In 2009 the St Francis Xavier (SFX) school community noted that its school playgrounds were worn, rusty, and unable to cater for the growing needs and interests of students. Parent, teacher and School Board member, Fiona Angelatos, found that the play spaces in Steiner schools were constructed from natural materials in keeping with the local environment, and were of be-spoke design. The potential higher play value and safety compliance of this approach was researched.

Typical of many Western Australian schools, SFX had vast areas of lawn, and some isolated playgrounds and sandpits. Whilst providing high energy play opportunities, there was little scope for children to engage in creative or exploratory play. The range of textures, scents, sounds, surfaces was very limited, and children had few places to engage their curiosity, and none for solitary or quiet play.

Conversations with the Principal, Therese Asplin, and school community parents, drew support for the development of new, fun, natural play spaces. Students were consulted for ideas, and schools with similar play spaces were contacted for advice and feedback. A committee was formed, and a project was proposed to the School Board, Parent and Friends body (P&F) and school staff.

Making the dream a reality

Photos of local and international examples of natural play spaces; sample design plans; and a summary of research, were provided at meetings, information sessions and on mobile display boards around the school. Comparisons were made between conventional pre-fabricated playgrounds and natural ones, and the latter were found to be of greater cost-benefit, and to provide greater play opportunities. Using site photos and an ideas/wish list and an initial fee of $1500, design plans were created by Bernhard Kaiser, Perth-based owner of Natural Play Solutions, with the support of the SFX community. The P&F committed funds for construction of five new playgrounds to be built over as many years.
Grant opportunities were sought to no avail, so the committee developed a fundraising programme that included: a sponsorship project whereby families donated and gained publicity through the school website, newsletter and plaque recognition; P&F fundraising activities, and an inventory of families and businesses who would donate in-kind support.

While this process was underway, the committee implemented immediate strategies to increase play opportunities. Costumes and second-hand clothing were gathered for dressing up and role playing opportunities; baskets of used kitchen implements and sandpit digging and construction materials (pipes, spades etc) were collected; blackboard donations were sought and mounted on walls throughout the school; and traditional schoolyard games like ‘elastics’ were inspiration for parents to make sets, and teach the game during play breaks.

“A playground should be like a small-scale replica of the world, with as many as possible of the sensory experiences to be found in the world included in it”. (Dattner. 1969)

**The resulting play spaces**

In 2010, Bernhard constructed ‘Southgates’ with assistance of the school groundsman and parents. This was complemented by the completion of ‘Chapman Valley’ in 2011. The following materials were donated to reduce playground construction fees and the cost of other materials: limestone blocks, rock boulders, a large tree log with accompanying truck and crane, a used rubber conveyor belt, and tyres. Bernhard used logs sourced from remnant school bush, and adjusted the playgrounds to fit with existing buildings and play sites. Students were also involved in garden planting, and helping create a mosaic area with parent volunteers.

The Southgates playground, designed for senior students, incorporates elements for climbing (tree log and branch construction, rope bridge and ‘wobble walk’), swinging (circle tyre swing), and exploration (‘talking pipe’ connecting underground by two speaking tube-ends) and socialising (wall seating, circle tyre swing).

The Chapman Valley playground provides opportunities to junior students for water play (pump, channels, mud dish), sand play (chutes, scoops, sieves), music play (pipes, ‘thongaphone’, bells, mini-orb), climbing (logs, tyres), exploration (wall with cut outs and coloured glass bricks, ‘talking pipe’, native plants attracting insects and birds).

The school looks forward to the construction of the remaining three play spaces. This will include a musical and gathering area for senior students. Younger students will be given access to nooks and crannies of ‘grown’ (vine covered) cubby houses at one playground, and labyrinthine contemplative spaces in another.

*Prepared by: Fiona Angelatos, Coordinator Regional Operations, Mid West Education Regional Office, April 2013.*