Sense of Place: Narbethong Special School

what & why

The project

Students at Narbethong Special School are disadvantaged by their inability to access information readily; 80% of learning is through vision and every child in the school has a vision impairment. To enable learning, the world must be brought to them and be accessible through their residual senses, physical abilities and cognitive functioning.

Most of the students have limited mobility independence. Stepping out into an empty space can be a frightening experience. Other children require walking frames to move around or need to be pushed in wheelchairs. To succeed and gain confidence to move independently, they need to learn to perceive space as a series of 'places' or destinations.

Sense of Place was conceived to:

- create artworks that communicate visual information to blind and vision impaired students by using tactile, auditory, olfactory, kinesthetic and visual perceptions
- transform non-communicative 'spaces' into a series of defined 'places'
- encourage positive shared experiences between students, volunteers, staff and families within the stark walls and corridors of the school
- educate visitors and staff within the school about braille and visual functioning
- create a prompt for students to initiate their own process of exploration and discovery, supported by the school's unique philosophy of active learning and the school motto of 'learn by doing'.
The project delivered a range of art installations:

- The school name is presented in a teachable braille format using muffin tins filled with balls to create braille characters.
- Braille-paneled walls provide texture and shape.
- A tactile kaleidoscope wall features a patterned relief sculpture of differently textured and coloured materials.
- A ‘long and short wall’ provides an arrangement of objects that can be defined and grouped by their length. Tactile and physical qualities such as size, texture, weight, thickness are considered. An overall pattern from short to long to short help define the start and end of the wall for students learning to orientate themselves along the corridor. Materials include spoons, cooking utensils, tubing, rope, chord, bamboo, pipe and rods.
- The ‘round and round wall’ features a sculptural arrangement of round objects where some parts align vertically and some horizontally. Some objects are woven, attached on rods or elastic, can be spun, pushed, pulled, slid and banged.
- Red, green and blue walls provide meaningful experiences relating to colour – auditory, olfactory, tactile, large print and braille label poems form part of these walls.
- Light boxes are for children who only show a visual response to light.
- Black and white and shiny walls are for children with early visual responses.
- Wooden panels provide texture and pattern.
- Facial recognition walls are for children who have difficulties with facial recognition and include life-size staff photos in black and white and also pop art elements.
- The colour vision wall is a demonstration of colour vision testing.
- Mosaic group tasks are used to help staff consider expectations put upon children and thinking about visual information.
- A rope installation is included for children to be able to move through and experience the texture all over their body.
- Bell pulleys are ropes easily manipulated to make sounds.
- Bottle top installations are lengths of bottle tops in playgrounds and corridors.

The braille walls are positioned around the school only on one level so that the children know when they find the braille panels they are on level one. It is rare to find braille cells in a larger format so this is wonderful for the early explorer. It is also immersing the campus in braille as is the expectation that a home will also be immersed in braille, just like other environments are immersed in print. This is labelled the Rainbow Wall and has poetry, songs and stories beside the panels for adults to read to the children about the colours of the rainbow.

Photo: Edith Cieslar
where & when

Place and space

The art installations are in the school grounds at Narbethong Special School: in playgrounds, corridors and hallways.

The project was commenced in 2009 and took two years to complete. Most of the project was completed in the first half of 2011.

A key challenge was to find the artists who could understand the children and produce art that was usable for children with disabilities and vision impairments. Many artists visited the school and spent time in the classrooms but wanted to produce visual pieces that would not allow interaction or meaningful experiences.

with

Partners and people

Arts Queensland’s art+place Queensland Public Art Fund provided funding of $40,000 for the project in 2008-09. Narbethong Special School supplemented this funding and provided countless hours of work by school staff.

Volunteers were mainly from the school staff – drillers, threaders, painters, sorters, knitters and collectors.

Most of the school’s families find it quite difficult time wise to offer support away from their home. However, the community were wonderful in collecting hundreds and hundreds of bottle tops.

The red wall is a common meeting place; however, it gives children without sight little meaning for the concept of the colour. Large print and braille signage were added to the wall because it is difficult for children to find incidental braille and large letters in their environments. The concept of red is expanded through olfactory – scent on the red rose; auditory – fire engine sound and heartbeat from using the stethoscope; tactile – ladybird, heart and stop sign. Children with some vision are very interested in looking through the red perspex and notice the red glow from the sun shining through the objects and creating patterns on the ground. There are three colour walls and the children enjoy listening to the poems about colour from the book Hailstones and Halibuts.

Photo: Kerry Tait
the wins & what next

Outcomes and learnings

Children are using the installations on a daily basis. Corridors that were previously functional but unimaginative have become happy places where students want to be.

Meaningful conversations are happening between students and adults. On a student-free day recently, teachers and teacher aides were blind-folded and taken on walkers, canes and in wheelchairs through the installation. Staff now ask more questions about braille and observe visual responses in children using the installations.

Two little boys who were reticent to do anything in the beginning now race up to a red wall where they know there is a fire engine and turn on the siren. Several children who previously did not raise their arms are now being brave because they have learned that waving their hands makes a frog croak. Children who use a wall to walk usually won’t go further along a wall if there’s a gap; it’s like walking off a cliff. The art works have provided something to aim for, i.e. “there’s a nice thing over there that I like”. Some of the children who were very reluctant at the beginning are now running to the art works and their verbal skills have also increased.

Visiting teachers and guests have been very excited about the art installations and have taken many photos to show schools and families. Many want to talk with the school and artists about how to do something similar locally. Conversations about the value of art installations in enhancing the lives of children with disabilities and their comprehension of the world around them have taken place and that debate has gone into other schools.

Key artist Carolyn Parsons is still volunteering with Narbethong Special School. She hopes to collaborate again with Fiona Cameron. School parents have approached the artists with requests to make smaller art works for their home spaces. They are thrilled with their children’s newly acquired skills and confidence and want to provide more for their children to work on.

At the entry to the school the name of the school is displayed in large print and shows the corresponding braille for each letter. The muffin tin presentation was selected to educate others that braille is initially taught on a large format. A variety of balls were chosen to show the pattern for each letter. The school’s philosophy of active learning has been incorporated into this sign. The children are able to explore the tins and the 10 different balls.

Photo: Kerry Tait
The art installations needed to use found objects and recyclable objects. The project was successful in collecting objects from families, houses, garbage side collections and second hand shops as well as using hardware and cheap shops. Artists enjoyed looking outside the normal places for sculptural material. The whole project awakened artists to how texturally devoid our society is most of the time.

The project involved anchoring things to concrete walls and suspending things from ceilings that needed to take the weight of teenage children. Trying to locate the relevant Workplace Health and Safety information was a bit difficult.

The major difficulty from the school’s perspective was the amount of time that was spent bringing in new artists and waiting for their proposals and costings. Each of these artists had a walk through the school and a visit to the classrooms; however, many had difficulties catering for children who are blind or vision impaired and also for children who have limited physical movements. Most artists wanted to come in and work with the children to do hand prints. However, the children are very tactile defensive. As a result of this difficulty, the project coordinator settled on trying to achieve as many art installations as she could organise until she was able to find the main artists. The artists had major health issues, car accidents, flooding and family difficulties so this further added to the amount of time that was available to finish the project by the due date. It was difficult to know where to access more artists – most of the artists interviewed were identified by word of mouth. The school has suggested that access to a database of artists experienced in creating similar art installations would be useful.

The school philosophy is active learning or ‘learn by doing’. It was difficult to consider the olfactory sense in the art installations; however, this was achieved by hanging planters filled with mint, rosemary and citronella geranium and a watering can that encourages children to interact with the plants. For the auditory sense the artists used the croaking frog, fire engine sound, tweeting bird and stethoscope to listen to your heart, bells and chimes.

It is extremely difficult for severely physically disabled children to interact with art unless someone is initiating the sound and description. This installation allows the participant to be immersed in the smell, sound and tactile experience and does not require a carer to support participation. With the use of very minimal physical ability the ropes can be moved or grabbed to produce a sound.

Photo: John Reed
What next

Future plans for the project are to increase the number of music installations. As part of the initial Sense of Place project, the artists were able to create bell pulleys (ropes easily manipulated to make sounds) and they have many more plans for interactive music installations.

Buranda State School have approached the school and want to be involved with our community to produce similar concepts on the two bridges that the community use to cross the creek.

St Laurences School staff, who came to the opening, plan to advocate for the inclusion of projects in the art curriculum that could be incorporated into the school surrounds or to be used at other facilities they visit for community visits.

Vision Australia are extremely impressed with the project and have already approached a number of the artists. This kind of project is still fairly innovative and new; there is not a lot out there yet and Vision Australia want to work with people who have prior knowledge and experience.