

Sabbatical Report

**School Outdoor Environments:
Their ability to meet the needs, particularly well-being needs, of emerging adolescent**

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Acknowledgements:

Waimea Intermediate Board of Trustees, management team and staff for allowing me to spend ten weeks exploring this topic. This was a real privilege and I thank them and the Ministry of Education for that.

Principals and staff in a number of schools that spent time sharing the stories of their outdoor environments with me. A number of other schools were visited out of school hours and in weekends and holidays without staff input. I especially thank the principals who spent time with me outlining their approaches. I have not listed the schools visited. Readers of this are more than welcome to contact me if they would like more detail.

NZEI deserves recognition for encouraging the Ministry of Education to fund sabbaticals for primary principals.

Executive Summary:

This report identifies the need for a more focused approach to the development and management of school outdoor environments to better meet the diverse needs, including well-being needs, of students during break times.

Purpose

The project looks at the ways that school, especially middle school, outdoor environments have developed and been adapted over time to better meet the needs, particularly well-being needs, of emerging adolescents.

Rationale

The drive for this study was a desire to investigate ways in which the areas on schools' immediate sites outside of the buildings have been developed to positively impact on how students use those areas.

Background

Several years ago at Waimea Intermediate it was identified that there was a need for a more engaging outdoor environment. Initially it was felt that this would be achieved with the installation of a new playground/fitness facility seen in many similar schools. Three years ago the school developed a 'Student Well-being' project with the guidance of Group Special Education (GSE) to enhance student well-being across the school. While not primarily focused on the outdoor environment this project drew together previous planning towards improving the outdoor environment. Outcomes of the year long project continued to grow and spark further initiatives and outcomes in the subsequent years with a significant impact on student well-being and engagement across the whole school. During this process the sabbatical focus was developed.

Methodology

A number of approaches were used to inquire into this topic including the following;

- Researching the identified needs of this age group.
- Looking into what guidelines there are for New Zealand schools in developing their outdoor environments.
- A similar search for guidelines in another education jurisdiction; the state of Victoria, Australia.
- Contact and visiting schools and their principals to discuss approaches to the outdoor environment development and management.
- Visiting a number of other schools – some targeted and some random to look for evidence of developments.
- Visiting four Victorian schools.

Findings

Student Needs: The needs of this age group are clearly identified in research. The needs outlined in Stewart & Nolan still stands the test of time while other lists collected by Prendergast are typical of many modern interpretations from the 21st century. The significant difference is that Stewart & Nolan identify the needs of the students whilst other more recent definitions focus on characteristics of successful schools or programmes.

Needs of Emerging Adolescents

- competence and achievement
- self exploration and definition
- social interaction with peers and adults
- meaningful participation in school and community
- routines and limits and structure
- diversity and challenge

Stewart & Nolan (1992) *The Middle School: Essential Education for Emerging Adolescent*. Massey University Press

Characteristics of Successful Schools for Young Adolescents

- educators who value working with this age group and are prepared to do so.
- courageous and collaborative leadership
- a shared vision that guides decision
- an inviting, supportive and safe environment
- high expectations for every member of the learning community
- students and teachers engaged in active learning
- an adult advocate for every student
- school-initiated family and community partnerships

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Programme elements

- curriculum that is relevant, challenging, integrative and exploratory
- multiple learning approaches that respond to students' diversity
- assessment and evaluation programmes that promote quality learning
- organisational structures that support meaningful relationships and learning
- school-wide efforts and policies that foster health, wellness and safety
- multifaceted guidance and support services

National Middle School Association (2003). *This we believe: Successful schools for adolescents*. NMSA, USA. [via Prendergast & Bahr 2005]

A highly effective outdoor environment can help support the provisions to meet the needs of this age group in many ways. In developing positive social interactions with peers the outdoor environment should provide a range of contexts for students to mix in active and passive play and interaction – both structured and unstructured. Physical challenges can be catered for by wild environments, age appropriate installations, healthy expectations and provisioning of equipment for play. Guidance and well-being needs and strategies are supported by an engaging outdoor environment – students can find contexts that suit their needs and develop confidence with support to move gradually into other contexts.

Key Concepts:

There were many differences in the outdoor environments being provided for students and, while there is a need to be cautious in assessing them from limited investigation and without more in-depth understanding of each situation, I have listed the key concepts that I identified. These relate to trends that were identified or possible explanations for what was seen in many situations. After these there is a second list of specific components identified as contributing to effective outdoor environments.

- 1) **Advantage & Disadvantage:** Many schools are significantly advantaged or disadvantaged by historical factors. These include the sites they occupy, the time they were established, the apparent approach to their establishment, people or groups who have been involved in the school over time and the community they serve. Some are naturally well set up for having a constructive outdoor environment - schools with large fields, well treed areas, changes in levels and good aspects are significantly better off than some other schools.

Schools that are built in steep valleys, on the back of hillsides or in tight cluttered sites have significant challenge when it comes to providing an engaging outdoor environment. They are often in lower socio-economic areas, often due to the nature of geography of the area, which tends to compound the challenges for the development of their outdoor environment. There are a limited number of schools around the country with no grassed areas, some with no large flat areas and some with limited sunlight during winter.

- 2) **Contributing Factors:** Many schools have factors that contribute to effective outdoor environments. They may lack other components including an across the school planned approach but have an advantage because of a limited number of existing components.

Schools that have a positive component or other particular attributes have a head start in developing their outdoor environments. Taking advantage of an existing aspect can compensate for under development in other areas. Examples could be a site that has changes in levels with wooded or grassed sloped banks joining them, having a large field bordered by trees or a natural creek also provides a strong positive environment. Well organized and resourced playground play and supervision systems tend to have a similar effect.

The opportunity for all schools is to consider the range of components and how they can be developed to enhance their environment.

- 3) **Tomorrows Schools Impact:** The focus post ‘Tomorrows Schools’ by schools and their boards in trying to develop buildings to mitigate years of poor property management and meet the learning needs of modern students and the expectations of their community has in many cases taken the focus off the outdoor environments.

Community input since the early 1990s has generally been focused on governance of the key functions of the schools and in many cases has been diverted away from traditional community input which previously focused on playgrounds and outdoor environments. Many schools had excellent, although dated, examples of this with effective installations that were 20-30 years old but nothing of substance from recent years except maybe a standalone commercial challenge type playground.

The challenge, and there may be tension around it, is to bring some focus on to the outdoor environment. As buildings are developed some attention still needs to be given to the outdoor environment. Even if this is relatively minor, depending on other priorities, there should still be some focus, energy and resourcing put into it.

- 4) **Planned Approaches:** A limited number of schools have clear planned approaches to the development, management and utilization of their outdoor environment. The depth of the approaches appears to vary greatly. Some are very comprehensive and integrate a range of short and long term approaches in operational, resourcing and physical areas. These can include strategic design of the outdoor landscape for play and interaction as well as a range of resourcing approaches including installations, consumables and staffing as well as operational approaches such as timetabling, access variations, supervision models and organised activities.

Others are more operational with a focus on utilizing the existing environment through organizational approaches such as those above. Some seem to have ‘parked’ playground development and management and possibly not identified the importance it plays in the development of students and the support it can provide for learning.

- 5) **Differences:** There are many ways to develop, manage and utilize outdoor environments, no single approach or formula. Different schools have responded differently to their unique situation; their students, site, community, staff, philosophy. This is to be encouraged. Where schools bring a considered planned approach to this issue they are more likely to achieve solutions that are likely to meet the needs of their students.
- 6) **Guidance & Direction:** Guidance to schools from MOE and others in respect of outdoor environments seems scarce. Property personnel and typical school service property and project managers think about property from the building development and maintenance perspective. Attention to the outdoor environment tends to be from an access and flow perspective with some attention to courts, hard surfaces and commercial playground structures and to a lesser extent the fields. Very little attention is given to the whole outdoor environment as an interactive space for modern children. The relatively recent focus from the Ministry on quality learning environments has provided an example of what is needed in respect of the outdoor environments. This needs attention which could be led by the Ministry and involve staff expertise from within curriculum and GSE. It could also include input from professional landscape designers, school sector representatives and any other relevant professionals.

Specific Components:

There are many components that contribute to effective outdoor environments. Below are a number of components that have been identified as a result of this project. There may well be others.

- 1) **Assessment of needs.** A method, whether formal or informal, needs to be used to identify the needs of the range of students. This could range from professionally driven tools or criteria drawing on quality research outcomes right through to a simple survey approach using the experience of staff, students and community or simply looking at what other schools have identified as needs for a similar cohort. Forming a picture of what the needs of students might be will help focus the planning and can be referred back to throughout the development.
- 2) **Planning and design.** Putting a focus on design and planning can pay big dividends later on. A well directed and suitably experienced designer can bring clarity to the development, introduce new concepts and assist in exploring options before actual work is started. A quality plan can allow for considered assessment of intentions, prioritizing of projects, considering single projects within a larger plan and allowing for adjustment of later stages within the context of an overall plan.
- 3) **Stimulating landscaping.** Schools are high use public spaces and should have landscape features to the quality that can be seen in other public places. Buildings on a site with fields and courts linked by simple paths are not of a standard suitable for such a high use space. Worse still are the band-aid or hotch-potch layouts and landscaping that is seen in many schools arising out of poorly planned additions and deletions to school property over time. These have left many harsh and unsightly environments. Quality landscaping would effectively cater for flow of users, change of levels, add interest and form, include quality paving, seating, other installations and multilevel planting. They should make the environment that students move through and use daily interesting, pleasant, effective and engaging.

The retention of wild aspects of school outdoor environments has been achieved in some schools. However in many schools as they have grown, developed their property and/or catered for those with 'politically correct' views on child safety, the many typically kiwi wild elements in school playgrounds have reduced. Examples of such elements include things you would have seen in many school grounds fifty years ago; large boundary trees and hedges, creeks, undeveloped scrub land, rocky outcrops, banks and bush blocks. These provided previous generations with great kiwi landscapes. They should be valued and retained.

- 4) **Engaging installations.** A range of installations should be available to increase engagement of students. Generally most schools have fields and courts with some form of commercial or community constructed 'playgrounds' and/or "fitness', 'challenge' or 'adventure' type playgrounds. There can be many other types of installations that can be added to engage students and better meet their needs; decks, amphitheatres, creative seating, areas for students to assemble, addition or utilization of rocks, poles, creeks, bridges, trees, bush paths, boardwalks for students to move through, specific play areas to engage such as skateboard areas, cycle tracks, frisbee zones - the list could go on and on.

- 5) **Equipment Provisioning.** Most schools have systems to give students access to play equipment such as balls, bats, ropes and other traditional play & PE equipment. This can be expanded by looking for other age appropriate items. Unicycles and stilts have been used very effectively. There will be other items that could be considered; juggling balls, frisbees, kites. Some may only suit unique situations but schools should consider what may work for their students and keep their eye out for opportunities to experiment with.
- 6) **Expectations.** The expectations and ‘rules’ that schools put in place can also be empowering or limiting. Do out-of-bounds areas really need to be off limit? Playing in bush and scrub or in creeks and down banks, even climbing trees provides challenge and variety. Schools can look for age appropriate activities and expectations that may normally fit outside a school context. They should feel confident to appropriately challenge the overly ‘politically correct’ approaches to play; tackle, bullrush, cycles, high structures, tree climbing etc ...

Expectations around how students play, interact and treat each other are vital and should be reinforced by a constructive school culture and enforced by effective behavior management with inclusive restorative and consequential approaches.

- 7) **Organisations.** Systems and organisations support goals and expectations. Depending on the situation some schools have organised duty so it encourages different levels of engagement with students, sometimes around an activity. Organized inter-class games or sports practices are other examples of this. Designated zones for special activities such as skateboarding are effective too.
- 8) **Access to Indoor Spaces.** Many schools give students access to indoor environments during their break times. This effectively increases their play space options. Libraries are traditional examples but in some schools, especially intermediates, middle schools and colleges, students get access to specialist places such as performing arts blocks, art and design facilities as well as gymnasiums and science and technology spaces. These allow some students to better meet their recreational needs which may closely align with learning needs in parts of the curriculum.
- 9) **Supporting Curriculum.** The outdoor environment supports the aims and objectives of a school’s curriculum. While making links with specific learning areas was not a focus of this project, making the outdoor environment supportive of them and the whole curriculum is important. The Modern Learning Environment assessment tool encourages consideration of this but mainly just around the learning areas. Other parts of the wider curriculum, key competencies and values, are important in this context especially ‘Relating to Others’ and ‘Managing Self’. These parts of the curriculum that contribute significantly to the development of confident, connected, actively involved lifelong learners.

Implications

The implications of my findings are that more can be done to make outdoor environments effective for students.

- 1) There needs to be a full understanding of the importance of quality outdoor environments.
- 2) More attention to planning, design and management of outdoor environments.
- 3) Resources need to be allocated to the development of outdoor environments.

Conclusions

I feel that the following recommendations need to be considered by officials and schools.

- 1) Conditional assessment of outdoor environments to be made part of the 10YPP planning process. The current focus on property risks such as heating, water, drainage & power needs to be extended to bring a clear focus on engaging learning environments both inside and outside the buildings.
- 2) Assessment tools need to be developed to assist schools and consultants in assessing the merits and development needs of a school's outdoor environment. This could initially be relatively brief and included in the new Modern Learning Environments (MLE) tool. However over time a fuller more comprehensive tool could be developed to allow further exploration into the different aspects of this.

The following section with five questions on the outdoor environment could be considered for addition to the newly develop "Modern Learning Environments – School Assessment Tool".

13) Outdoor Environments		MLE answer	Rating	School priority
<i>Does the outdoor environment provide for healthy challenging play?</i>				
1	Is there appropriate balance of hard surface & grassed playground to cater for active play, sport and physical education?	Yes/No	Core	Yes/No
2	Is there a range of challenging age appropriate installations for play and active interaction?	Yes/No	Core	Yes/No
3	Do plantings allow for current & future needs – shade, play, challenge, interaction, intrigue and aesthetic appeal?	Yes/No	Core	Yes/No
4	Is there a range of formal & informal structures and form variations to support student engagement and interaction- decks, seating, platforms, quiet areas, wild areas, amphitheatres, etc ...?	Yes/No	Moderate	Yes/No
5	Do landscape elements add to flow, access, engagement and quality aesthetic appeal for visitors and users?	Yes/No	Moderate	Yes/No

- 1) Exemplars could be developed, possibly using MOE website to provide a rich collection of positive examples of successful developments of outdoor environments in a range of settings. This should cover existing schools as much as new schools. New schools often, but not always, benefit from the input of professional planners and designers. Existing schools could be provided with a large range of examples that they can use to reference their own planning from.

While this may have a property focus similar exemplars could be developed for organizational and provisioning systems. They could highlight ways schools manage their outdoor play spaces, organise access and provision play equipment.

- 2) Efforts could be made to promote the importance of outdoor environments as part of the Positive Behaviour for Learning action plan being driven by GSE.

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Definitions:

Middle School: This international name for schools catering for middle years students, generally aged 10-14, is used to describe a number of school types. In New Zealand this includes predominately intermediate schools as well as full primary schools and a limited number of Year 7-13 schools and 0-13 schools. In Australia this may include different structures including; K-12, K-6/7 and 6/7-12 schools.

Well-being: This term is used to describe the state of a student's well-being at school. It is a positive state of mind where they feel content, safe and happy with themselves and their social environment. It encompasses student behaviour and bullying.

Emerging Adolescence: Stewart & Nolan use Eichhorn's definition of what he called 'transescence' to describe the stage experienced by 'emerging adolescents'. *"The stage of development which begins prior to the onset of puberty and extends through the early stages of adolescence. Since puberty does not occur for all precisely at the same chronological age in human development, the transescence designation is based upon the many physical, social, emotional, and intellectual changes that appear prior to the puberty cycle to the time in which the body gains a practical degree of stabilization over these complex pubescent changes"*