BLENNZ Friday fun social skills programme

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Just like birds of paradise humans are predominately visual animals. I remember as a teenager spending hours preening and primping to make sure I looked my best and then watching my peers to figure out how to interact with others (especially that scary animal known as the teenage boy). Even as adults we retain this visual bias, assessing those around us using our vision. Is she grumpy today? Am I dressed appropriately for this event? Is it a good time to speak up in a meeting? A quick smile, reassuring glance around the room and a shared gaze and nod from a colleague can be all we need to answer these questions but for our visually impaired students these cues aren’t available.

The purpose of this presentation is to look at the social skills programme known as Friday Fun which has been running the in the Auckland area for almost 15 years. By examining what has happened in the past and what is currently happening in the programme we have a number of recommendations on how to take this programme forward into the future, hopefully for the next 15 years.

Friday Fun is a social skills programme which gives primary aged students who access the curriculum through braille the opportunity to meet on a regular basis with their peers and both acquire new social skills and practice old ones in a culturally inclusive and learner specific setting.

*It was created in response to the challenges blind students encounter at school. This includes the skills to initiate and maintain friendships, working in a group, and using appropriate social behaviours. Social skills development is an essential component of any child’s educational programme. . The basis for teaching social skills is grounded in “Stepping Stones” the expanded core curriculum developed in 2000 by Resource Teachers of Vision throughout New Zealand. Stepping Stones is a tool used by Specialist Vision teachers to support visually impaired students to access the New Zealand curriculum. Stepping Stones is currently being reviewed to bring it into alignment with the New Zealand Curriculum and its Key Competencies.*

The background for the development of the programme came from both the literature which links a lack of social awareness and vision impairment and the experience of Resource Teachers of Vision who recognised the needs of the students in their care.

*In the early 2000 a group of Auckland based RTV’s embarked on an Action Research Project under the guidance of Dr Eileen Piggot-Irvine. The purpose of this project was to ascertain the relevance of the programme and to ensure the programme aligned with research surrounding best practice for the teaching of social skills to visually impaired students. The Social Skills Checklist was implemented as a result of this project. Evidence overwhelming supported a systematic and developmental approach to the teaching of social skills to visually impaired students.*

The Friday Fun programme supports the goals from the *Stepping Stones: Guidelines to the Expanded Core Curriculum* (2005) and the *New Zealand Curriculum* (Ministry of Education, 2007). The programme uses individualised and learner specific planning, it also aligns with the individual goals set for each student via their IEPs. The programme is on-going and is currently used throughout the student’s attendance at primary school, ending as they transition into intermediate school.

The programme fits within Stepping Stones. According to Stepping Stones the “Expanded Core Curriculum comprises the specific body of knowledge and skills (not inherently addressed in the regular curricula) that learners who are blind or vision impaired need to develop. Qualified professionals, such as Resource Teachers Vision (RTVs) or Developmental Orientation and Mobility (O&M) specialists, teach the Expanded Core Curriculum and see that it is appropriately included in the Individual Education Plan (IEP) of learners who a blind or vision impaired.” (Vision Education Agency, Pg, 6).

The social skill programme also supports the vision of **Success for All – Every School, Every Child**, **and the Disability Strategy.**  Both documents promote inclusiveness, positive attitudes and students receiving the support necessary for them to be included accepted and confident. Friday Fun exists to support children with disability (blindness) to grow in confidence, involved in the life of their school enjoy interacting and learning alongside their peers.

The Friday Fun programme is also firmly grounded in research regarding the need for students who are blind or low vision to have specific instruction in how to interact socially with those around them. For visually impaired students to acquire the skills necessary to promote social inclusion and integration, they will require regular on-going intervention strategies (Sacks et al 2000). Since most social skills are attained through verbal communication and visual cues, learning and modelling these skills without interventions is difficult. Throughout life, sighted people observe and intuitively learn and use new social skills. Blind students can miss out at every level of social development. They are unable to see what their peers are doing and how they are interacting. They are limited in the interpretation of social behaviours through visual cues. It is imperative that teachers of the visually impaired do not take social skills learning for granted; the attaining of skills requires direct and specialised instruction (Miller 2006).

According to McAlpineand Moore (1995, p.350) “Social understanding is the knowledge that enables a person to understand, interpret, and take appropriate actions that are relevant to different social settings and personal situations”. Visual cues are one of the main ways that children learn to understand that others have a “theory of mind” that is different from their own, because of this children with visual impairments are often behind their sighted peers. Infants begin to develop a shared reference with their caregivers first through a shared gaze and then through pointing. Sighted children begin to understand that others can have a belief that differs from their own at around four years old but this does not seem to develop in visually impaired children until much later (around 7 or 8) (McAlpine & Moore, 1995).

There is little research examining the impact of visual impairments on the development of friendships. However, a study by MacCuspie published in 1992 proposed that students who are blind and low vision perceive friends as “those who help me” and saw themselves as “special” i.e., they were entitled to privileges like standing first in line and not having to obey the same rules and social behaviours as their sighted peers. MacCuspie saw that often the only reason blind students would interact with peers was if they needed help. Ecological assessment of how sighted children at different age levels interact and communicate with their peers is crucial in the creation of a skills development programme. For authentic inclusion to occur, educators, parents and whanau must have the same social behaviour expectations for both sighted and visually impaired children (Miller 2006). The findings of Kekelis and Sacks (1992) suggest that visually impaired children required additional training and experience than their sighted peers to develop friendships. These social skills development programmes can take many forms however the most successful social skills programmes are founded on developmental learning and task development.

When the programme was first started the resource teachers of vision involved in the project stated that the purpose was to “Identify the learning outcome in relation to the specific social skill being targeted.

To model and role play the targeted skill to provide consistency of approach, realistic expectations and opportunity for learner responsibility. To evaluate the learning outcome and provide opportunities for consolidation. To enable structured modelling of appropriate social behaviours; To socialise with visually impaired peers; Facilitate and assist students in the development of friendships; to promote and facilitate the use of braille as a means of becoming literate; to learn, develop and practice social skills in a variety of social settings. To facilitate the generalising of skills in different contextual setting.”

As stated previously the purpose of Friday Fun is to provide a regular social skills development programme for braille users who attend primary school. An integral part of the strategy is to facilitate and assist students in the development of friendships. Not only is making friends a challenge for a braille student but acquiring the skills to maintain friendships are challenging (Sacks 1992). Friday fun allows students to learn, develop and practice social skills in a variety of different settings.

The Friday Fun programme was also created to enable structured modelling of appropriate behaviours to be provided. The aim of the programme was to give mainstreamed students the opportunity to meet others like them; to socialise with their visually impaired peers and to learn the social skills they need to be accepted by their sighted peers.

The programme is planned and implemented by Resource Teachers of Vision whose students are on the BLENNZ role and meet the following requirements. Currently the students who attend must be braille using students attending primary school in the Auckland/Northland Area. Teacher aides usually attend with the students and whanau are welcome to attend if they would like to and are also specifically invited to particular events. The programme was developed for a group of 5-6 year olds but has expanded to include any primary aged students who are braille users.

The programme continues to follow the format developed by the action research undertaken 2000 with some modifications - collaborative planning, learner needs identified from the IEP and social skills checklist, pre-teaching and modelling of social competencies. The programme currently takes place three a term and is assessed via a social checklist, anecdotal records and observation.

Friday Fun requires;

Active Student Participation – it is vital that students be active rather than passive participants. It helps to develop risk taking, the core of all social interactions (Miller 2006)

Everyone is involved with the learner to give constructive feedback on both acceptable and unacceptable social behaviours – meaningful feedback provides an increase in reinforcement leading to the development of higher levels of social skills (Jindal-Snape 2004)

Students to meet the same standards of social behaviour as their peers and the same consequences to occur as for sighted peers (Miller 2006)

Feedback to classroom teachers and parents enables further reinforcement of positive social behaviours both at home and at school.

“Inclusion is not geography” (Doyle, 2004). At first examination the Friday Fun programme does not look like an inclusive practice as it is run by withdrawing the students from their mainstream classrooms. However the intended outcome is the facilitation of more inclusion within the mainstream setting. Many blind and visually impaired students experience exclusion at school, due to their inability to interpret facial expressions. Blind students are unable to observe how other children interact with each other, accepting or rejecting the viewed behaviour (Miller, 2006). In the past educators of the visually impaired have been so focussed on academic inclusion that the teaching of essential social skills needed for students to function independently have been neglected” (Sacks, 1992). To ensure that the visually impaired student is included there are a number of strategies that the Resource Teacher of Vision can use, such as providing opportunities for the student to participate in a wide range of activities including those provided by the Friday Fun programme. It could be argued that Friday Fun is exclusive, withdrawing students who are blind for a separate programme from their sighted peers. However we would suggest that the programme promotes inclusion. A blind student attending school without the necessary social skills does not afford inclusion. Miller (2006) states “Putting a blind student into a class without the necessary tools, to access learning; to be able to fully participate is to place them on an island.”

As such Friday Fun provides a safe, non-judgemental opportunity for the student to practice real-life problem solving that the students can then take back and use when interacting with their sighted peers (Koenig, Holbrook & Corn, 2000). The development of friendships and support networks are vital to the long term well-being of all adults and children visually impaired or not, “One of the realities of life that our young people are the future. One of the challenges of inclusion is that they enter that future with acceptance and friendship.” (Fraser, Moltzen, & Ryba, 2005, pg. 187). We see Friday Fun as providing students with the opportunity to be accepted by both their sighted and non-sighted peers through developing the skills they need to form and maintain the friendships they will need to move successfully into their futures.

Most sessions are held at the North Shore Visual Resource Unit, where children are involved in a variety of activities.

As the programme is responsive to the needs of the learners who attend it would be very difficult to describe specifically what happens at each session however a general overview is that students and Resource Teachers of Vision or Teacher Aides arrive between 9:30am and 10am. Students are encouraged to greet one another and spend some time catching up in an informal setting. Once everyone arrives the RTV who is running the session introduces the topic and provides an overview of the activity that the students will be participating in.Some examples of the activities undertaken include; board game playing, fishing, apple picking, putting up a tent, making baking soda volcanoes. In order to for students to generalise their social skills in a variety of places sometimes trips are organised to places such as an historical village, orchard, horse riding, or going to a supermarket. These trips provide opportunities to practice a skill the children have learnt in a wider social setting and be able to apply learning in the familiar to the unfamiliar.

The activities are always interactive and provide opportunities for the students to work co-operatively. The students always share morning tea and lunch and are left to have free time and discussion during break times.

Friday Fun provides -

Learners with opportunities to practice and repeat social interactions with peers

For the teaching of social competency skills

Exposes students to a range of social settings enabling the generalisation of skills from one environment to another

Support network for family/whanau and also teacher aides

RTVS involved together in fun and sometimes challenging activities

The thematic approach of the programme allows for the interests and needs of the students to be catered for. The students often describe Friday Fun as the best part of their week. Strong friendships have developed within the group, with students describing one or other of the others who attend as their, “best friend.” It is interesting to note that these students although shy and reticent in the mainstream setting were noticeably more confident and outgoing with their non-sighted peers.

A great example of this can be seen in the blind cricket programme which we have run this past year. We were invited to attend a Halberg Foundation event and learnt how to play blind cricket, the students absolutely loved it and asked if we teach the rest of the Friday Fun students. So we organised Friday Fun around sharing the skills we and the students had learnt with their Friday Fun peers. Finally as part of generalising the students’ skill base and facilitating inclusion in the mainstream environment the two students who had originally attended the Halberg event took their newfound skills and experience into each student’s school where they taught groups of their peers how to play blind cricket. A set of equipment has been bought for each student to have at school and it is being used on a regular basis.

The strengths of the Friday Fun programme are many;

Friday Fun is collaborative and consultative and meets the individual needs of students. It has been running successfully for fifteen years and it facilitates the initiating and maintaining of friendships. - “For visually impaired children, the challenge of initiating and maintaining interactions with peers is considerable” (Kelkis, 1992). It gives students the opportunity to take risks with their peers in a safe environment. “The establishment of friendships increases self-esteem that translates into a willingness to take risks. Risk taking is inherent to learning and independent living (Miller 2006).”

It is flexible in meeting the needs of the students who attend which allows for the various cultures and needs of the students to be catered for.

The regularity of the programme, giving students ample opportunity to practice and be scaffolded successfully to the acquisition of new skills.

It is backed up by the literature and theories surrounding both education and the developmental needs of visually impaired students.

However it also has some weaknesses;

Unfortunately because the students have to travel to participate in the programme students are sometimes unable to attend because of transportation problems/prior commitments and dependence on teacher aides and RTVs. The programme is limited at this point to braille using primary school students. Spasmodic attendance at Friday Fun often due to ill health can result in the fragmentation of learning goals. It is limited to primary aged students stopping just as the students enter arguably the most turbulent social time of adolescence.

We used Sacks and Wolffe Hierarchy of Social skills schema (below) to examine the Friday Fun programme.

* AWARENESS
	+ Self-identity + Social Awareness = Behavioural social skills
* INTERACTIVE
	+ Awareness of other people’s skills +Strategies for positive interactions = Interactive social skills
* EVALUATIVE
	+ Interpretation of social situations + Awareness of social needs of others + Strategies to enhance social competence = Cognitive social understanding

Sacks & Wolffe, 2006

So, where to from here? After our review it was clear that the Friday Fun Programme should be extended from its current narrow focus to a much wider one.

As we explore the recommendations that we have made for this extension we need to be clear regarding what we mean by social skills. As human beings we have a set of social skills that through various means we acquire in order to interact with each other on a social level. These skills move from the simple to the complex as we grow. Typically developing children acquire many of these skills incidentally through visual cues so for our visually impaired students these skills need to be part of the curriculum moving from just the awareness of social skills to being fully cognitive of social understanding.

After our review of the programme it became evident that long term planning and assessment plays an important role in the successful implementation of any curriculum and this extends to social skills teaching. It was our recommendation that a more structured curriculum be implemented as consistency and clarity of purpose is vital to the acquisition of social skills for the visually impaired therefore a well-planned curriculum is vital (Loumiet & Levack, 1993). A balance needed to be found between the flexibility and adaptability of the programme which allowed us to meet the very individual needs of each student with the consistency of a clearly planned curriculum with the long term goals in mind.

At this time Friday Fun is limited to those students who are classified as blind braille users as this was the group of greatest need when the programme was first developed. However social isolation and exclusion experienced by the visually impaired is not limited to those students who are braille users. Students with visual impairments from mild to severe all require teaching to facilitate the learning of social skills and the opportunity to socialise with their peers. Since completing this review and making our recommendations a number of low-vision groups have developed to meet the specific needs of these students as identified by their resource teachers of vision.

The research is clear that students at all levels will benefit from the systematic and sequential acquisition of social skills. Looking back to the social skills hierarchy, the first level of awareness is that of a very young child. We have all observed this in babies and toddlers when they smile in response to being smiled at, right through to the side by side play that can be observed in early childhood centres to the beginnings of true social interactions which express interactive intent. The development of social skills is ably covered by the ECE Resource Teachers of Vision in the early childhood setting when they facilitate and teach social skills to their students. Currently Friday Fun is meeting the needs of a very specific group of Braille using students in the primary school setting which is level two on the hierarchy of social skills but we feel we need to consider level three with adolescents and level two with the low vision students.

Low Vision students may acquire social skills more quickly than braille students however significant intervention is still required. As a team the Auckland Resource teachers of vision have discussed and then established various social skills groups for these students so that their needs are met. These include; the intermediated albinism group, the social kids group (for students in years 6-8) and the active explorers group of (5-8 year olds).

Adolescents have much more specific needs. Currently at BLENNZ there is the Kickstart programme which caters for students transitioning from school to independent living and there is a small but growing number of social skills programmes for Years 7-13. In Auckland there is a girls group which meets twice a year for Girls Day Out. The aim of the programme is to establish friendship networks and to develop strategies for social success such as addressing appearance, and social expectations around eating out. However research shows that as with other skills social skills need to be taught consistently therefore the extension of these programmes could be considered, however academic pressures often dictate the frequency that these older groups can meet.

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