



# SPEVI

South Pacific Educators  
in Vision Impairment

## Australia

SHINING THE LIGHT ON VISION EDUCATION

# 2017 CONFERENCE

**BRISBANE 8TH - 12TH JANUARY**



# Wheelchair Fun

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# Objective

To document the evolution of wheelchair dancing and games at Narbethong Special school.



# Setting the scene

At Narbethong Special School all students have a significant vision loss, all have an intellectual impairment and many have physical impairments. We have many students who use wheelchairs for mobility. Typically our students spend little school time in their wheelchairs; they are engaged in their Active Learning programs.



We wanted to provide the opportunity for these students to participate and interact whilst engaging in movement based activities. In other words we wanted them to have fun whilst they were in their chairs.

Today I would like to show you how we were able to assist our students to dance, play games and generally have a fun time whilst in their wheelchairs.





During the year 2010 one of our students was trialling a post school service provider with a teacher aide accompanying her. During her day she was introduced to 'Wheelchair dancing'. The teacher aide came back to Narbethong and recounted the details and ideas she had seen to her class teachers (Jim Good and Annett Wellard). They contacted the service provider to learn more and set about making it happen at Narbethong.



Our version of wheelchair dancing looked a bit like line dancing with wheelchairs. Jim in particular worked on choreographing 4 dances which were easy to learn and were fun.

Wheelchair Dancing provided lots of repetition of specific concepts:

- Numeracy - Counting, mostly 1 to 4 but up to 8 in one dance.

Spatial Awareness - Forwards, backwards, right and left, half turn and full turn.



- Auditory Processing - Specific students were asked to listen to a short sequence of words and say “go” at the right time.
- Social Emotional - Interactions with other students and adults occurred throughout the dances.





- Physical Awareness – Students experienced vestibular stimulation throughout the activity. It was very noticeable that many students ‘responded’ almost straight away – they smiled, laughed, rocked, clapped, waved arms and legs about.....
- Emotional Engagement - Enjoyed the music or not (some students disliked particular songs and they let us know).



# Dancing 2011

In this picture you will notice that the students have their heads up. The two boys are moving their arms and one has a leg up. These were not typical positions for these students.



# Reaction

This student typically has a very blank expression. He loves dancing, has his favourite music but generally responds in an animated way at each session.





# Happy dancer

This chap has his head up and eyes forward. He is a child who enjoys engaging with others and dancing gives him plenty of motivation and opportunity.



Over the last 6 years we have been able to involve several classes in various combinations and groups. We were always constrained by the number of adults available compared to the number of students. We found that we didn't want students waiting on the sidelines for long periods of time, therefore we restricted the number of classes participating in any session.



# Pastoral care programs:

At Narbethong we are regularly involved in pastoral care programs with local secondary schools. Where the students were attending for a series of visits they became involved in the dancing program. At one stage they brought music which had the same beat as one of our dances and we were able to substitute their music to use with our dance.

Many of our students responded to the interaction with other young people in a favourable way. There were more smiles, heads raised ,listening, laughter etc.









# In 2013 the Variety chefs visited our school:

The chefs arrived at school dressed as chefs and simply joined in our dancing session as a part of their visit to the school. It was great to see our students have a way to connect with strangers via a fun activity, ie a shared experience of dancing together.





## Variety Chefs visit

The chefs were able to learn a dance very quickly and join in the group activity with the students.







# Parents:

In time we were able to host opportunities for parents to join in a dancing session. This allowed parents to have a shared experience with their student which was just fun, and to gain an understanding of what we were doing each week.









# 2012 - Taking It Overseas

“The Mango Tree’ is a centre for the disabled in Tonga. We were invited to visit in order to collaborate with staff. The centre is run by a mission and relies heavily on goodwill from many sources. Those attending the centre have a range of disabilities and we were invited to work with those with vision and other impairments.



We were able to demonstrate wheelchair dancing to show family and staff another way to have fun, playful and active interactions with their wheelchair bound children. They thought we were highly amusing but as we continued to dance with their children the adults started to understand what was happening – ie. We were having fun together in an active way. The Tongan children loved it. They smiled, laughed and waved their arms about. There was a feeling of joint celebration between us all.



# Tonga

Dancing was a very quick way to connect at a very happy and friendly level with the people at the centre in Tonga.



# Physiotherapist's feedback:

We knew why we felt the sessions were beneficial to our students - they were fun for everyone, our students were laughing, smiling, lifting their heads up, interacting and responding. Some were answering on cue when asked for input, all were enjoying some fresh air and all had the opportunity to be a part of a larger group activity.



As wheelchair dancing became a regular activity in our school our physiotherapist (Kim Morris) gave some positive feedback which confirmed what we felt was happening. These are her words to describe wheelchair dancing at Narbethong School:

**Language to orientate (WESST)** – as spoken by person pushing the wheelchair. Eg. Left, right, forward, back, around.....





- **Vision** – for those with cortical vision impairment where movement improves functional vision
- Variety of **Vestibular** (movement through space) input to *alert* – definite changes in direction, and using a speed which is faster than regular movement eg, circles with change in direction; back and forth; whereas slower movements are more calming.



- Variety of **Proprioceptive** (awareness of body position) input – different speeds of stop/start and change of direction; stimulates taking *weight* through different parts of the body and promotes *correcting* of body position.
- Increasing **Vestibular** and **Proprioceptive** input improves body awareness & posture and balance responses.
- **Rhythm & Beat** – movement to music to stimulate movement/vocalising.



- A stimulating movement activity – changes **breathing pattern** and encourages deeper breaths.

Thus wheelchair dancing/fun has the potential to result in the student being **more alert/focused** on returning to classroom.



Over time at Narbethong many things emerged in a natural way.

There were some mobile students in the school who were also musically talented. Our sessions were held on the ground level of the school in an undercover area. These mobile students would be returning from an O & M walk and arrive back just as our wheelchair dancing session was getting underway.



Two of these mobile, articulate students were soon taking on the role of 'caller' for our sessions. (This meant the student held a microphone and 'called' the steps for the dancers as in a square dance or bush dance situation. They kept us on time and on task throughout the dances. The sessions were actually significantly more animated when these students were involved.







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This was great for them – they demonstrated and progressed in their understanding of musical situations and concepts.

They stayed on task, interacted on a concrete level with the multiply impaired students, and they had a lot of fun whilst developing self confidence in their abilities.

Naturally one student was more able than the other. By offering both the opportunity to call (taking turns), both were able to progress.



Classroom Teacher's observations of her mobile students who were involved in the wheelchair dancing program.

- Self confidence to speak into microphone in the large group
- Self esteem gained through acknowledgement of the assistance they have been giving to other class teachers and students
- Feeling of helping others as in Community Service work . John saw it as his role, something where he was needed outside of the routine in his class.



- Added to their music programme. Gaining skills such as knowing when to come in to call the words, feeling the beat when calling as well as when helping out with pushing a chair and experiencing different music styles beyond what they listen to.
- Communication with students who are non verbal showing respect by always greeting, using their name and asking after their health.
- Social Interaction with wider school community
- Learning new skills



Their teacher also commented that with other students, goals for wheelchair dancing might address:

- Time keeping
- Self determination

Goals would always depend on each student's ability etc.





All of the Narbethong students have a significant vision loss. Some of our mobile students assisted adults to push the students who were in wheelchairs. These students were also reinforcing their English and Maths curriculums by; listening, communicating and following instructions - including counting and following directional information. They learnt to work as a team and to stay on task. Finally they were mixing with other classes and having fun in a larger group.



# Helpers

In this picture you can see three mobile students assisting adults to push other students in their wheelchairs. They are all wearing cowboy hats, as for a Bush dance,



Upon being prompted with the familiar cue ; "one, two, three", two students who were able to respond vocally, were expected to say "go" to start the dances. These students were given plenty of processing time and received lots of reinforcement when the music began immediately after their responses. Allowing this to be a part of the routine at wheelchair dancing reinforced concepts being taught both in class and at home. Wheelchair dancing though great fun in the moment provided an opportunity for discussion back in the classroom. Eg. *"Tom, you were laughing when we were dancing today, you were having a great time ....."* Talking about our dancing became a part of the regular classroom communication sessions.



When pushing a wheelchair you are aware of head and body movements and vocalisations but you do not see any facial expressions. As you approached other dancers you could see their smiling faces and respond accordingly.

Often the students we least expected would enjoy the activity were the ones who responded the most. I do not recall anyone actually disliking it but many students surprised us with their responses. One particular student almost always has a 'poker' face. However during wheelchair dancing he would 'light up'. Big grins, arms waving around. He also took a great dislike to one song and let us know about that too.











We saw an improvement in posture as well as increased communication through body language. Heads coming up more, directed gazes, smiles, laughter, arms and legs moving about. We saw people learning while they were having fun!



Our wheelchair dancing evolved to include a game at the end of each session. We played something similar to musical chairs using quadrants marked on the ground. The objects used in the game had tactile and auditory features. In addition numeracy concepts linked the activity to our curriculum.

The outdoor area we used most often for our dancing was later painted with a simple grid (in high contrast colours for VI students). This grid facilitates the playing of simple games modified to suit specific students' needs. eg: Snakes and Ladders - teaching spatial concepts, including position and rotation.





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Other opportunities to have fun whilst in a wheelchair have presented themselves through inter-school activities. The St Laurence's and Stuartholme schools host an Annual Special Olympics Day for Special Schools in our region. Students are given whatever level of support they require, provided mostly by the students from the St Laurence's and Stuartholme schools. There are many opportunities for interaction throughout the day.

We have collaborated with the planning committee to develop an inclusive program of activities, including adapting games to suit our Vision and Multiply Impaired students.



# Gutterball

We used chutes and gutters to roll balls at a target area. Each ball differed from the others in size and shape and had tactile and auditory features.





# Tug of war

A large thick rope was used as a tactile object which was moved over each team member, giving each student a sensory experience as it moved over their body.





# Parachute Games/Songs

Students also enjoy playing these games at school. The parachute is raised up and down at the appropriate time in the song. Eg. The Wheels on the Bus, Itsy Bitsy Spider, The Grand Old Duke of York..



- Lightweight objects and equipment were used in throwing games to cater for our students capabilities. Eg. Foam javelins



These Special Olympics are big events involving several special schools and are improving each year. They give our students the opportunity to interact physically and communicate socially with a wider community in a safe and supportive environment.

This year the highlight was relay races, with our students racing against another school. Going fast is fun for many of the students and the spirit of competition was almost tangible.





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In 2016 we were ready to incorporate games as an addition to our dancing sessions. They became “Wheelchair Games” sessions. We always began with one of our original dances and moved onto games. We were determined to retain dancing as an element of our program, building on the familiar while learning new ways to have fun.

Conscious of the need to integrate the Maths and English curriculums into all of our practice, we decided to work on developing games which would reinforce the main concepts of our specific units of work.



We began by looking back and recalling games from our own childhood;

We recalled playground and skipping games. These games involved; turn taking, listening for your name (and hopefully recognising it), recognising a familiar tune or chant, counting etc. They provided opportunities to vocalise a response, use a switch to respond, give a yes/no movement of the head etc. We adapted these games to work with students in wheelchairs.





Some games which we adapted were:

- ‘Vote, vote vote’ – This is a skipping game. The first student moves into the centre of the space as the song is sung. The next, student is called in, the first is sent away, another is called in and so on. Recognising and responding your name is emphasised as are concepts of moving in and out.
- What’s the time Mr Wolf – adapted to ‘who is wearing Afo’s, who is wearing red, who has curly hair etc.



- 10 Little Monkeys – This is adapted to suit the number of students participating at the time. Numbers are used in context, heads are touched at the appropriate time in the song etc. If students are able they are encouraged to select the next person to leave the circle. Throughout the game students are being moved about the space in their chairs.
- Hokey pokey – emphasises concepts of in, out and around as well as body parts.



# Magic Hat

We use a high contrast hat with an auditory component – a bell attached to the hat. A switch with the message : “I’ve got the hat”, recorded and the switch placed appropriately for each student.



# Magic Hat

The hat is moved around the group as the song is sung. Students are encouraged to indicate that they want the hat. Once wearing the hat the student is offered the switch which has the recorded message saying, “I’ve Got The Hat”





Songs written for each student  
to describe their recent events.  
EG.

*John Bro-wn has red hair*

*He love s go ing swimm ing*

*He eats his yum my lunch es*

*And he drink s by him self*





**John Bro-wn has a new chair  
He sits in it for his lu nch  
His Pop makes such lovly meals  
And John eats them with a spoon**

**John Bro-wn loves the swimming pool  
He goes wi ith his mu um  
She puts on his leg weights  
So his feet touch the bottom.**



These songs were used whilst our English unit had a focus on identity, rhyme and rhythm. We wrote new songs frequently and they provided an opportunity to remind students about what they were doing, and included personal details like – hair colour, texture etc



Our program continued to develop with input from our Speech Language Pathologist. We implemented her recommendations which led us to imbed communication responses into the sequences, games etc. This meant switches (Big macs) were used at appropriate times during games. Sometimes this meant that the game moved more slowly. Yes/no responses (specifically using the PODD system) were expected at different points in a game and students had opportunities to demonstrate their skills in the context of the game.



We have seen these sessions evolving continually in response to our students' needs and abilities as well as reinforcing specific aspects of the current curriculum. With each New Year we expect that this change and growth will continue.

We have endeavoured to demonstrate that students in wheelchairs can enjoy fun activities whilst in their chairs; regardless of their cognitive, physical and visual abilities.





One of the things that we have loved most about these programs has been the opportunities given to our students to come into contact with more people; both adults and students. To have shared experiences which are positive and in which they can have an active part.

The culmination of this year's dancing and games was the School's Christmas concert. Our students danced our version of the barn dance to the tune of "Rockin around the Christmas Tree"





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