Illawarra Primary School, Blackman’s Bay - Including students in the playground

KidsMatter Primary ‘fitted with our values’
In 2009 Illawarra Primary School was one of ten pilot schools in Tasmania that implemented the KidsMatter Early Childhood Initiative over two years. It was a logical step to introduce KidsMatter into the Primary School in 2011 after staff had had positive experience of professional learning through the pilot.

They valued the emphasis on increasing protective factors in the school community, and gaining deeper knowledge of students in the context of their families.

... Being in the pilot really informed staff about the need for KidsMatter Primary across the whole school, not just in Kinder. The focus on building links with family and home fitted with our values about supporting strong parent involvement. We took it on with energy!
Wendy Anderson, Action Team Coordinator

Asking students about their interests
Applying the focus of Component 1 of inclusivity and building community, staff at Illawarra identified the need to build on initiatives to include students in the playground.

They had witnessed the discomfort and uneasiness of some students who experience difficulties in joining groups, participating in sports games or playing with others.

Staff were clear that taking the time to ask students about their interests could be a way to address diverse needs.
They thought of it as a protective factor for supporting student wellbeing.

"... We discovered that playtime was not a happy time for some students, and could be a stressful part of the school day. We began to ask students about their interests. We have a paved and covered central courtyard area with a set of tables set up permanently. It was possible to use this space and offer activities to different individuals and groups of students to engage with a range of equipment and items, and play in a safe, creative environment."
Wendy Anderson, Action Team Coordinator

New possibilities for lunchtime
New possibilities for creating playtime activities emerged when students described their interests. One student loved gardening and he is now involved in the school vegetable garden and draws up the weekly watering roster. Another student with an interest in music hosts sessions using an old karaoke machine. On a regular basis, 15 students from the youngest to Year 6 girls and boys participate...
in loud, energetic karaoke sessions.
Initially, teachers on playground duty set up activities such as playdough; lego equipment; or art tables. Now with more than a year’s experience of the lunchtime program, members of the Student Representative Council organise and pack up activities.

The teacher on duty supervises, and students take responsibility for the selection and setting up activities that rotate each week: Skipping Club; Games Club; art tables and board games.

**Views of the playground at Illawarra**

At any time in the playground it is obvious that staff have thought about how to include the needs of individuals.

> "... If you walked into our school at playtime, you’d see a diversity of activities. You’d see the usual sports games on the oval and groups of students playing on equipment. You’d find students in the central courtyard; a mixture of girls and boys across different age groups. The tables are always in use. Students come and go and might join in playing with the articles from the dress up box or the lego blocks."

Wendy Anderson, Action Team Coordinator

Other activities offered in the playground include:
- Structured group activities such as gym or dance taken by a PE teacher
- Imaginative games in the river garden area designed by Year 6 students in 2012
- Quiet play in the environment created in the Land Care area.

**Happy students learn better**

Staff at Illawarra are convinced that the lunchtime activities program supports students’ wellbeing. They say that students who have positive experiences in the playground are more likely to engage with learning.

> "... If the students feel lonely or excluded at lunchtime, they’ll come into class with a lower interest in learning. If they have a happy time in the playground, we see they are more willing to learn. We see the effects of positive playtime."

Wendy Anderson, Action Team Coordinator

**Parent involvement – it’s obvious!**

The initiative to implement KidsMatter Primary extended the approach to involve parents in the school. When the Action Team was started up, it was clear that a few parents would be invited to join it. Staff encourage involvement through informal and formal opportunities such as an after school parent group; volunteers for the breakfast club; and participation in a Component 3 professional learning session.

> "... We felt a whole-school approach had to include parents so it was obvious to ask parents to be on the Action Team. We invited three parents to component training, and it’s been a real bonus because parents have a different perspective of a school and we need to hear it."

Wendy Anderson, Action Team Coordinator