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A Group Based Intervention for Children with Special Educational Needs: Promoting Social Skills and Communication through Shared Cooking Activities in a Mainstream Primary School

The author describes the development and implementation of a cookery programme aimed at enhancing social and communication skills for pupils with special educational needs (SEN) in an Irish primary school. Initially the programme was developed for pupils with autistic spectrum disorder, but was later extended to include pupils with other SENs. In order to ensure relevance and effectiveness, planning for the intervention was based on a review of pertinent literature. The project is ongoing and anecdotal evidence indicates positive outcomes for the pupils involved.

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INTRODUCTION

The aim of this cooking-based project was to design and implement an intervention, supported by the literature, which could be applied in a primary school setting for the purpose of enhancing social skills and communication in young children with special educational needs (SEN) (initially prioritising students with autism spectrum disorder (ASD)). The children involved are all based in mainstream classrooms alongside their typically developing peers. However, there exists throughout the school, opportunities to develop subsets of pupils that are afforded time to focus on and develop targeted skills to promote friendships and social inclusion. Over the years, teachers have worked collaboratively to implement literacy, music, physical education, and behaviour based interventions to support the self-confidence and social competence of children with SEN. The cookery-based intervention, with website support (http://sallinsns.scoilnet.ie/cookery-archive.html), began in the

school year 2011/12, and continues to date, to offer students a relaxed and friendly setting in which to interact with each other, a place to practice relevant social skills and learn about rules of social relationships, and appropriate support to guide and scaffold the verbal and nonverbal subtleties of communication. A long-term outcome of this particular intervention has been the building of skills that form "the underpinning of later social competence and enable children to participate more actively in a variety of learning contexts" (Charman and Stone, 2006, p. 28). Moore (2013), in a school-based action research study examining "ways to improve the social functioning, and enhance the social inclusion of some students with special educational needs (SEN)" (p. 30), concluded that such interventions need a long-term timeframe, as "without such scaffolding and opportunities to practice these skills, children with SEN are unlikely to achieve their potential" (p. 38).

Students, in the school where the social/cooking intervention is ongoing, have been meeting regularly over the past three years. While the initial focus group comprised of students with ASD, the profiles of subsequent groupings have included students with varying SENs such as mild general learning difficulties, speech and language impairment, attention deficit hyperactivity disorder, dyspraxia and behavioural, social and emotional difficulties. Each week a selected recipe is followed by the group's members and the successful completion of this task, within a set time, requires that the staff model, scaffold and strengthen the requisite cooperative social/communication skills, thus helping the students to better manage their emotions, respond appropriately to the behaviours of others, and recognise and accommodate the opinions of others. With the focus on social strengths, turn taking and the promotion of positive interactions, the cooking tasks can be divided up and successfully completed in an easy-going atmosphere, and the groups still have time to sit together and enjoy their produce. Timmins (2014) reminds us not to overlook the pleasure to be gained from completing a task and summarises that an effective intervention is one that "creates natural opportunities for social interaction and fun-filled learning" (p. 74).

THE VALUE OF LONG-TERM INTERVENTION

As recommended by O'Keeffe (2011), the importance of ongoing feedback over the past years has been taken into account in the form of:

- **Teachers' observations:** witnessing the children interact socially while at work during the shared cooking activities, noting their use of verbal and nonverbal communication skills, and the friendships perceived as growing from the cooking group.

- **The voice of the students:** Students have expressed personal happiness within the group and often identify other group members as friends.
- **Photo-voice interviews:** The students have reviewed and discussed their photographic "How-to Slide-Shows" posted on the school website: (http://sallinsns.scoilnet.ie/bon-appetit—au-revoir-2013-2014-.html), indicating how they have felt about the activities and how they have shared the website ideas with others.
- **Reflections:** Personal reflections, by the author and colleagues, on the synthesis of theory and practice have encouraged the staff to expand the intervention, forming groups of children with varying SENs, targeting the development of social skills, communication and friendships.

Over the years of the project's implementation, the author has been mindful also of the findings of Marriage, Gordan and Brand (as cited in MacKay, Knott and Dunlop, 2007) of limited improvements in the social and communication skills of pupils after short-lived interventions but is heartened by Cragar and Horvath's suggestion (as cited in Neill, 2005) that generalisation of these social skills may develop over time. Keeping informed of various SEN school-based interventions, the author read of the 'Naturalistic Intervention Approach'. Norris and Hoffman, Tannock and Girolametto, and Del Rio and Vilaseca (as cited in Walsh, 2013) all supported this form of intervention which "aims to improve children's language skills, by setting up situations which are as close as possible to those in a natural setting and which provide the child with opportunities to use language in interactive processes" (p. 18). The social cooking, promoting meaningful communication opportunities, would appear to be supported by this theory. The natural and fun activity of cooking together with friends lends itself easily to the generalisation of language acquisition and parents can follow through, supporting target language and communication skills, by repeating the cooking activities at home with their young children, aided by the website "How-to Slide-Shows".

While encouraged by the perceived social success of these long-term interventions the author is cognisant of Scott's (2009) reference that time spent in mainstream classes has not always been affirmative for these students and that Rose (2005) stated that full inclusion may at present be proving intangible. A review of the literature indicated that while a mainstream education can be a challenge for both the pupils with varying SEN and their teachers, many of these young students can and are being successfully included in mainstream schools. Successful inclusion is the task at hand and the job of all involved, in the words of Morewood, Humphrey and Symes (2011).

LITERATURE REVIEW

Inclusion and Relationships

Balfe and Travers (2011) looked at the concept and definitions of an inclusive education. While acknowledging the absence of "explicit definitions of inclusion in either of the two most important acts written for Irish education in the last fifteen years, the Education Act (Ireland, 1998) and the Education for Persons with Special Educational Needs Act (EPSEN) (Ireland, 2004)" (p. 8), they summarised that inclusion is about the relative values afforded to the different people in the culture of the school and the reduction of barriers to learning for all students. Identifying a population of students with special educational needs (SEN), across a range of schools, Balfe and Travers asked: What makes students feel included? In recognising each student's voice as vital to experiencing an inclusive school environment they found that key factors to feeling included were: having friends, engaging in specific group activities and playing together in a positive atmosphere. O'Keeffe (2011) found that students with SEN identified those they spent time with in mutually enjoyable shared activities as 'regular friends'. With this in mind and in order to maintain a positive and inclusive environment, "teachers need to be sensitive to the friendship patterns among children so that they can plan more effectively and create learning opportunities that allow for the development of social relationships" (Balfe and Travers, 2011, p. 20). Inclusion, as defined by Jones (2002) is the practice of including and educating the child in a mainstream school, meeting the child's needs through the delivery of a flexible curriculum in a suitably adapted environment. "Particular attention is given to the relationships the pupil is enabled to develop with other pupils, both within and outside the school, and the potential benefits to other pupils and staff" (p. 39).

Selection of Participants and Intervention Conditions

The initial issue facing the author was the selection of a subpopulation within the school for which a social skills and communication intervention would be beneficial. Five pupils in fifth and sixth class with a diagnosis of autism were selected. These pupils had "learned language but not conversation or even the basis of how to communicate, such as social play, turn-taking, reciprocating, responding sensitively, and related social skills" (MacDonald, 2004, p. 194). Hence, it was the expectation that this group would benefit from an autism friendly environment that addressed physical and social/communication aspects in a comfortable place, where social activities could be enjoyed and where humour, irony and metaphoric speech could be scaffolded through the joint involvement in shared activity (Morewood et al., 2011).

The literature confirmed that the framework for an intervention promoting good social relationships should have three specific conditions present:

- **Opportunity:** That is, being within proximity of other children frequently enough for meaningful contacts to be made.
- **Continuity:** Being involved in the same group of children over a relatively long period of time, for example, several consecutive years, and also seeing some of the same children in your neighbourhood out of school hours.
- **Support:** Being helped to make contact with other children in order to work and play with them, and if possible being directly supported in maintaining friendships out of school hours (Westwood, 2003, p. 85).

In acquiring good social interaction skills Jones (2002) noted the importance of assessing social understanding through the use of checklists but advised that target skills should not be taught in isolation. For example, the process of following a recipe and cooking together could be identified as an everyday social routine and "pupils with ASDs need to be taught by experience, that sharing in an activity with others can be pleasurable, as they will not easily arrive at this realisation themselves" (p. 96).

Initially, planning this intervention for students with ASD, the author addressed the issues of social skills, communication and enjoying shared activities. Could a series of cookery sessions target social skills such as turn taking, collaborating, assisting, cooperating, sharing, asking for assistance, being polite and being patient? Could this school-based activity, provide an opportunity for friendships to develop and be sustained? Westwood (2003) observed "it is evident that poor peer relationships during the school years can have a lasting detrimental impact on social and personal competence in later years" (p. 84). Thus, to establish good social relationships among students with ASD, Westwood recommended engaging in-group activities of a non-academic nature. Cooking, chatting and eating together are "activities which appear relatively successful for group work" (Jones, 2002, p. 99). In her guide to day to day living for people with ASD, Patrick (2008) observed that much is to be gained from practical activities such as cooking. As well as providing tasty food it can be enjoyed as a pastime to share with family and friends. While the best strategy for teaching social skills may be through direct instruction, "direct instruction paired with many opportunities for practice is more apt to lead to successful acquisition of these social skills" (p. 44).

Guldberg, Parsons, MacLeod, Jones, Prunty and Balfe (2011) identified key developmental areas crucial to the education of pupils with ASD and suggested that "children on the autism spectrum need interventions that support the development of spontaneous communication and language, joint attention and social understanding, peer interaction and play" (p. 69). It was proposed for this intervention that small group cookery sessions could offer the opportunity to implement the recommended guidelines for pupils with SEN, as outlined by the Department of Education and Science (DES) (2001), stating that such pupils "need to be taught, cognitively, the basic life skills that are normally acquired intuitively. Difficulties regarding the ability to transfer learning experiences and poor organisational skills imply that a holistic approach based on individually identified needs are warranted" (p. 123).

The initial literature review supporting this intervention presented definitions of ASD. Jones (2002) and Attwood (1998) recognised the value of insights and perspectives provided by individuals with ASD, as clear and poignant information to be assimilated alongside that acquired through reading scientific journals. Such insights into the thinking of individuals with ASD along with a clear knowledge of the clinical definitions of ASD can assist practitioners in designing interventions that offer practical assistance to young people with ASD in conversing with and attending to shared activities with their typically developing peers. While an historical overview of the origins of autism and personal testimonies were originally included, limits do not permit their inclusion here.

Social Relationships in Realistic Situations

In the literature, autism is defined as a developmental disorder that "significantly affects social interaction and verbal and nonverbal communication" (Slavin, 2006, p. 407). Klin and Volkmar (2000) identified the need to enhance communication skills and social competence as possibly the most important components of any intervention programme for individuals with autism as growing awareness of personal inadequacy in social situations and the experience of failure to maintain relationships can isolate them from their typically developing peers. There is a need to teach communication and social skills, both formally and informally, in order to prepare the individual to cope with the future expectations of social conversations, friendships and employment (Klin and Volkmar). MacDonald (2004) identified five characteristics of social relationships wherein children were found to be most effectively social and communicative:

1. They are balanced in the sense of allowing the child to lead at times.
2. They are matched in that the child's interests and abilities are supported.

3. They are emotionally attached in that each partner is genuinely enjoying the other.
4. They are responsive in that partners respond to the child's natural learning and signature strengths.
5. They share control in that each person is having positive effects on the other (p. 43).

Alongside these relationship characteristics found to effectively scaffold social and communication skills, MacDonald followed children through five developmental stages in becoming social and communicative:

- Interaction
- Nonverbal communication
- Social language
- Conversation
- Civil behaviour (p. 76).

To achieve efficiency in social language, MacDonald observed that children learn best in real relationships and by using language in their daily routines. Canney and Byrne (2006) maintained that social skills are rarely explicitly taught, but are learned through modelling and shaping behaviours. They identified the need for training in social skills to come to pass through enjoyable group activities:

- **Foundation skills**, such as observation, eye-contact, gesture and facial expression.
- **Interaction skills**, such as initiating conversation, reflecting back, repairing breakdowns and turn-taking.
- **Affective skills**, such as recognising one's own feelings as well as others' feelings, trust and disclosure.
- **Cognitive skills**, such as social perception, problem solving, negotiating and self-monitoring (Rustin and Kuhr 1989, as cited in Canney and Byrne, 2006, p. 19).

Having identified a focus group in need of a social skills programme it was then important to decide upon an intervention process. Jones (2002) reviewed a selection of interventions observing that one single intervention would be unlikely to meet all the needs of a student with SEN. Dunst, Trivette, and Masiello (2011) showed that young children with autism demonstrated more progress over a period of time when engaged in interest based tasks. Harpur, Lawlor and Fitzgerald (2006), stressed the importance of the group having a close age range,

noting that if distance in age and school years is too great, peer-to-peer interaction may be less satisfactory. They reasoned that "the intervention is not about normalising the adolescents; rather it is about improving their capacities to interact more effectively and satisfyingly with their peers" (p. 90). Patrick (2008) endorsed direct instruction paired with ample real-life opportunities for practice as liable to lead to the successful acquisition of social skills and "groups which contain only those with ASDs might offer some reassurance to the participants that there are others who have similar difficulties" (Jones, 2002, p. 100).

Reviewing the literature encouraged the author to focus on a group based intervention for children with ASD that promoted social and communication skills through sharing in a cooking activity. The intervention was planned to run over the course of a school year and if accepted as successful in promoting social and communication skills among children with ASD, could subsequently become part of the curriculum for students with varying SEN. Parker and Kamps (2010), in studying the effects of task analysis and self-monitoring for children with autism in multiple social situations, found that the most dramatic improvements in peer-directed vocalisations and activity engagement were seen in the completion of the cooking activities. Neill (2005) studied adolescent group sessions, run within an autism-specific school, designed to develop social understanding and social skills. The sessions, lasted 45 minutes each, and were ongoing over time and seen as intrinsic to the school day. The results obtained were extremely positive regarding improvements in social interaction, social communication and social understanding: "Delivering an ongoing programme, which is within the school curriculum, provides the opportunity for young people with Asperger's syndrome to develop a degree of social understanding which will impact on their ability to develop social skills (Neill, 2005, p. 72).

THE INTERVENTION

Having found, within the literature, a rationale and a framework on which to base this project the author proceeded to design and implement the intervention. Having sought approval from the school's management team and the participating pupils' families a suitable time-fame was agreed upon. The cookery intervention ran from September to Easter (Appendix A).The pupils involved each had an Individualised Education Plan (IEP) prioritising learning goals in the areas of communication and social skills which were assimilated into the cookery sessions. The group met for fifty minutes on Fridays in the resource room and the sessions, following the recommendations of Harpur et al. (2006), Patrick (2008) and Dunst

et al. (2011), focused on shared attention to the set tasks. Staff encouraged and scaffolded spontaneous, socially appropriate interactions and communications as outlined by Klin and Volkmar (2000), MacDonald (2004), Lehman and Klaw (2003), Canney and Byrne (2006) and Guldberg et al. (2011).

The practice of specific social skills and rules (Appendix B), which make up the basis of social understanding, along with the scaffolding of verbal and non-verbal aspects of communication (Appendix C) underpinned each session, thus providing an understanding environment where the pleasant experience of preparing and tasting food together, could lead to a creative and successful social interaction. Each session began with an introductory phase, progressed to a central phase, incorporating the social cooking activity and concluded with a review phase that outlined the next week's session.

During the introductory phase the pupils would meet and greet each other, engaging in spontaneous conversations which were scaffolded by the teacher and the special needs assistant (SNA) who would, in turn, model appropriate interactions for the pupils' benefit. The central phase of each session focused on the shared activity of following the chosen recipe of the day. The pupils were guided through the procedures, taking turns to read aloud the recipe instructions to the other group members who in turn completed the tasks of weighing, mixing, pouring or sieving, as required. The teacher and SNA directed the procedures discretely, attending to health and safety and also modelling positive social interactions. Where time permitted, while an item was cooking in the oven, the group would engage in an activity, perhaps playing a game of "I spy" or "Charades". With the "meal" then ready for sharing, the group would sit to table in a mannerly way, paying attention to social pleasantries while sharing the food.

Where appropriate and when safe to do so, the pupils took photographs of the steps required to complete the task. These formed the basis of picture-scripts and slide-shows which have been uploaded to the school website (http://sallinsns.scoilnet.ie/index.html dropdown menu: Cooking Together) providing illustrated procedures, of a cue card nature, so that other young children with ASD/SEN can log on at home with their family members and participate in the cooking as they may respond more readily to information that is presented pictorially as opposed to responding to directions given verbally (Howlin, Baron-Cohen and Hadwin, 1999).

Finally the session moved to the review stage. The pupils shared their opinions of the food, celebrated their success and thanked each other for the opportunity to

work together. Incidental conversations and a plan for the next session took place as they journeyed back to their classroom.

CONCLUSION

The author and colleagues are of the opinion that there have been improvements in the social skills and communication abilities of the participants. One teacher reflected on the personal development she herself experienced, "Throughout the stages of the cookery lessons, communication, patience and flexibility were all essential. The sessions enabled us to successfully model, teach and practice skills including organisational skills, turn-taking, safety awareness and practice with the children." Other reflections include, "Through these cookery sessions, I have noticed a gradual and significant growth in confidence in the children and in their ability to verbally communicate independently with their peers."; "So much of the curriculum is shared in the kitchen! Health, Language, Maths, Science, Social Studies, Muscle Control/Coordination and Social Skills!"; "The children themselves more often treat each other as friends, both within their groups and when meeting on yard. They are caught "being good" so to speak! I've noticed them applying the social rules and successfully use verbal and non-verbal aspects of communication" and "The relaxed yet structured atmosphere of the sessions provided the children with an everyday activity where they practised essential life skills, worked collaboratively to create a finished product and similarly enjoyed the experience. Socially, the children worked very well together!"

Finally, while this project was not designed to be a formal action research study, it is a faithful account of a teacher's synthesis of theory and practice on a subject of special interest. The author is glad to be reminded by McCaffrey (2014), that the fundamental tools for any practitioner, working in the area of education remain: a sound knowledge and understanding of the core elements of an identified SEN, and a child centred, creative, appropriate and enjoyable approach to implementing an intervention. The staff and pupils in the school, central to this social-cooking intervention, continue towards these goals and are enjoying the journey.

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APPENDIX A

Timetable: September–March

Each of the following recipes are cooking activities that are manageable during an intervention session. More recipes can be sourced from children's cookbooks, the internet and from the children themselves as a result of conversations based around their own experiences.

Jam Tarts: Fit for Royalty & Gift wrapped too!	September
Fruit Feast: Kebabs	September
Pasta: A warm snack: Just add toppings!	October
Pumpkin Soup and Jack O'Lantern	October
Belgian Waffles	November
Flapjacks!	November
Salt Dough: Christmas decorations: 2 Sessions	December
Christmas Cookies	December
Stewed Apples: sooth that sore throat	January
Bird Cake: Yes! It's for the birds! 2 Sessions	January
Pancakes: Not just for Shrove Tuesday!	February
Let's cook Pizza!	February
French toast! Bon Appetite!	February
Freshly baked Tea Scones	March
Continental Breakfast	March
Grow Your Own: 2 Sessions	March

APPENDIX B

Social Skills and Unwritten Rules of Social Relationships

For people with ASD basic social skills need to be taught over a long period of time. Once the base of social understanding is achieved, students can benefit from opportunities to practice them during guided activities where they are required to apply the skills to various social situations (Patrick, 2008). The specific social skills that make up that base of social understanding include the following:

- the use of proper greetings and farewells
- taking turns
- being patient
- being polite and courteous
- being kind
- being respectful
- listening to others
- waiting your turn to speak
- praising others
- knowing what jokes to tell or not
- knowing what topics of conversation are appropriate for which audiences
- respecting personal space
- refraining from making negative comments about people
- refraining from calling other people names
- refraining from swearing and making obscene gestures
- using good manners (Patrick, 2008, p. 44).

The Ten Unwritten Rules of Social Relationships

1. Rules are Not Absolute. They are Situation-based and People-based.
2. Not Everything is Equally Important in the Grand Scheme of Things.
3. Everyone in the World Makes Mistakes. It Doesn't Have to Ruin Your Day.
4. Honesty is Different from Diplomacy.
5. Being Polite is Appropriate in Any Situation.
6. Not Everyone who is Nice to Me is My Friend.
7. People Act Differently in Public than They Do in Private.
8. Know When You're Turning People Off.
9. "Fitting In" is Often Tied to Looking and Sounding like You Fit In.
10. People are Responsible for Their Own Behaviours. (p. 119) (Grandin and Barron, 2005, as cited in Patrick, 2008, p. 47).

APPENDIX C

A Guide to both Verbal and Nonverbal Aspects of Communication

The following guide to verbal and nonverbal aspects of communication was adapted by Prizant et al. (as cited in Harpur et al., 2006) from earlier work by Lapidus (as cited in Harpur et al., 2006).

Verbal discourse skills

1. Attending
    - Attends to partner
    - Secures other's attention.
2. Turn Taking
    - Initiates greetings
    - Responds to greetings
    - Follows partner's turn with appropriate utterance
    - Yields turn when appropriate
    - Allows partner to complete turn without interrupting
    - Can participate in discourse over multiple turns.
3. Initiating conversation
    - Introduces/ establishes conversation or topic
    - Uses attention getters
    - Uses comments
    - Requests information
    - Uses variety of strategies
    - Selects appropriate topic
    - Takes listener's perspective by focusing on new information
    - Can discuss a variety of topics.
4. Maintaining conversation
    - Acknowledges others' comments
    - Questions appropriately
    - Uses contingent response/ comments
    - Presents valid and relevant information
    - Signals topic shift
    - Uses repetition (echolalia) to maintain conversation
    - Requests clarification
    - Responds to clarification requests.
5. Breakdown and repair
    - Recognises breakdown
    - Requests clarification
    - Responds to request for clarification.

6. Metalinguistic knowledge
    - Uses/ understands metaphors or idioms
    - Tells/ understands jokes
    - Understands teasing
    - Gives/ understands warnings
    - Gives/ understands hints.
7. Sociolinguistic sensitivity
    - Adjusts speaking style according to listener's age. Status, sex and familiarity
    - Uses politeness markers and forms
    - Uses appropriate vocal volume and intonation
    - Avoids socially inappropriate topics.
8. Terminates conversations appropriately.

Non-verbal discourse skills

1. Uses of gestures
    - Points to support language use
    - Gestures for size and distance
    - Does not use extraneous movements that interfere with communication.
2. Eye gaze
    - Establishes eye contact prior to initiating communication
    - Looks at speaker when listening
    - Uses gaze checks to signal attention to speaker
    - Uses gaze appropriately (duration and timing).
3. Facial expression
    - Display of affect is appropriate to situation
    - Does not display extraneous facial movements.
4. Use of head nods and head shakes
    - To signal affirmation
    - To signal denial/ refusal
    - To signal attention to speaker and comprehension of message.
5. Posture
    - Is conducive to face-face interaction
    - Stands or sits appropriately in situation.
6. Proximity
    - Moves closer to initiate interaction
    - Uses appropriate distance
    - Moves away to terminate interaction.

7. Bodily contact
    - Shakes hands appropriately
    - Uses touch to secure attention
    - Does not exhibit inappropriate touching during interaction.
8. Orientation
    - Uses appropriate head and body orientation when seated or standing.
9. Paralanguage
    - Uses appropriate features for
        - volume
        - intonation
        - pitch
        - vocal quality
        - stress
        - rate
    - Speaks fluently
    - Does not produce extraneous sounds or jargon (Prizant et al. 1997, as cited in Harpur et al., 2006, p. 80-84).