**Princess Hill Presents Living Learning Environments**

*Dr Esme Capp, Principal*

Learning environments are a really crucial element of understanding contemporary learning. It’s about children having the ability to move between spaces on a purposeful journey of learning.

*Mary Featherston, Interior Designer*

The learning environment is both a social environment, it’s about the relationships between people and the learning; and it’s also a physical environment. The two are really inseparable.

*Hannah McVean, Parent*

The atmosphere in which a school functions and operates is also important too. And by atmosphere, I do mean the intangible that creates a culture. So, for me, learning environment does encompass the environments within someone’s mind almost and in fact the environment of how people are behaving.

*Dr Esme Capp, Principal*

A crucial element is the theory of learning that underpins our vision, and so through that we’ve come up with some key principles of learning; such as children learn through engagement with community. It’s about the relationship between emotion and intellect that children are connected through this emotional tie to the content.

They also learn through involvement in complex ideas that have relevance to their lives. Then also, that they express their thinking and their ideas through multiple forms of expression. So, it’s those key theories of learning that underpin the pedagogy and also underpin the design of the learning environments.

Collective enquiry is about finding a really deep meaningful concept to explore throughout the year. We actually have three big ideas which drive our curriculum and they’re: identity, interdependence and sustainability. But the challenge with the concept is, as Vygotsky states, is a concept is something that can’t be taught. It’s got to be experienced, then new conceptual understandings and perspectives of the world can be grown.

*Mary Featherston, Interior Designer*

It may be useful to conceptualise the physical environment as having essentially three layers. The building shell; the architecture if you like. You’ve got the interior fit-out and furnishings, and then the third layer is all the loose items. For it to be really effective, in my experience, they all need to come together.

The school decided to develop five neighbourhoods. Within each neighbourhood, we have developed ten or a dozen settings. What determines those settings? Is a detailed analysis of the very wide variety of experiences that are involved in the development along long term projects.

*Keith McNeill, 3/4 Neighbourhood*

Learning spaces are specifically set up to give behavioural and, and learning cues to children. So, that space contains within it, the resources that children need to complete that learning.

*Student 1*

Each morning, each homegroup will go and gather with their homegroup teacher. On Mondays, we get our new checklists and then we tick off what we’ve done and it’ll have a part which has what is due by Friday. Let’s say I had a fraction self-assessment; I’d probably work on that in either the learning commerce or the art space.

*Student 2*

When we go off to work in a certain space, because of the displays around and the different spaces have been a propagation almost allocated to them, it just gives us motivation and inspiration and helps us keep on track.

*Dr Esme Capp, Principal*

A learning environment within that home context is a space that has been researched in collaboration with Mary Featherston. It’s been about analysing- well what are all the spaces that children need? And then how do we provide those spaces within a limited context of what we have? And, so, our real research has come down to areas where children can be making and creating, and wet space.

*Student 3*

And we have a reading corner where obviously, people read books. There’s also the performance space.

*Dr Esme Capp, Principal*

There’s an open floor space so children can be engaging in games, in construction, in robotics.

*Student 3*

There’s the target area. Usually smaller groups with a teacher doing things that they need to focus on in their learning.

*Dr Esme Capp, Principal*

A table-based space where they can be writing and engaging in group discussions or brainstorms.

*Mary Featherston, Interior Designer*

A small lounge area which is a quiet, softly furnished base. It may be where the transport portfolios are, so that parents can sit there with their kids.

*Student 3*

Last, but not least, there’s the media space and that has a green screen so a lot of people film there.

*Mary Featherston, Interior Designer*

The third and last layer, which is really incredibly important; is all the loose stuff. And from the design point of view, it’s important to provide the infrastructure, the shelving, the storage display to support all that diversity of material, and it’s the layer that sort of builds the emotional attachment to the environment.

*Student 2*

I think it’s really important for the work to be up on the walls because it inspires me as I’m working and also it makes me feel like you’re working as a team.

*Steven Marks, Year 3/4 Neighbourhood*

The purpose of the enquiry walls are really just to provoke that learning initially. So, by putting up those pieces, that gets students inspired and, and wondering. And then, to make the learning visible, now we’ve also been heavily using the QR codes, which connects to the online blog that we use. So, students write summaries that we’ve got that up for the display, but it also links to the blog where we’ve got recordings and more information about the work they’re doing.

*Keith McNeill, 3/4 Neighbourhood*

So, we start with quite a broad question or concept that we want children to grapple with over a certain period of time. We don’t tie ourselves into a week, a term, two terms. We follow the flow of the enquiry. How we start with those kind of things- we generate publications. Now, these are sort of learning tasks if you will. Now, they are vertex between the spaces, the physical environments, the thinking of the teacher, and the thinking of the student. So, you have all three meeting at that point.

*Mary Featherston, Interior Designer*

Design is needs-driven, human-cantered. In the best way you can, you design something to answer that need, but you do it in the simplest way. If you go too far, if you embellish it, you restrict this. There’s a sense of it being open ended as well, so that the children and the teachers can inhabit it in their own way.

*Dr Esme Capp, Principal*

A key way to assess if these learning environments are successful is through multiple ways. First and foremost, what visitors to our school will we connect with is the engagement of children, but also then, it is the depth of the enquiries and what are the understandings that come out.

But as well as that, you’re looking for certain skills and understandings for the children to develop. And so, what we’ve really engaged with is actually making that curriculum visible to the children.

*Mary Featherston, Interior Designer*

Through lots and lots of practise and discussion, research groups, a shared vision has developed. And then, the teachers start to understand why the environments are the way they are, and they get to understand how they can use them best.

*Dr Esme Capp, Principal*

Here at Princes Hill, we get a lot of visitors. The thing they need to take back is the process. It’s the process of unpacking- what does it mean to be a high-level learner; what does it mean to create an environment and a culture of learning within your school. And for me, the crucial element is to begin with unpacking what are the key principles of learning that theorise what we believe in learning, that set the vision for our school. So then, from those elements, everything else flows.