

Learning Outside the Classroom

Nature on your doorstep

Nurturing the spiritual through developing the school grounds
The school grounds, St. Mary the Virgin Primary School, Gillingham, Dorset

What are we trying to achieve?

The vision is eventually to conduct 50% of all learning outdoors for all pupils. In so doing, we wish to extend the child-centred principles, now well established in Early Years, right on up to Year 6
Our purpose-designed grounds and gardens provide opportunities for pupils to:

- nurture spiritual awareness and respond to life, being conscious of their own emotions, convictions and values
- experience contact with nature and recognise responsibilities as human beings
- work co-operatively and constructively with others, including those of other faiths and worldviews, in a spirit of mutual respect and appreciation
- develop reflective and critical thinking skills, especially in making meaningful life choices

Cost:

£20,000 over two years, for the entire garden and grounds paid for through funds and grants received from external sources.

Who is involved?

The whole school and broader community

Preparation:

The entire project was proposed and designed by the pupils, with input and guidance from staff, parents and governors.

How did we organise the learning?

The grounds and gardens are divided into several key areas, including:

1. A Butterfly Garden: the butterfly's development is a powerful spiritual metaphor and relates to ideas of religious views on rebirth. This area and others are useful for quiet contemplation and reflection.
2. A Story Telling Orchard: a tiered seating areas acts as a theatre, especially useful for exploring various faiths and their points of view
3. A Nature and Science Area: this helps promote a view of technological science that acknowledges interdependence, and is intimately related to the natural world and environmental concerns
4. The Mathematical and Religious Area: this includes a maze relevant to so many religious themes, for example journey, choices, dilemma or salvation. Year 4 have explored 'trust' in pairs, with one pupil leading a second who is blind-folded. Year 6 have collected religious quotes related to mazes, labyrinths and corresponding concepts and metaphors. They have also explored ideas about 'choice' and 'pathways through life', pertinent to their imminent transition to secondary school.

What was the impact of the experience?

The head of the school remarked, 'The project has fostered our bonds as a community, given children and adults greater knowledge of how they learn best and enabled our children to develop as learners and reflective spiritual human beings'.

Follow up:

We are continuously exploring how the curriculum can be creatively linked to our outdoor learning areas, and to pupils' own development of these facilities.

Contacts and links:

www.stmarygillingham.dorset.sch.uk/

<http://www.ltl.org.uk/> Learning through Landscapes, who have provided much support for this project.