JPE Design Studio would like to acknowledge the collaborative group who guided the development of the concept design for the Campbelltown Preschool outdoor learning zone.

Site leader, Sharon Devlin and the educators (both kindergarten and primary school), Community Development Coordinator, Fiona Pulford, Early Childhood Leader, Suzie Cottle, and the Kindergarten’s Project Steering Committee.
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Introduction

“Research across the world supports the view that outdoor play is fundamental to childhood. Opportunities for outdoor play and immersion in nature are essential to the health and wellbeing of children, helping them to develop to their full potential.

Further research evidence demonstrates that well designed outdoor areas not only connect children with the natural world but support learning and development.” (taken from the ‘Project Initiation Document’ PID)

In 2014 JPE Design Studio was engaged to undertake the analysis, consultation, design and delivery of 5 selected DECD preschools, as part of a larger government initiative. Following the 2013 report “Re-imagining Childhood – The inspiration of Reggio Emilia principles in South Australia” prepared by Thinker In Residence, Carla Rinaldi the Government of South Australia committed in March 2014 to provide more opportunities for children to learn and connect with nature and the outdoors. The delivery of new Nature Play based outdoor learning areas in preschools is an important step in providing these opportunities.

Five sites were selected as the ‘concept leaders’ of this new focus on outdoor play and learning. These five sites have also been selected to champion the exploration and demonstration of key principles and values of the following initiatives;

- Madge Sexton Kindergarten, Reggio Emilia
- Melaleuca Park Kindergarten, Better Together and Schools as Community Hubs
- Campbelltown Preschool, Children’s Voice
- Sturt Street Children’s Centre, Schools as Community Hubs
- Wandana Child Parent Centre, Involve Me

The project objectives which have been set to guide the focus and direction of the outdoor learning areas are listed below;

1. Demonstrate the principles and values of authentic engagement with children, families and the local community
2. Strengthen communities through the design of culturally appropriate environments
3. To redevelop the outdoor environments in each of the sites to demonstrate the philosophy and practice of nature play in outdoor learning environments
4. To develop a space that fosters interaction, autonomy, explorations, curiosity and communication and offered as a places for children and adults to research together
5. Illustrate how and why the curriculum and the children drive the environment – to understand and promote the relationship between the outdoor learning environment and children’s learning and the pedagogical practices that enhance children’s learning

Ultimately this project will allow each site to gain the knowledge to support other preschool educators across the state as well as continually engage with their local community to help connect with nature.
What is Nature Play?

This project recognises the importance of outdoor play and supports the recent establishment of Nature Play SA, which focuses on encouraging not just schools, but families and communities to connect back with nature.

The fundamental outcome for nature play is encouraging children to play outside and reconnect with their local natural environment. JPE Design Studio’s role, together with the site leaders and site educators, is to redefine an outdoor space which promotes learning in and through nature via play.

The following overarching principles have been developed, underpinning the thinking behind key design moves and outcomes for each site:

1. Use natural materials where possible; stone, timber, water, plants and soil.
2. Create flexible spaces with movable, mouldable parts, which can change and adapt to each child’s imagination.
3. Provide spaces which encourage research, investigation, manipulation and discovery.
4. Create changeable natural, living systems which evolve with each season, ie productive gardens, water pools, dry creeks.
5. Create flexible spaces for a range of learning styles and curricular.

Nature play is defined as a learning process, engaging children in working together to develop physical skills, to exercise their imaginations, to stimulate poetic expression, to begin to understand the workings of the world around them.

(Executive Summary, Nature Play & Learning Places)
Melaleuca Park Theme: Schools as Community Hubs & Better Together

Essentially, engagement with the community is an integral part to all projects to determine the appropriate direction or outcome.

Engagement helps to develop strong communities; it gives them the confidence to participate and develops their interest in being part of the solution.

(Better Together, Principles of Engagement)

It is fundamental to the longevity of the project, to ensure community and family ownership and therefore respect for the outdoor space. Engaging with the community can determine what challenges will be faced, identify better outcomes and therefore help design and implement a supported design solution.

What is Melaleuca Park Kindergarten doing to engage with the community and establish themselves as a Community Hub?

Using this project as a catalyst to implement consultation with families and community, Melaleuca Park Kindergarten have identified how the community could utilise the outdoor spaces whilst recognising the importance of engagement and community ownership to help control vandalism and miss-treatment of the yard – which has been identified as a concern.

One of the biggest challenges facing Melaleuca Park Kindergarten was convincing the parents and families of the benefits of nature play. In saying this, Melaleuca Park Kindergarten have found support in their local council stakeholders who are currently undertaking a review of some existing reserves within the community where they can implement the nature play principles and possibly aid in changing some community perceptions.
Some key initiatives the Kindergarten is exploring to further establish themselves as a community hub are the following:

- Playgroup and community centre adjacent the Kindergarten
- Incorporated outdoor learning zone for shared use between playgroup and kindergarten
- Open use for junior primary children in controlled times
- Open use for other community groups and families for birthday parties, picnics and the like

What does this mean for the Melaleuca Park Kindergarten outdoor development?

Considering the requirements, the outdoor learning space will therefore include the following:

- flexible and adaptable spaces
- a range of play opportunities, from open active spaces to quieter, secluded spaces, in addition to what the junior primary play space is offering
- opportunity for multiple groups to use the space at the one time without feeling crowded
- offer a range of learning challenges, surpassing language and cultural barriers
- creative spaces for interaction and community/family group activities
The Site

This section provides a thorough description of Melaleuca Park Kindergarten existing outdoor learning environment, its wider context and important aspects of the outdoor space to retain and build on.
Local Context

Melaleuca Park Kindergarten is located adjacent the Melaleuca Park Primary School within the south-eastern suburbs of Mount Gambier. The site is located off Boandik Terrace.

Local reserves and Mt Gambier show grounds are nearby features, as well as the Blue Lake which sits approximately 1km from the site.

The site and surrounding landscape is the land of the Bunganditj people. Their stories and how they use the landscape is important to recognise and capture in the development of the design response.
Site Analysis

To provide a thorough understanding of the existing outdoor learning environment, the below analysis has been divided into 5 key headings:
- Natural shade
- Views and Topography
- Access
- Built form and landscape connection
- Site Photos and Descriptions

Natural Shade
A small grove of birch tree is located to the rear of the site and is an aesthetic landscape feature to keep and build upon. The junior primary has a large eucalypt within their grounds which provides excellent natural shade and an important landscape feature to retain.

Views and Topography
The site is flat with the exception of an existing mound to the junior primary zone. Sight lines are clear across the site.

Access
Pedestrian access can be achieved from either Boandik Terrace or Ayers Street either through the Kindergarten building or through an existing access gate to the north of the site. Vehicular access from Ayers Street is possible however a more formalised car park is to the front of the kindergarten, or southern side of the kindergarten off Boandik Terrace.

Built Form & Landscape Connection
Double doors from the building to the outdoor space offer good indoor to outdoor connectivity. Windows to this edge also provide a good connection to the space.

Natural Shade
A small grove of birch tree is located to the rear of the site and is an aesthetic landscape feature to keep and build upon. The junior primary has a large eucalypt within their grounds which provides excellent natural shade and an important landscape feature to retain.
Site Photos & Descriptions

Covered Sand Pit
The sand pit is covered by an enclosed structure which makes the space uninviting and dark. The overhead structure will be retained, however the sides will be removed and the sand pit will be relocated.

Swings
The swings will be retained and relocated.

Birch Grove
The existing birch grove is a great natural feature of the site and therefore will be retained.

Birch Grove
The existing birch grove is a great natural feature of the site and therefore will be retained.

Verandah
The verandah works well connecting the outdoor area to the indoor. This area will be retained and incorporated into the design proposal.

Fake Turf
The fake turf is not well-liked and used due to current soil issues. All fake turf will be removed.

Existing Slide
The existing slide is well used but restricts play opportunities. This slide will be removed within the design proposal.

Veggie Patch
The veggie patches are a great asset to the Kindergarten, where possible productive gardens will be relocated and incorporated into the design proposal.

Mound (Junior Primary)
An existing mound sits within the junior primary outdoor area. A good natural feature of the site and well-liked, this area will be reviewed and incorporated as a varying play area for the Kindergarten to use.

Sand Pit (Junior Primary)
A large sand pit with an inner and outer boundary sits within the junior primary outdoor area. The sand pit will be reviewed and incorporated as a varying play area for the Kindergarten to use.
The following section outlines the key site issues and opportunities. By highlighting specific site issues and positive opportunities this can help guide an appropriate, site specific design response. The key issues and opportunities for the Melaleuca Park Kindergarten have been listed below.

**Issues**

1. **There is asphalt and road base under much of the outdoor area:** Currently fake grass has been provided due to inability for anything else to grow in this area.

2. **The enclosed and undercover sand pit is not very popular and not very appealing:** The sandpit is not well utilised, it is in a dark, unappealing location. A new informal sandpit has been implemented outside of this covered zone which contributes to its lack of use.

3. **Outdoor area is quite small:** The area for outdoor play is small and therefore new play opportunities are restricted.

4. **Vandalism:** Past vandalism issues have arisen to the outdoor space and this will need to be monitored and managed in the future.

5. **The site can become very wet in winter:** Due to the high volume of rainfall to Mount Gambier and the soil type the outdoor zone does get boggy and almost unusable after large rain events.

6. **Community acceptance of the benefits of nature play and risk play:** An issue which the Kindergarten educators are working through is the perception of nature play along with the perceived risk benefit associated to the local community. With new nature play parks being implemented within Mount Gambier, these perceptions will soon change.
Opportunities

1. **Connect the community facility, kindergarten and school through the outdoor learning/nature play areas**: By using the project process to start the conversation, there is a real opportunity to further engage with the community providing a loved community facility.

2. **Utilise the adjacent school land to extend the opportunities for outdoor learning**: A majority of the junior primary children may have siblings or friends within the Kindergarten, therefore this relationship and use of both outdoor learning areas is important to consider.

3. **Connection to country, Input from the Bunganditj community**: It is important to recognise the Bunganditj people within the outdoor space design to enrich the design response and give greater meaning to such elements such as plant species selection, landscape arrangement and materials.

4. **Tie into the ‘Pack a picnic’ initiative. Outdoor learning areas as a picnic site**: As part of an initiative developed by the DECD’s Learning Together Program, the outdoor learning areas could be further developed as community spaces and used for picnic sites.
Consultation Process & Findings

An important component in the process of developing the ideas for the outdoor learning areas has been broad consultation involving the children, families, educators, nature play specialists and the community.

This has not only influenced the outcomes, but provided a means to inform and educate families and the broader community on the importance of outdoor learning environments and the principles and benefits of nature based play.

Melaleuca Park Kindergarten is situated in an area of Mount Gambier where parents’ aspirations for quality play experiences for their children generally lean towards a McDonalds’ playground. It was recognised early on by Sharon Devlin (preschool Director), Suzie Cottle (Early Childhood Leader) and Fiona Pulford (Community Development Coordinator) that one of the biggest challenges would be educating the kindergarten community about the benefits of nature play and that large, expensive, colourful pieces of play equipment aren’t necessarily better, particularly through the eyes of the child.

JPE first met with the kindergarten on the 5th November to understand the site, its context, the community and the aspirations of the kindergarten in relation to outdoor learning opportunities. Following from this, the kindergarten embarked upon a range of consultation, including setting up a steering committee for the project including staff, parents, council and other stakeholders.

A display was prepared in the foyer of the kindergarten showing the outdoor space in its current condition along with examples of nature play spaces. Families were invited to comment and encouraged to share their thoughts and ideas.

The kindergarten curriculum focussed on nature play and the children were consulted about their ideas and thoughts. They were also taken on excursions to some recent nature play initiatives by the City of Mount Gambier including the development of the old railyards which incorporates a number of nature play opportunities.
A workshop on nature play for families, kindergarten and school staff was facilitated by Niki Buchan to further explore the benefits of risk play and nature play.

Meetings with pre-entry families were also arranged to inform them of the project, its objectives, and to invite comment and feedback. A facebook site was also used to generate discussion and share ideas.

Ongoing consultation with the adjacent primary school with regards to shared space and use of the kindergarten also occurred.

On the 26th November, JPE facilitated a workshop with Sharon Devlin, Suzie Cottle and Fiona Pulford to determine priorities and begin to develop spatial arrangement diagrams for their site. Later that day another workshop was held to further develop the spatial arrangement and obtain further input into the concept development. The second workshop included other stakeholders including junior primary staff, members of the steering committee that the Kindergarten organised and Council’s architect, who was heavily involved in the redevelopment of the railyards.

Following the workshop a concept plan was developed and provided to the kindergarten for feedback to guide the final concept master plan.

In early February 2015 two ‘Community Conversation’ sessions were held at the kindergarten to enable further sharing of ideas.

Consultation with the community is still occurring and Fiona Pulford and a local police officer are undertaking a door knock in the local community to share the project further with those that may still not be aware, and to collect more ideas. Where possible this additional information will feed into the design development phase.
Key Design Principles

In addition to the overarching nature play design principles outlined at the beginning of this report, the following design principles, specific to the Melaleuca Park Kindergarten will guide the development of the outdoor learning space design as well as further development for the school.
**Community Ownership**
Support community engagement where possible throughout the development of the project.

**Connection to Country**
Connect to the Bunganditj culture and use local landscape materials and plants which are unique to the Mount Gambier landscape.

**Engage with Adjacent School Land**
Provide opportunity for a strengthened relationship between the junior primary outdoor learning area and kindergarten outdoor learning area.
Concept Design

Final Site Master Plan

The adjacent concept design for the Melaleuca Park Kindergarten outdoor zone provides the school with a master plan for further development surpassing this project scope. With the consideration of project budgets and deliverables there are some items which may not be realised however the master plan provides a future vision for the site which can be expanded and implemented when possible.

The master plan has been developed using the data and information gathered in consultation with the Kindergarten as well as analysis undertaken reviewing the existing site parameters.

The design response has been developed around a key story, the ‘Meeting Place’.

‘The Meeting Place’ is a special place within the Melaleuca Kindergarten. It is a place where the community can meet and play, it is a place where relationships grow and stories are told.

Inspiration from the Mt Gambier landscape is essential to the success of the design for the new outdoor learning space and reinforces the importance of connection to land and country.

The new outdoor learning space will introduce key themes of spirituality, cultural influence and understanding.

The following numbers provide further understanding and description regarding key areas within the Melaleuca Park Kindergarten outdoor space.

1. New realigned car park adjacent Community Centre.
2. Irrigated lawn for community use and flexible play.
3. Cubby structure to encourage social and imaginative play.
4. New maintenance access gates from car park for easy access to and from the outdoor space.
5. Retained kindergarten swing relocated adjacent the undercover area and positioned to face into the outdoor learning space giving children the opportunity to swing and look out over the play space.
6. Balancing, climbing and elevation using rocks, red gum logs, dolomite boulders and stumps.
7. Undercover area is retained with opportunity to upgrade the veranda structure to resolve leaking between building and veranda.
8. Loose parts play, providing opportunity to make a cubby, collect rocks and sticks, research and discover.
9. Climbing tree is retained.
10. Wooden craypot adventure climbing structure. (Designed and sourced through Bush Repair Cultural Education)
11. Sandpit surrounded by rocks and a timber platform against the fenceline to allow for paperbark texture, perspex and other sensory items to be integrated.
12. Pumbable water source to provide water to both the wetland and sand play. The water could be pumped into buckets or run over the rocks to create different textures and play experiences.
13. Wetland zone integrating large and small rocks, gravels, pebbles and shell grit in some areas to provide another texture for imaginative play. The planting types are predominately coastal planting to the shell grit zones and reed and rush planting to the main wetland area.
14. Boardwalk to main sensory path, accessible to all and providing a change in surface type and experience.
15. Mud play zone with large limestone slabs for outdoor kitchen play and bush tucker planting to the edges for potion making and opportunity for local flora education. Large sandstone stepping stones could be integrated to the mudstone providing opportunity for references of flora/fauna to be integrated. (In consultation with Bush Repair Cultural Education)
16. Butterfly and bird attracting sensory bush garden with an integrated cubby and secluded sitting spot.
17. ‘The Meeting Place’ story telling and outdoor teaching space with a Sheoak tree and mounded backdrop and log or rough stone seating surrounding a river sand fire pit.
18. Irrigated lawn space for active and open play.
19. Raised water play element to express water movement and flow into the wetland as a play element and learning tool. Climbers to the back of the water wall to create a green wall.
20. Productive gardens in raised planters.
21. Orchard space extending into the junior primary space providing visual connection to the kindergarten play space.
22. Sensory gate and fence (appropriately sized for children) incorporating mirrors, blackboards, music walls, green walls to both sides of the fence for junior primary and kindergarten interaction.
23. Existing junior primary sandpit upgraded to include rocks and sensory planting to promote more imaginative play. A storage box could also be integrated to store sand pit play elements.
24. Existing turf mound with new tunnel to provide another play experience.
25. Paving to the junior primary play space extended to create a complete trike track.
new path connecting car park to junior primary play

future formalised carpark

future community space

temporary kindergarten building

junior primary covered outdoor play

primary school oval adjacent
Precedent Imagery

The imagery shown captures key design ideas, varying finishes, and materials proposed within the design response.

Numbers correspond with those on the concept plan.
Next Steps

Following the endorsement of the concept master plan, the design will be further developed and detailed, and documentation drawings prepared to enable the works to be tendered.

The tender process and subsequent procurement of contractors will be undertaken through the Department of Planning, Transport and Infrastructure (DPTI).

Following the appointment of a contractor, a start-up meeting will be held with the site leader to coordinate site access and sequencing of works to minimise disruptions to day-to-day operations and children’s access to outdoor areas.