

UKAAF webinar, 6 September 2022

Gwyn McCormack in conversation Transcript

Roger Firman

Hello. My name is Roger Furman from the UK Association for accessible formats, so glad you could join us.

Today as our guest, we welcome Gwyn McCormack who is the founder of Positive Eye Ltd. Her mission being to provide practical courses, consultancy, and a bespoke product range of resources for practitioners working with children and young people with vision impairment (VI) and additional learning needs.

Gwyn McCormack

Thank you, Roger.

Roger

Gwyn, in 2008 you founded Positive Eye Ltd but before we get to that, I wonder if you could sketch in your previous work and what brought you to the realisation that you wanted to go in a different direction?

Gwyn

Thank you, Roger. I was a teacher of children and young people with vision impairments and was a teacher in St Helens for eleven years, a peripatetic teacher supporting children, mainly in Secondary and had the

Secondary caseload for the whole of St Helens in the North-West, where I live, and we went out into schools and homes supporting children and young people with vision impairments who were my responsibility.

Then I moved to a Local Authority in Tameside where I was the head of service for five years and had a team of twenty teachers of vision impairment, teaching assistants, again supporting children and young people across the town and across the area in homes, schools, and colleges. So that was my Teacher VI background.

Prior to that I was a fashion and textiles teacher for about eight years before I left to have my boys and then came back in just as the government was wanting to include children with vision impairments more in schools. That's how I came back into the education sector as I had been at home with the boys for four years and not working. Then I came back as a teacher of VI, and so I really, really loved my job and really loved my work. And I worked with brilliant teams, who were very dedicated, passionate professionals who were a joy to work with.

But I came to the point where I felt that the way we were being asked to deliver services was not conducive to the benefit of children, really. We had so many needs to meet and put in a position where I felt I couldn't cut the cake any thinner and do justice to the children's needs so personally, that became one step greater than I wanted to continue to take and so decided to leave my wonderful job and set up Positive Eye.

Roger

Could you tell us about Positive Eye and the start of that journey, what were your hopes having clearly identified a gap you felt needed to be filled?

Gwyn

Well, my hope at the time, still what it is now, is to bring a very practical approach to a very small world of professionals and families, because I

serve both in terms of courses and resources. The hope was to continue to provide courses and resources that actually, our practical in their approach and really meet the needs of professionals working with children and families too, because we are such a small world, there is very little out there in terms of guidance documentation to support the workforce. And I saw all the gaps in my job but never had any time to do anything about it. So my hope was to take my knowledge and experience and to give back to the Community that supports children with vision impairment in the best practical way possible, I never ever come at this as an expert. I don't think I am an expert, but I use my knowledge and experience to look at ways of supporting children and young people with vision impairments in a very realistic practical way. That was my hope then and it continues to be my mission now. In fact, it's probably a deeper desire now than it ever was.

Roger

Could you tell us about your work with Courses for QTVIs?

Gwyn

Well, I have developed courses for QTVIs, Qualified Teachers of vision impairment, but also my courses are suitable for school class teachers, early years practitioners, teaching assistants and parents as well, they're not just specifically for teachers of VI.

I've developed so many courses. Courses for if you're new to working with a child in your classroom giving the basic skills and knowledge that you need to support them, to running a whole QTVI course at the University of South Wales for two years where I was training QTVIs specifically, to developing courses and programs that go with the courses.

My courses are on visual skills, for tactile learners, on including a child who's a brailist in mainstream. There are courses on a multi-sensory approach to literacy, on social and emotional well-being, and on building independence.

If I could highlight two, because there are so many, I think the thing to say about everything I ever do I hardly ever use PowerPoint. If I use PowerPoint, it's only to show an image.

I really am a practical presenter and I will arrive wherever I'm delivering courses, or from doing it online here with many practical resources, twenty-five bags of stuff and more to get in the car to travel. That's why I think I've become so loved because people love to see the resources.

The two courses I guess which are my flagship courses - the ones I seem to do the most - the first one is the Positive Looking Visual Skills Program which is one I wrote when I first left my job and it gives activities, goals, observation points for each visual skill and the hierarchy of visual skill development. So from children who might just be visually aware, to visually attending, to fixating, to tracking, scanning, visual directive, reaching discrimination of objects, discrimination of images, and then children who are going to read print and access number and print was a hierarchy of development and I always felt this was misunderstood and that our role in supporting children to achieve these skills was not appreciated and I just knew we needed this program that was simple to understand and now it's used internationally. It's used in Australia, New Zealand, Iceland, America. I've developed assessed courses where I've trained trainers, QTVIs to become a Positive Look trainer, they deliver another assessed course called my Positive Look Practitioner Course. It's used as a whole school approach across many special schools in the UK and it really is such a huge difference-maker. This is highly thought of by Professor Rachel Pilling, the consultant ophthalmologist from the Bradford and HS team, who really promotes its use in schools. So that's one course that's really popular, and I run cohorts all the time, and they're always full. It really underpins our knowledge as teachers of VI, teaching assistants, class teachers, any teacher anywhere in mainstream or special needs to understand that visual skill hierarchy, because it's the foundation of children's development and often misunderstood. So that's one course that's very popular.

I guess my other course is my multisensory approach to literacy. I'm very good at showing how to teach literacy in the everyday experience of the child who's visually impaired or any other child who has complex learning needs, that literacy is all around us. It's in the home, the garden, and the bathroom. It's in having a snack, it's in getting ready for bed. I do very much link to the everyday experience, but I set it against a framework of the literacy access skills like tactile access, fine motor skills, concept development, book and story skills, language development. So it's very much linked to all the skills a child who is visually impaired, or a brailist accessing by tactile methods would need to participate in literacy and learning, whether they're in mainstream or special schools. So I think those are the two, there are many more. But those are the two that I chose to highlight.

Roger

During the last fourteen years, is it your view that the need is the same as when you started, or has the landscape changed?

Gwyn

I think children's needs are the same. I listen very carefully to teachers of VI, teaching assistants, class teachers and they still report the same challenges that I experienced, not enough time to adapt the curriculum materials that the children need that are not catered for enough in working out the time required. I don't think it's understood how time-heavy that is or can be, and what that requires. The lack of time for forward planning, which is absolutely crucial for children and not enough time for training, to actually train the whole school, train the key teams. You're still in the position where you're lucky to get that time because often the child who is visually impaired is the only one in the school and there are other children who may have greater needs, so the focus could be on them rather than the one child who's visually impaired, so I think the needs of the children with vision impairments are not always understood by the budget holders.

The reality of what the cost is of including a child with vision impairment in mainstream or special schools is still I don't think fully understood. I

think what it boils down to is the actual understanding of what it truly means for a child not to be able to see and what the impact of that is on learning and development, and so I don't think things have changed in terms of that because if we understood that and we recognized it and we responded, we wouldn't be getting what we're still getting now. I don't think the landscape for children has changed. It needs to change and we really need to put VI at the starting point for planning by budget holders, local authorities and by class teachers at the very start of planning and then for the teacher in the classroom if they plan for that child first, all the other children's needs fall into place. So I think there's still a lot of work to do to change that landscape and also to support the independence of children so that although they need a lot of support, that we are making sure we enable their independence.

I think there's the training for technology for children who are visually impaired. the technology training is huge and often the teacher of the VI is only one step ahead. So the money and the time for training for technology and all those things really need to be budgeted in carefully, so that the need for the child is properly truly met.

Roger

I know you work both nationally and internationally. Have you found there are differences in how you present courses internationally and if so, are there things to which you can point?

Gwyn

Well, I have done a lot of training in the last fourteen years. I've trained in, I think over twelve countries on more than one occasion quite often. And I would say that there are no differences, The needs are the same. So I guess sometimes the need is greater in a poorer country, I've travelled to many countries, but underlying there are no differences. Everybody wants to know how to enable access for a tactile learner. Everybody needs to know how to enable access for a visual learner. Everybody wants to know ideas for resources, and the social skills and development of supporting social and emotional well-being are the same. So when I was thinking about that question, there are no

differences. And I think the only difference is that I sometimes have to have an interpreter to translate what I'm saying. But that's really the only difference. The needs are the same wherever I go, whether it's America, Iceland, Hungary, Romania, France, or Germany.

Roger

In delivering your courses, what has been your experience of this either online, in person, or both for the same event?

Gwyn

I think person-to-person, face-to-face will always win, because there's the dynamic in the room and there's a camaraderie of spirit. And usually when I deliver training, I know 99.9% of the time I get really brilliant feedback and everybody goes out with the shopping list of things that they are going to buy from the Pound Shop or IKEA. So face-to-face for me is always better because I always take a lot of practical resources and they always like to look at those. I show those online, but also they can't look at them directly.

For me, the other problem with working online is the people don't interact online as well as they do face-to-face. Often people have their videos off. You don't know what they are thinking. You don't know what they're doing behind the black screen that you're seeing. And I find that, well, I used to when I first started online found that quite disconcerting. And I used to think I was just delivering training to myself in the end.

Because I could see myself with the big screen, but I never knew what anybody else was doing. So I prefer face-to-face. But I do so much training online.

My biggest difference is the interaction. For some reason people tend to go behind their video cameras that are switched off and you don't make the connection in the same way. So you're left imagining what they might be thinking, so it doesn't do your mental well-being very much good. I think you have to be a tough trainer to ride that one out actually and not worry about that. I don't worry about it anymore. I used to but I don't

anymore because I think, well, I can't make people put the video cameras on, but that would be my biggest thing of why I prefer face-to-face. So I'd rather struggle on the motorway with all the traffic and have all that hassle and take my stuff with me and be in the room with people. It's much more fun as well.

Roger

At this point Clair, do we have any questions please?

Clair Woolrich

With changes to the school curriculum, how do you see this impacting upon children with complex learning needs?

Gwyn

Well, it's the same as what I said Clair. I think there needs to be definitely more training available for teachers and teaching assistants in schools who are working with children with complex learning needs, inclusive of those with vision impairment, we need to have more training on vision impairment to teacher training level. I think there needs to be a better understanding of the needs of children with vision impairment and to make sure that there is planning time on the curriculum for the curriculum adjustments that are necessary, the forward planning needs to happen and then the time for curriculum adaptations needs to happen. So it will be the same as it was and ever will be. The fundamentals don't change regardless of what the curriculum is or what the changes are. These are children who are visually impaired, the needs don't change, children are children and they are children with vision impairments who still have those needs whatever the weather is doing, a very practical curriculum or an academically driven curriculum. So I think we'll always get what we've got until we understand those needs that I've just outlined and it's a culture change that's so desperately needed to have that recognition of the needs of children with vision impairments and that understanding of the impact on learning and development, but also time for curriculum resources to be made accessible, because as you'll know from UKAAF, it's not a quick process.

Roger

now Gwyn, before we close, you are going to give us a flavour, a demonstration of one of your Story Time Shows, I think, would you like to go ahead now? Thank you very much.

Gwyn

Thank you. In March 2020, when COVID hit the world, my business went on hold and everything was cancelled and I'm not a person who sits and does nothing. Within a day or so of that happening - because it pretty much happened overnight - for me everything was cancelled. I decided that I wanted to do something to support the community of parents and families and particularly children with complex learning needs, those with vision impairment but also children with profound and multiple-learning difficulties, when I knew it was going to be an incredibly long, difficult day, many days ahead of isolation. So I, for some reason, decided to take my stories of Marvin, the little boy that I write stories about and take them on Facebook, and I went live three times a week for four months, and I performed what it developed into, a model of literacy underpinned with teaching and learning practices for children with vision impairment, which I named along the way the Story Time Show.

Hundreds of families from around the world found me on Facebook and joined this community which all I can say is, and was, truly, truly beautiful. I quickly ran out of stories and had to start writing more and I also had to start creating a lot more characters and the whole thing evolved and developed. I was always doing a lot of work in America and I spoke with my American colleagues at the deaf-blind projects from all the states across SE, Midwest States and said how about a Story Time Show for your children and to cut a Long story short, because there's so much to say.

Two years later, I have performed hours and hours of Story Time Shows for, I don't know, maybe one-thousand families by now and more and growing. And the love for the Story Time Show is phenomenal. It's incredible the difference it's making. In fact, we're about to do some

research with West Chester University on the difference the Story Time Show is making.

It goes out live to families, I do show runs and I'm not live every single week of every single month, but there it is. I write a story, and it goes out over four shows, five shows, six shows depending on the length of the story. But it's underpinned with good learning and practice for children with vision impairment. I wear a bright neckerchief around my neck and I'm putting on the yellow one now. I work against a black background so I stand out. I've got a hot air balloon and a frog called Fabulously Fabulous Fabiano, the frog who's on the wall behind me. These are all characters we've made. My husband and I make all the characters.

And I use a simple rainbow wheel I bought from the Pound Shop like a windmill for the garden and I spin that. And for the children at one point in the show, I'm gonna do a burst of the show in a second and then go wee! Wee! Wee!.

And I also tell the story of Marvin's adventures using the characters I've created, I use cardboard or by Grey Board off Amazon, and I buy glitter paper and we design characters so this one I'm holding up is Deck, the Decopus.

I'm doing a Story Time Show tonight for America, so getting my things ready for that, and it's a blue Octopus. He's got ten legs, which is why I called him Dec, the Decopus, and he's got white and orange legs and a big happy smile on his face. And I have one-hundred characters that I've designed now, and our son Tom, who's thirty-three, writes all the songs for the show and writes all the music and I sing the songs. I'm not a singer, I'm not an actor and I'm not trying to be. The idea of the show is that the families can participate in meaningful literacy from home, and they can copy what I'm doing, I don't want it to be perfect. I want it to be homespun fun, but the joy the show has brought has just been incredible. I get feedback on a daily basis from the families who connect with me, so this is Marvin, who's got black hair, who wears black round frame glasses, has a big smile on his face. He's got a yellow jumper, green shorts, and blue boots, and he's a really kind and helpful little boy.

In all his adventures he's always kind and helpful to all the fun characters he meets along the way, and also on the show.

I make craft and the craft is linked to whatever character I'm telling the story of that day, and then all the families in America receive a craft box with all the craft materials for each character I'm making. And there's a group in Mississippi, a big group of people who pack the craft materials, and they're mailed in boxes across America. And the families really, really love receiving them. And then while I'm making the craft on the show they've got the right materials for the right character and they can make the craft too. And like I say, this is all underpinned with good teaching and learning practices for children with vision impairments, children with complex learning needs, neuro-typical children, so it suits all abilities, all ages, all needs, and the parents love it too. I think everybody loves the Story Time Show, so I will just display it before I give a burst of the show because once I start I'll be singing to you in a minute.

Roger

To close, I wonder if you would like to give us a flavour of your Sparkly Story Time Show.

To listen to Gwyn's presentation, do visit the recording from our website or YouTube, you will surely hear how enthusiastic she is.

Gwyn, thank you so much for that short presentation. I'm sure we all wish you continued success and it has been a privilege to have you as a guest.

<https://www.youtube.com/user/PositiveEyeLtd>

www.positiveeye.co.uk

A brief word about October 4th, James Bowden will be joining us to tell us about the International Council on English Braille. From us all, goodbye until next time.