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Transforming Classroom Practice

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How can a school create a learning space that provides a retreat from the regular classroom and provides an environment where children can connect with learning and with God?

When a demountable classroom was removed from a central position in Avondale's Primary Campus, Deb Cooper pondered what to do with the space that was left. "The room had been surrounded by hedging on three sides but was otherwise a blank space." Deb turned the space over to the grounds staff when one of them came up with an idea to convert it into an outdoor classroom.

Says Deb, "Our grounds staff designed,

constructed and planted an amazing learning zone that we call our outdoor classroom. A man made stream gurgles through this space with a board walk allowing access to a tiered deck. Shrubs, vines and plants soften the space and attract birds and insects." As the plants mature they will create a canopy and understory of living colour. The cascading creek is not only visually appealing, but provides the sound of running water which is frequently associated with calming the mind.

The teachers are continuing to adjust to the availability of this additional learning environment and have observed "students enjoy the tranquillity of this learning space for quiet reading and reflection, art time, writing, giving speeches, praying or relaxing while listening to a story. The outdoor classroom also provides a calming space for students to take a deep breath and be mindful, while connecting with the Creator's handiwork."

However, practical advice from one teacher reminded, "given the stream sounds, experience recommends a prescribed bathroom stop for all class members, before any session begins so as to avoid multiple interruptions."

The outdoor classroom ... provides a calming space for students to take a deep breath and be mindful, while connecting with the Creator's handiwork



Figure 1. The Avondale School outdoor classroom. Photo credit: Jonathan Christian



Figure 2. The creek bed adds soothing natural sound to the outdoor classroom. (Photo credit – Jonathan Christian)

Students from Diane Robert’s Year Four class shared:

We go there to do a quiz or have some spelling revision or even do a test out there. It is different to the other places and classrooms because it helps you to focus more on your work. Being outside helps you to relax a bit more. I personally love doing my work outdoors but I think we could improve it by maybe buying lap tables to lean our work on? That would be perfect! Anyway I love having a chance to be outside!!! (Caitlyn)

It is not much different to working inside, ... but you get loads of fresh air which helps us to learn. ... That’s why I love learning outdoors. (Holly)

I like our outside learning area because it is like a rain forest, and it’s very peaceful there. It’s different from inside because there is no air conditioner, plus after rain the seats are wet ☹️. We normally do worship there. We could improve it by putting fake animals in, and putting a rainproof cover over it. (Anonymous)

My opinion [on] outdoors is that it makes me feel calm, with the birds, the nice water flowing and the beautiful greenery. I think we could improve on more space and a roof over our heads. (Acacia)

Learning indoors is all right, but outdoors there’s fresh air and birds singing. It helps me concentrate. Learning outdoors should be done more often. (Ava)

Avondale’s outdoor classroom demonstrates that it is possible to bring nature into the learning environment for the benefit of the students and teachers.

The psalmist implores, “Let the heavens rejoice, let the earth be glad; let the sea resound, and all that is in it. Let the fields be jubilant, and everything in them; let all the trees of the forest sing for joy” (Psalm 96:11-12).

Job advises “ask the animals, and they will teach you, or the birds in the sky, and they will tell you; or speak to the earth, and it will teach you, or let the fish in the sea inform you. Which of these does not know that the hand of the Lord has done this? In his hand is the life of every creature and the breath of all mankind” (Job 12:7-10). **TEACH**

“*We could improve it by putting fake animals in, and putting a rainproof cover over it.*”



Figure 3. John Venagas and Grade 5 (2017) enjoying interaction in the outdoor classroom.