St Stephen’s Early Learning Centre Play Space

Background

- In 2010 St Stephen’s primary school (Duncraig) was in the process of building a new Early Learning Centre (ELC) for Kindy to Year 2 students. The Principal expressed a desire for the ELC to have more creative and nature-based outdoor playspaces. The school was proactive in wanting to align with the then new National Quality Framework for early learning, which refers to the need for outdoor spaces to include some natural elements and materials, and for outdoor (and indoor spaces) to be designed and organised to engage every child in quality experiences in both built and natural environments.

- The Child’sPlay research team (Lisa Wood, Karen Martin) met with members of the school leadership to discuss the merits of the school opting for a more natural and experiential playspace design. Queries relating to the relative cost, maintenance, safety and ease of procurement were discussed, along with the benefits for students and teachers of the school taking a new approach to the design and use of outdoor playspaces.

- An interactive session was held with students from the Year 2 class to get their input and ideas for outdoor play spaces at the new ELC. Children were asked about aspects of play and playgrounds they enjoyed, and in groups, were shown pictures of play areas and playgrounds. Each group was asked to select their favourite ten play areas and play areas as well as playgrounds considered least appealing.

What the students said....

- Overall a main reoccurring theme was a desire for more imaginative play facilitated by natural play objects. Elements such as trees, tree-houses, stepping stones, and items such as rocks, leaves and twigs were identified as popular. Spaces that enable games such as hide and seek were desired, with one student lamenting that the best place they had to hide at present was behind a rubbish bin.

- Positive play experiences associated with this nature-based equipment were reported by children, such as;
  
  “A treehouse or a cubby... You can make things, put things in there”

  “Stepping stones and you can walk along them”

  “If you had leaves you could stick them onto you and be in disguise for hide and seek”

  • Although children were somewhat interested in traditional play equipment such as monkey bars and swings, they were still less enthusiastic about such features – with many of them describing them as ‘boring’ or ‘the same at every playground’.

  • Students wanted active play opportunities, favouring elements such as a wobble bridge, climbable surfaces, tyres to clamber on and ‘spider web’ structures for climbing.

  • Children strongly favoured sand as a preference for surfacing beneath playground equipment. Their rationale was that it was softer, they could dig in it and make sandcastles. Soft-fall was considered not to be soft at all and children reported being hurt when falling onto the surface.
Development/ Design of the play spaces
Student suggestions were incorporated into the design brief given to the playground designer (Berndt).

The architects overseeing the building of the new ELC ensured some trees were preserved for incorporation into the play areas. Two natural playground areas were created within the ELC (one for Kindy/Pre-primary, one for year 1 and 2).

The ELC opened for students in 2011, with the playspaces completed mid-2011, however these continue to evolve.

Not just a static fixed place to play...........

The ELC staff has been innovative in finding ways to keep the play environment fresh and stimulating for students. This is important not only to enhance play, but also to keep children occupied, as there is not much room for running play.

Loose materials and objects (eg. fabric, pipes, sticks, and rope) are often brought out for students to incorporate into their play – much of this is recycled materials. The loose materials enhance many aspects of child development, including cooperation between children, problem solving, concentration, independent play not requiring teacher intervention, and opportunities for quiet and active play.

Messy ‘dirty’ play is something modern children often miss out on, but the school is addressing this creatively. Messy Days and Wet Days have been great events in the Pre-primary and Kindy areas. The children come to school dressed for the occasion and have marvellous fun squishing sand, mud and slime, throwing wet sponges and splashing each other.

Feedback from students....
“We have chairs”
“We have rocks”
“We have slides”
“We build lots of cubby houses and have fun”

Feedback from staff about the ELC play areas
After school many children and parents are staying to use the playground.
Children seem to be happier and as they are not limited to playing ball games, the play is less rough and competitive.
There appears to be less fighting amongst peers in the playground.
Introducing equipment in stages has meant the children are excited when new pieces are added.

The children are much more interested in creating their own structures, for example re-arranging pieces of retic. pipe or building cubbies

A teacher new to the school commented;
‘I have never seen so many children so engaged in their play’

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