

Cranbourne lower primary teachers are counteracting large class sizes and noisy classrooms with equipment usually associated with amplifying sound - microphones and speakers - and the results have been surprising.

Prep to Grade 4 teachers at St Agatha's, Cranbourne are using Hear and Learn's RedCAT system to equalise the quality and volume of the teacher's voice to every student in the classroom, regardless of class size or the physical classroom space: older classrooms with limited space, spacious new classrooms with flexible learning spaces, or long portable classrooms with shared interactive areas.

Classroom noise and the inability to hear their teacher's instruction can cause a child's focus to drift and disruptive behaviour, minimised learning outcomes and stressed teachers are often the result. But St Agatha's Deputy Principal, Paul Sharp says the RedCAT system has positively impacted the school's classroom management.

"The teachers are telling us they're able to moderate the level and tone of their voices," says Paul. "Their voices are calmer, their delivery is more succinct and the environment of their classrooms is quieter and more composed. Receiving a clear sound helps students listen and curbs disruptive behaviour."

Larger class sizes, older classrooms with limited space or open plan classrooms can all result in noisy learning environments where teachers need to raise their voices just to be heard. This can negatively impact students with hearing impairment or auditory processing issues who may mistakenly receive a raised voice as an angry one.

Using RedCAT, the feedback from St Agatha's staff is that they are calmer, able to maintain calm voices and lower tones, enhancing a more peaceful, receptive teaching and learning space.

Introduction of the technology has sparked teacher-led ownership of the program with many staff specifically requesting the system for their classrooms once they'd seen the positive results achieved by their colleagues.

"Staff taking ownership of an introduced program like this is very powerful and has an incredibly positive impact on morale," said Paul.

For St Agatha's Grade 1 teacher Katia Picinali, the RedCAT system presents significant benefits not only for children with diagnosed learning disorders, but particularly those whose learning problems remain undiagnosed.

"Children with receptive language or auditory processing problems having difficulty understanding what I'm saying really benefit from the RedCat system," explained Katia. "If they can hear me more clearly they're engaged, active listeners and that complements my role as a teacher."

"If a child is having difficulty hearing their teacher they become disengaged, their focus wanders and that sometimes leads to disruption in the classroom. For children with learning difficulties the RedCAT system is especially good. They can find it hard to stay focussed with maybe 24 other people around them in the room. Our intent is to provide clear, directed sound to every child, enabling them to listen and stay on track."

From the teacher's perspective, classroom disruption is diffused so it's a more relaxed, calm teaching and working environment "and with a microphone you don't have to strain your voice to be heard," said Katia.

With an additional microphone for students, RedCAT has become a useful tool to encourage even the most quietly spoken child to participate and become a more active contributor to classroom discussion.

"It's been great for developing their confidence and self esteem. The children have really adopted the technology and often ask to wear the second microphone so they can present Show and Tell."

According to Katia, having RedCAT in the classroom has enabled peers to acknowledge that the quieter students "who sometimes go unnoticed, actually have a voice, they have opinions and they make a positive contribution to the whole group's learning".

The technology is also supporting the school's ESL programs. St Agatha's welcomes students from a wide range of culturally diverse backgrounds, including Sri Lanka, China, the Philippines, India, Sudan and the Pacific Islands.

Clear receptive listening is a key element to successfully learn a new language. "If you're not hearing the language properly how can you hope to learn it yourself?" said Katia.

"With children from such a wide range of cultures and demographics, it's critical that they are able to hear the clear pronunciation of words as well as articulation, tone and nuance while they're learning to speak English. That's difficult to do with a lot of other noise and distraction going on around them, but with the RedCAT system their classroom is calm and more collaborative and they are able to focus their attention to active listening."

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