

# "I LIFT UP MY EYES TO THE HILLS..."



At South Australia's newest Catholic primary school the natural playground is a place to make the heart sing...

Outside, on a fresh spring morning, the primary students at Galilee are busy. Five year old boys bridge a rain-filled creek-bed with rocks and branches. Another group rub creek stones over a large rock to create ochre paint. Older girls relax on a garden seat, braiding reed bracelets while they chat. Across the way in the native woodland cubby construction is in full swing. In a nearby shrubbery, two little girls crouch over a secret snail farm hidden under the strappy leaves of a dianella. At the frog-pond, a group of enthusiasts

spy on newly hatched froglets from the 'hide'. Corellas squawk and children chatter. In the distance, the Willunga Hills rim the horizon, an ancient backdrop for this vibrant theatre.

Galilee Catholic School has a naturalised playground – the nature-filled grounds, rich in plant and wildlife are more like a native garden than a traditional schoolyard. Here in this living, breathing habitat the children have abundant playing, learning and spiritual opportunities.

These pioneering grounds are 'created nature'. The school site was carved

from marginal wheat-country in outer Adelaide only seven years ago. Child-friendly landscaping, and thoughtful planting has created a little eden of hills, shrub islands, woodlands, garden rooms, shaded sandpits, trails, tunnels, ponds and orchards. As well as a vibrant playscape, the grounds are a gift of restoration to the local environment.

## The Vision

In the mid 2000's, when Galilee was being planned, research pointed squarely to the life-giving advantages of natural landscapes for children. A surge of literature showed that nature play offered



children mental, physical, social, creative, environmental and spiritual benefits.

Galilee's planning group took the research seriously. Formed of parish members and school staff including the eco-literacy and religion teachers, and new principal and with encouragement from the CEO they saw the new school as a chance to innovate. They were a visionary group who deserve credit for their courage; although the research was clear there were fewer examples of natural playgrounds to draw on locally or globally in the mid 2000's. Nationwide, Australian schoolyards were typically sterile places of surplus safety and low maintenance. One of the founding group shared that "there was an expansive, hope-filled, but not fully known vision". Indeed developing the outdoor environment is an on-going journey of learning and living research for the whole community.

There was some inspiration though. At the schools of Reggio Emilia in Italy, the physical environment is considered a 'third teacher'. Impressed by this idea the planning group envisaged Galilee's playground as a vital learning place, as legitimate as any classroom and a natural landscape rich with possibilities for students to discover, imagine, create and research.

The Catholic ethos brought moral inspiration – the right for human beings to experience the richness of life, to flourish and thrive. Nature-filled grounds would offer children the chance to experience the abundance of the earth, and participate in it. A beautiful garden might also bring an experience of God, a sense of his presence.

The papal call for ecological conversion also had a powerful influence. A natural environment would allow students to explore custodianship, restoration, and celebration of God's sacred creation.

These values could be woven into the liturgy and culture of the school.

Students also had genuine input into the development of Galilee's grounds, which continues to this day. Through art, music, discussion and research the children have participated fully in imagining and shaping the school environment and staff have carefully recorded their input using books, art, films and photographs.

## The Reality

**Discovery:** In an age of diminishing green spaces and less freedom to roam, Galilee's earthy green environment is irresistible to children, bringing opportunity for exploration, adventure, discovery and fun.

**Participation:** Galilee values participation as a right and a Christian imperative. Students revel in the freedom to engage fully with the lovely outdoor spaces. Galilee children get dirty and a bit wet. Few places or activities are off-limits. Flowers are picked, rocks and logs rearranged, reeds harvested for weaving; sticks used for digging and lawns walked on. Loose organic materials; hessian, logs, stones, branches and sand are freely available for imaginative play and construction. Generally, the students honour the gift of trust that comes with participation. With gentle reminders they learn how to leave flowers for others to enjoy, to treat creatures with care, and to use sticks and stones constructively.

**Relationship:** Sophisticated social interactions and community building are possible in a naturalised schoolyard. Learning and playing in nature is fun, offering a relaxed way to hone communication and co-operation skills. The wide variety of outdoor spaces also offers choice about social contact;

the sandpits are lively meeting places while more enclosed places like the creek beds offer social 'safety', intimacy and peace. Somehow, belonging to an inspiring place has also created social glue – the Galilee community has a sense of pride and identity strongly rooted in the beautiful setting.

**Co-creation:** Galilee offers children a changing creation - creek-beds hold water after storms, frogs croak loudly over winter, fruit-trees blossom and fruit, butterflies herald spring, seed heads wither and split. Immersed in this dynamic setting the children seem to catch a sense of creativity. 'Outside learning' times (recess and lunch) are a constant flux of construction and revision. Miniature farms, giant sandcastles, perfume factories, cubby building, and fairy-bowers are just a few favourite activities possible in a natural playground.

**Divinity:** Galilee has become a transcendent, spirit filled place; a version of 'church' where the children meet God via the natural world. Using prayer, poetry and art, students often reflect on their sense of God in their surroundings. Themes of gratitude for the school environment, and a sense of connection to all living things feature prominently in the weekly Community Prayer event. The hills encircling the school have become part of the collective imagination of the Galilee community, often referred to as a metaphor for God's encompassing love.

**Beauty:** According to Pope John Paul II, "...the aesthetic value of creation cannot be overlooked. Our very contact with nature has a deep restorative power: contemplation of its magnificence imparts peace and serenity."<sup>2</sup> Galilee offers the children all the gifts that come with natural beauty.



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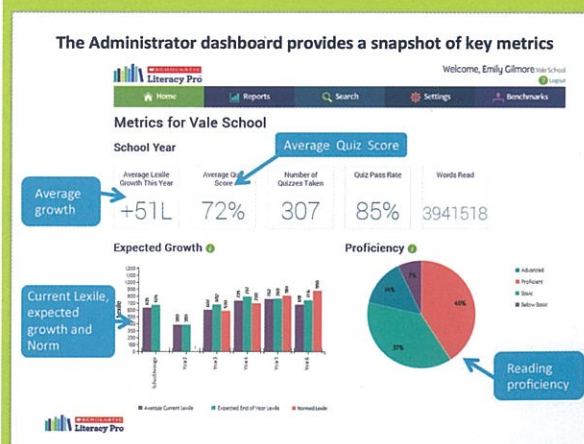
Last year, I had a call from a Principal who had extracted some reading data on reading performance from the *mylexile* website. He had manually collated the results. He found that the students in the last 12 months had shown much greater growth in their reading performance in comparison to the students the previous year. He put this down to what was happening for them in their classroom reading program.

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Christine Vale  
Head of Education (BA Dip Ed GradDip MA MBA)

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