alison, who

worked closely with them over several weeks to bring the garden to life. Under Ross's guidance, students and educators carved a shield from a Karra (River Red Gum) at the school entrance and etched their designs onto the seating and sculptures within the space.

“The shield cutting was a cool part of the project 'cause it's a nice part of Aboriginal culture that we can display here.” said another student.

Sessions reflected students' diverse interests, from art and design to planting and construction. “Being able to do hands-on stuff... you don't really get to do that at school,” one student commented.

Students saw their ideas take shape, creating something meaningful for their community. “All my ideas actually being made in real life... knowing that I made this. It's something to be proud of,” shared a classmate.

For many, the connection went deeper than the build itself. The garden became a place to return to — a calm, familiar space that reflected their contributions and sense of belonging.

“Even though I'll graduate,” a student reflected, “it'll be like a part of me is still connected to the school.”



Cultural Connection: *The carving of the Kaurna shield was a powerful cultural and creative moment. Led by Kaurna man and landscape designer Ross Alison, students took part in an ancient practice, cutting the shield from a River Red Gum on the garden site, and gifting the final piece back to the school as a symbol of reconciliation and respect.*



“To cut the shield from the tree... all students involved had a turn... and now it will hang proudly in the front office.”



Creating a Cultural Legacy: Students paint the Kaurna shield, now proudly displayed in the school's front office as a symbol of culture and connection.

Shaping the Shield: An Observational Story by Alan Peat

From Alan Peat's perspective, the school's Wellbeing Leader, the shield-cutting session was a powerful example of experiential learning in action. Watching students engage with real tools and a culturally significant practice revealed how hands-on experiences can deepen understanding, spark connection, and foster shared pride.

What unfolded on the day

Ross guided students through cutting a traditional Kaurna shield from the bark of a gum tree. He spoke about its cultural significance and explained the process before giving every student a chance to take part. Using basic tools, they learned to cut the shield carefully and respectfully.

Students loved the hands-on experience. They found it emotionally connecting to both culture and learning. Some described it as "fantastic fun," said they "loved learning new skills," and felt proud to be involved. A few stepped into leadership roles, helping others join in. Most were in awe when the shield released from the trunk, an unforgettable moment.

One of the most powerful aspects was how all students came together to work toward a shared goal. Everyone was engaged. Everyone contributed. Students also heard Ross's story of reconnecting with Kaurna culture, which gave many of them hope.

Hands-on learning with experts makes a big difference. It sparks curiosity, invites questions, and opens doors for deeper learning. This experience could lead into exploring the art and making of the shield, its history, or connections with places like the Botanic Gardens or Tandanya.

More than anything, this was something everyone could be part of. The Cultural Connections Garden will continue to be a space where all cultures feel welcome, and where the school community grows stronger together.





A Project Within a Project: Jarvis and the Possum Box

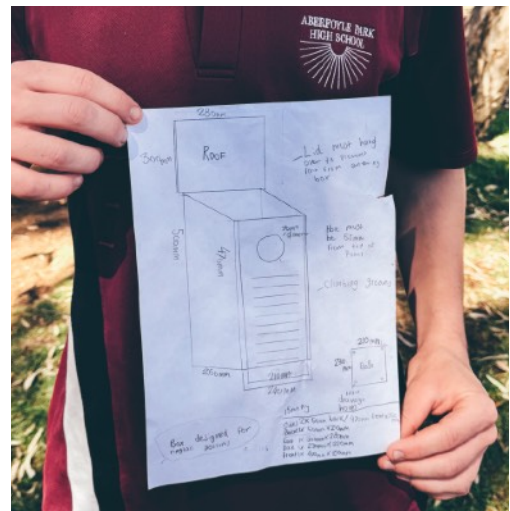
Some students found their rhythm in digging paths or shaping the layout. For Jarvis, it was the quiet focus of creating something purposeful and enduring. His contribution, a possum box, blended creativity, care, and real-world problem-solving.

Jarvis initiated the project himself, bringing in design sketches and early ideas developed at home with his father. It quickly became a way to follow his curiosity and apply what he was learning in a meaningful way.

“I stumbled across the idea and fell in love with it straight away,” he explained. “It was something I designed... and I learned as I went.”

With support from educators, Jarvis navigated the challenges of creating a safe, functional habitat. This hands-on involvement gave him a strong sense of ownership and pride: “I had so much help, but it was my project. Being able to do it myself made it special.”

For Jarvis, this was more than just another school task. It was a chance to follow an interest, take responsibility, and leave something behind that others could appreciate.





Co-Design: Student drawings inspired the designs etched onto the garden's seating and sculptures.

Summary

Nigel Lockyer, the school's Aboriginal Community Education Officer, shared how deeply the cultural garden project has impacted both students and the wider school community. For many who may have had limited opportunities to explore their cultural heritage, the project sparked conversations and encouraged students to speak with their elders and families about culture and identity.

Nigel said, "It's starting that conversation, which is a really important first step."

He's seen genuine shifts in how students engage—with more curiosity, confidence, and pride as they watch their own designs come to life in a garden they visit every day. "I run a lot of programs, but this one's been the most impactful so far," he said. At the opening ceremony of the garden, Nigel shared:

"This initiative is not just about cultivating plants, it's about nurturing understanding, respect, and connection to the rich cultural heritage of the Aboriginal people. The garden serves as a living classroom where students have the opportunity to learn about traditional Aboriginal knowledge, sustainable practices, and the deep spiritual connection to the land. It is a place where stories are shared and cultural practices are celebrated, fostering a sense of unity and respect among all who visit.

I am immensely proud of our students who have dedicated their time and energy to this project. Their enthusiasm and commitment have been truly inspiring. Through their hard work, they have created a space that honours the past while looking forward to the future of reconciliation and mutual respect. This garden is a testament to what can be achieved

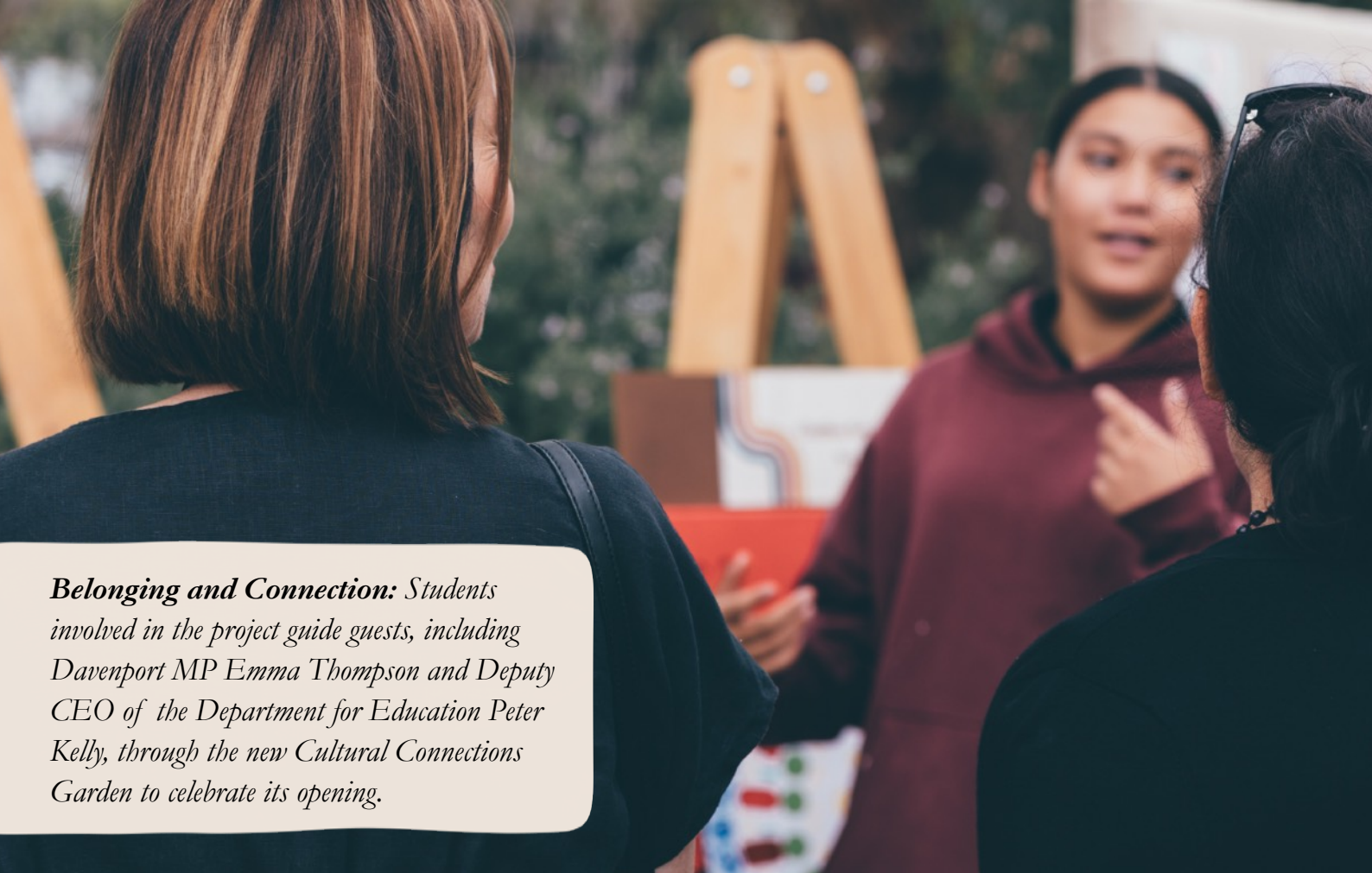
when we work together with open hearts and minds. It stands as a symbol of hope and a reminder of the importance of preserving and celebrating Aboriginal culture."

Principal Marion Coady emphasised the garden's significance as a place for cultural connection and active student participation. She explained that it builds on last year's mural project, deepening the school's recognition of Aboriginal heritage. The project also created opportunities for students who had previously been hesitant to engage with their culture to explore it through co-creating the garden alongside peers and community members.

"It's the co-construction and the learning along the way, the workshops they have done, the carving of the shield, the design, the selection of plants — they have been actively involved in all of the decisions about where we've got to and where we're going in relation to this development."



Co-Design Inspiration: Student drawings inspire artwork carvings



Belonging and Connection: Students involved in the project guide guests, including Davenport MP Emma Thompson and Deputy CEO of the Department for Education Peter Kelly, through the new Cultural Connections Garden to celebrate its opening.

On wellbeing, Principal Coady noted:

“Wellbeing is such a complex issue. What I’ve seen for some of our students is that they have come out of their shell. They have contributed in ways that have enabled us to see their skills, abilities, and interests much more broadly than we may have before.”

At the opening ceremony, organised and hosted by students, pride and ownership were on full display. Students stood before peers, staff, Elders, and community guests to share their experiences and reflections on the project. For some, it was their first time speaking to such a large audience — a moment of bravery and confidence born from genuine connection to the work they had helped create.

Ross Alison noted that when they first met, the students were quiet — so quiet compared to the confident voices at the garden’s opening. “Through this connection, I’ve seen them rise up, have confidence within themselves, know who they are, and find this connection to Country and to Kaurua.”

Nature Play SA CEO Jason Tyndall praised their willingness to speak, noting that “talking in front of people can be really, really tricky... it takes a lot of courage to do that.”



Learner Agency: Jarvis shares the possum box he designed and built with Davenport MP Emma Thompson, explaining its features and how it can support local wildlife.



As student MC Jayden declared, “These are the leaders... who have led from the front and created this amazing place for students. Teamwork was the beating heart of this project.”

In building the garden, students turned shared ideas into a shared space — finding pride not just in what they made, but in making it together.

“I think everyone can come in and enjoy the garden, and they’ll be able to enjoy it for a very long time. It’s been made to last with natural materials. I think people will keep coming back and enjoying it for years to come.”



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