



# Learning Spaces, Wellbeing & Engagement: Re-conceptualising 'School' at Blair Athol North Birth-Year 7 School

How have changes in learning spaces impacted on learner engagement and wellbeing?  
How do the Learning Advisors' beliefs about learning spaces drive their practice and impact on children's wellbeing and engagement at BANB7?

Blair Athol North Birth-Year 7 School

<http://www.banb7.sa.edu.au>

## Principles and Elements for Effective Learning

These 6 principles are the foundation for effective 21<sup>st</sup> Century learning at BANB7 and are derived from contemporary research, experimentation and experience. We believe all children are competent & rich in potential.

### Personalising & Connecting

Viewing learners as capable and building on their interests, prior knowledge and understandings



### Environment & Spaces

Learning environment as the Third Teacher - adaptable, connected, inviting spaces & fittings that offer many possibilities for:



### Relationships & Wellbeing

Creating a culture of shared responsibility for feeling safe, respecting, inspiring and encouraging each other's learning

## BACKGROUND CONTEXT

Blair Athol North Birth – Year 7 School is a new 21st century school that opened on January 31st 2011. We are a community of learners where BELONGING BEING BECOMING is the motto reflecting our values and principles. We are deliberately moving away from a traditional model of schooling and through our professional learning community inquiring into ways of utilising the environment as the third teacher; incorporating nature education research in developing the outdoor environment; personalising learning and the use of 21st C multi modal digital tools. We intentionally changed the language we use to describe areas, roles and buildings – (learning advisors, studios, neighbourhoods, commons, home group, etc) to support a new way of thinking about and experiencing education in the 21st century.

BANB7 has a Children's Centre providing care, education and health services to the local community.

Before moving into the new school site, as a leadership group we intentionally focussed on challenging and supporting staff to question traditional notions of schooling (teaching and learning) to build a *culture of inquiry*. Significant work has been done on researching physical and virtual learning spaces, resulting in ongoing changes throughout our B-7 learning neighbourhoods. This has led us to the next stage of inquiry which is exploring the impact of physical learning spaces on wellbeing and engagement.

Drawing on contemporary research in the form of *Campfires in Cyberspace* and *Inspiring Spaces for Young Children*, staff designed their learning spaces. Through the lenses of wellbeing and involvement staff observed how children responded.

### References from research, literature

We value space because of its power to organise ... and its potential for sparking all kinds of social, affective and cognitive learning. **Loris Malaguzzi**

Educators' beliefs about children's learning and what motivates children to learn very much determine the learning environment that educators establish and maintain and the role they take in children's learning processes.

**Reflect Respect Relate:** Assessment for Learning and Development in the Early Years using Observation Scales, DECD



**Learning environment as the Third Teacher** – adaptable, connected, inviting spaces & fittings that offer many possibilities for:

- Provocation, exploration & discovery
- Play, creativity & construction
- Virtual & outdoor learning
- Individual / quiet spaces (the *Cave*)
- Small groups / workshops / Conferencing / Targeted & Intentional Teaching (*Watering Hole*)
- Large Groups / Storytelling / Workshops (*Campfire*)
- Presentations, Publishing & demonstration learning (*Mountain Top*)

**BANB7 Principles and Elements for Effective Learning: Environment & Spaces**

## RESEARCH DESIGN



- Focus Group to trial Rating Observation Scales for Inspiring Environments (ROSIE)
- Whole school PL Day-mainstream innovation
- Critiquing & feedback using ROSIE
- Focus for 2011-13 - intentionally setting up learning spaces
- Wellbeing and Involvement Scales used from Reflect Respect Relate in the focus group studios
- Drawing on current research about 'cortisol levels' and wellbeing and learning.

The stress hormone "cortisol" is at its highest in the morning and is meant to decrease during the day. The quality of the environment and the quality of human interactions impacts on cortisol levels and the ability to learn.

A focus group formed to trial the use and implementation of the

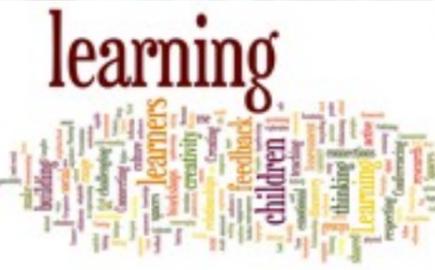
Rating Observation Scales for Inspiring Environments first met in 2012 to discuss the impact of designing learning spaces on children's engagement in learning and wellbeing.

This team engaged in professional dialogue and collaborated to redesign their learning spaces.

At the end of Term 3, a final year university education student used the Wellbeing and Involvement Scales to obtain a picture of children's engagement in their learning within these spaces - see chart opposite for results.

The 6 Principles and Elements for Effective Learning at BANB7 were developed by staff during the first year of the school, and are the drivers for the way Learning Advisors, children and community work together to improve outcomes for all. This research focussed on 3 of these principles, namely Environment & Spaces, Relationships and Wellbeing and Personalising & Connecting.

Half of the Professional Learning Day in Term 4 2012, was spent working through a process with staff to look at learning environments for children. The Focus Team facilitated these groups which moved the research innovation to the mainstream. The impact was seen on the first of day of school 2013 in how children connected with and explored their learning



## CONCLUSIONS

The anecdotal evidence and discussions around the impact of the aesthetics of spaces on wellbeing and learning continues and goes deeper. One of the most interesting observations was in the beginning when the older children's 'behaviour' initially increased when the environment changed to providing choice, comfort, provocation and nature. We understood this to be part of the 'de-institutionalising' process. Over time children responded to the changed environment

and staff noticed the positive impact on children self regulating.

For many younger children the environment they'd been part of prior to school continued and so their ways of learning didn't have to dramatically change because of the message the environment was giving them. For many educators their pedagogy is becoming more about understanding and providing for learning and learning dispositions than teaching pre determined knowledge.



*The Hundred Languages*  
As human beings, children possess a hundred languages, a hundred ways of thinking, of expressing themselves, of understanding and encountering others, with a way for thinking that creates connections between the various dimensions of experience rather than separating them.



The environment interacts with, is modified by, and takes shape in relation to the projects and learning experiences of the children and of the adults in a constant dialogue between architecture and pedagogy.



## CAMPFIRES in CYBERSPACE

David D. Thornburg, Ph D

- Campfire
- Watering hole
- Cave
- Life / Mountain Top

## DESIGN PRINCIPLES from

### Inspiring Spaces for Young Children

1. Nature inspires beauty
2. Colour generates interest
3. Furnishings define space
4. Texture adds depth
5. Displays enhance environment
6. Elements heighten ambience
7. Focal points attract attention



## RATING OBSERVATION SCALES for INSPIRING ENVIRONMENTS (ROSIE)

- An inspiring environment is essential for helping young children learn. The Rating Observation Scale for Inspiring Environments (ROSIE) is an observation rating scale that challenges teachers to examine classrooms in a totally new way: with an eye for what is aesthetically beautiful and inspiring.
- Looking through an aesthetic lens of nature, color, furnishings, textures, displays, lighting, and focal points, educators will learn to determine a classroom's level of aesthetic beauty. ROSIE then provides images and examples to assist in turning learning spaces into inspirational environments in which children can grow and learn.

## RESULTS & DISCUSSION

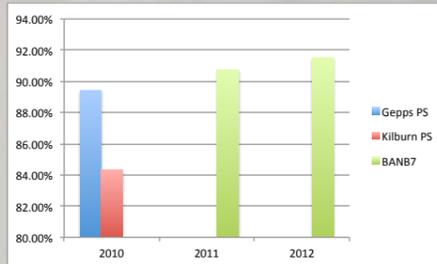
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- The Wellbeing and Involvement Scales comprise 2 predictor variables- relationships and active learning environment and 2 outcome variables – wellbeing and involvement. Wellbeing and involvement are described as outcomes of quality. The observation scales are beginning points for educators to examine and reflect on their practices.
- The scales showed high levels of wellbeing and involvement and educators attributed this directly to the impact of the environment on children's wellbeing, their own wellbeing and their pedagogy, which also contributed to levels of engagement. From the discussions following the trial educators are planning to involve children more in the design of the learning environments and move to a meta analysis of environment and learning with children.



### Attendance Improvement



and lived into. It was very useful to spend time in other people's learning spaces – and to discuss and bounce off the other 2 people I was working with to establish what was meant by different statements, and also to clarify what we were noticing (or even "not-seeing").

## REFERENCES

- *Inspiring Spaces for Young Children*, Jessica DeViney, Sandra Duncan, Sara Harris, Mary Ann Rody, Lois Rosenberry August 2010
- *Rating Observation Scale for Inspiring Environments*, authors as above 2010
- *Campfires in Cyberspace*, David D Thornburg PhD
- *Principles of the Reggio Emilia Educational Project, Re-imagining Childhood 2012-2013*, Reproduced with the permission for the purposes of the Carla Rinaldi Residency, Adelaide Thinkers in Residence, Government of SA
- *Respect, Reflect, Relate, Assessment for Learning and Development in the Early Years using Observation Scales*, DECD Resource
- *Belonging, Being, Becoming*, Early Years Learning Framework for Australia, ©Commonwealth of Australia 2009
- *DECS Learner Wellbeing Framework for Birth to Year 12*