

Trudy Smith:

Hello and welcome to this week's NextSense Institute Podcast, number 102. My name is Trudy Smith and I will be your host for today. I'm joined today by Christine Casey, who works for Education Queensland, Statewide Vision Impairment Services, who've got this really fantastic resource that they've developed. And I can't wait to talk about it and share some of it with you today as well, but Christine, welcome. Could you please introduce yourself to our audience?

Christine Casey:

Thank you for having me, Trudy. It's lovely to talk to you today. My name's Christine Casey, as you already mentioned, and my current role is as head of the braille advisory service, or head of Braille Literacy for the Queensland Department of Education. I'm a teacher and I've been teaching for over 12 years now, actually, in Australia and overseas. And I've worked in a range of different educational settings, including mainstream education. I actually started as a classroom music teacher and now I'm specializing in braille support. And my job includes supporting staff and students across the state of Queensland, and my primary role is to help improve outcomes for students and develop programs and resources to support braille learning and teaching.

Trudy Smith:

What a diverse career you've already had. And I feel like some of the start of your career explains what we're going to talk about now, but essentially what you've done is created some braille letter songs. And I'm just wondering where that idea came from.

Christine Casey:

So, the idea came when I was working to develop the Braille Learning Progression, which is what I was originally employed to do for the Department of Education. And during that process, I realized that a lot of the resources people were using to teach braille were a bit outdated or resourced from overseas, and they didn't have equivalent resources to what is available for sighted learners learning to read print. So, a lot of the programs that are used in schools come with songs to teach letters and sounds and lots of videos and cartoons and fun pictures, and I felt like our braille-using students were missing out on a lot of the fun of learning to read. And so, I got thinking about how we might be able to increase the fun and I really wanted it to have some good qualities that maximize the skills and interests that a lot of our students have.

And a lot of students that we work with who learn braille have a keen interest in music and quite a few of them have a really good sense of pitch, so I thought that developing some braille letter songs might help engage those students and yeah, help them to get really excited about the learning process. Learning to read and write is one of the biggest challenges of a young person's life and academic journey, and I just wanted to see if we could make that fun. And to be honest, I was quite surprised that no one had done a similar thing before. There were a few songs available on YouTube and other platforms, but they weren't of an equivalent standard to those that are available to students who read print.

Trudy Smith:

Fun is absolutely the word. This must have been such a great process. And can you tell us a little bit about what was involved in developing them?

Christine Casey:

Yeah, you're right. It was a great process. It was so much fun, and I really got to relive my music teacher side. I seem to have this unique skill of writing little jingles, and my previous job to this one was teaching English in remote India. And we used a lot of song and dance to help the students there, and so being able to apply that to braille was great fun. So I came up with the concept of linking particular dot numbers to musical pitches, particularly because a lot of our students have perfect pitch, in my experience, and so I thought that might help them to remember the songs. I wrote the songs and pitched the idea to my boss, who was thankfully very supportive and thought it sounded like a great initiative.

And then I got put in contact with Steve Sparrow, who talked over the songs with me and we discussed the ways to make them sound unique and memorable. Then I went to his recording studio when we recorded them, which was a very new process for me. And my background is as a primary music teacher, definitely not as a performer, but it was great fun and Steve's amazing. So, he took those recordings and worked his magic with them. He had his friend also play some of the instrumental tracks for those. And yeah, they came up with an excellent result. I'm very pleased with how they turned out. And I also like the fact that the songs were developed by three braille users, for future braille users. I think that's great.

Trudy Smith:

That is a really lovely involvement, actually, and I feel like they're bringing their own perspective of learning the dots as well to that. So, you can definitely tell that it's very personal. What's the feedback been like from students and families?

Christine Casey:

People love them. So, we've had excellent feedback and I love the fact that singing and dancing has become part of learning braille. I have a number of students learning braille across [inaudible 00:05:48]. It's the way they start their braille lesson every day, and a lot of schools have shared them with their classmates as well. So it's not just something that the student with vision impairment is using, but it's something that is being used in the classroom. And so, while our children are learning braille and their classmates are learning print, the classmates are also having some exposure to braille and enjoying the songs too, which is lovely.

Trudy Smith:

That's a really nice, inclusive element, actually. And I think, well, we talk about phonics and so many programs about phonics involve songs and dancing, as you say, so it makes sense that you would also add music to learning braille.

Christine Casey:

Yeah. Anything that brings fun to it.

Trudy Smith:

Absolutely. Absolutely. So, the audience is probably wondering what on earth that sounds like. So, we're going to just take a moment now and have a listen to the letter R, and we'll come back in a minute. So, have a listen everybody and enjoy these.

RECORDING:

R. Time to get our pirate voices happening and sing about the letter R. (singing) Now, don't you be forgetting, me hearties, that's the letter R.

Trudy Smith:

Oh, that's hilarious. And I can see that being so memorable for students, both typically developing kids as well as those who've got vision impairment. How do you record that without giggling?

Christine Casey:

Well, I have to admit there was a lot of giggling involved in the recording process, because they are children's songs and some of them are a little silly. Although thankfully, I didn't have to record the final pirate takes for these ones. I recorded a much more boring and serious version. And I said to Steve, "I think it needs to be pirates." He didn't believe me at first, actually, but he came on board with the idea and just ran with it. He's amazing at doing voices and accents. Yeah, it's a really fun result.

Trudy Smith:

It is a really fun result.

Christine Casey:

Yeah. There is another song though, which I thought was an outtake; the song for F, which actually does involve live giggling.

Trudy Smith:

We'll share the link to the website for everybody in the show notes so that you can go and have a listen to all of those yourselves and experience F with the live giggling, because honestly, I've now got that pirate song in my head. I'm going to have it there for the rest of the day. I just think this is such a powerful way to teach students. We often think about left brain, right brain, and adding music and memorable rhythms and rhymes is an incredibly powerful way to teach concepts. So, I definitely congratulate you on that work. Well, I'm just wondering, what's your next project, Christine? Where do you go from here?

Christine Casey:

Well, there are 180 contractions in braille, so that's where we're heading.

Trudy Smith:

Are you going to come up with 180 songs?

Christine Casey:

No, no. I don't think we'll do a song for all of the contractions, but we've actually already recorded the next 10, so we've done: and, for, of, the, with; en, in, ed; Dot 5 letter words, so: day, ever, father, for those who are familiar with braille. And we've done a song about numbers. So yeah, we plan to keep doing them. The feedback's been great and they've really helped students to engage with braille and also helped adults to memorize the dot patterns.

Trudy Smith:

Yeah. I see this being as something quite powerful for families as well, to be working on this together but making it feel like fun rather than work. And so, thanks so much for sharing this with us. I think everyone is going to be checking out your website now, just to have a listen to them for themselves. So, really appreciate you taking the time to share this with us today and wish you every success with your ongoing work in this area.

Christine Casey:

Oh, thank you so much, Trudy. It's been a pleasure to talk to you.