



Beyond Routines and Repetition: learning through the arts

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The Briars Special Early learning Centre is dedicated to the education of children with disabilities, significant developmental delay and complex communication needs. The centre is an early intervention service with a specialised Preschool, an Outdoor Learning Program and a Consultancy.

In 2011 we began a journey to improve the children’s learning outcomes by shifting the culture of The Briars to one focussed on the mental health and wellbeing of children. We engineered the site for communication to empower them. We knew that by developing the children’s communication skills to make choices, to express their needs and to navigate the site independently, we could help build their self-esteem and autonomy. Several years later, although we had evidence through a longitudinal inquiry proving that the changes we had made in philosophy and pedagogy were making a positive difference to the children’s learning outcomes, we began to challenge the norms of working with children with significant additional needs. Our belief that being active and valued members of a community is essential to well-being, drove us to enquire further into Inclusion. We used the unicef Rights of the Child as our foundation and developed The Briars Charter. As we worked through the articles we became more insightful and gained confidence to promote the universal rights of the children.

Already a site with no tolerance for restrictive practices, we began to discard the many ‘other’ restrictions we could see that educators can unwittingly put on children and focussed on building citizenship and resilience, providing learning opportunities that allowed the children to take risks and to develop coping skills that would support them in everyday life.

We realised that it was our responsibility to give the children opportunities to be creative and to express themselves beyond alternative communication systems for the augmentation of speech. We needed to enrich the curriculum and to provide ways for the children to express themselves through music, dance, drama and the visual arts. This was the beginning of our commitment to “Learning through the Arts” in the early years. During this presentation, I highlight the key philosophical and pedagogical changes that occurred, share the programs we introduced and give visual evidence of the joy, engagement and love of learning.