Let Me Tell You a Story About Successful Literacy . . .

By Dr Pam Macintyre

Prologue

I used to think that writing was boring. I found it really hard. I couldn't think of anything to write about. My stories were very short and abrupt. Now I think writing is very fun. I can make stories with my surroundings. I can expand my ideas. Next I will write more stories, and read more books to get more inspiration and vocabulary . . . (Jonathan, aged eleven).

Chapter One: Inspiration and beginnings

Storytelling is a unique aspect of being human: no other species creates narratives. It is through the stories we craft that we make sense of reality and construct our identities (Bruner, 2002). This story began in 2007 when Lachlann Carter and Jenna Williams heard American author, Dave Eggers, speak at the Melbourne Writers' Festival about his Valencia 826 project, a not-for profit organisation which supports the literacy and creativity of underprivileged young people. There are now chapters throughout the US, the UK and Australia, including the 100 Story Building (formerly Pigeons) in Melbourne. After travelling to San Francisco to undertake a three month internship at Valencia 826, Lachlann and Jenna returned to Melbourne to develop their own model of partnerships between local primary schools, authors and artists, which resulted in two publications: *Pigeons: Stories in the Post* (2009) and *Pigeons: Stories in the Post Volume II* (2010).

In 2013, an exciting development was the opening of the new centre for young writers, 100 Story Building, in Footscray. The programs support literacy and engaged learning for students from low socio-economic and linguistically diverse backgrounds in the inner western suburbs of Melbourne. It is an inviting space that houses writing workshops for children and adults, school holiday workshops, reading groups, projects involving the development of zines, radio plays, and the literary magazine, *Early Harvest*, the third edition of which is currently under production.

Chapter Two: In Other Words

The focus of this chapter is a specific program, **In Other Words** a partnership between Dinjerra Primary School, Maribyrnong Council's 'River of Words' initiative and 100 Story Building, designed to improve the literacy outcomes for vulnerable children. Dinjerra Primary School in Melbourne's west has students from 25 different nationalities, including recent arrivals. **In Other Words**, designed to build foundational literacy skills of students in years Prep to Grade Two, was an extensively planned, eight week program, an example of how learning to tell and shape stories, and listening to the stories of others advances literacy, a sense of community and deep engagement in learning.

Oral story telling was to be the basis for the literacy curriculum for term two, and Lachlann Carter was given responsibility for leading the program. It incorporated three expert storytellers, oral language skills, visual literacy and ICT skills, culminating in a celebratory 'Red Carpet' event – a Film Premiere of the recorded stories on a very cold June evening, 2012, which nevertheless attracted over 200 people, including families, teachers and supporters.

The school community, students and parents, and professionals from creative industries, contributed to the telling, illustration and video recording of stories.

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But at the heart of the program were the children and their stories – lively, told with animation, intonation and a clear desire to communicate something important to the teller. Since its beginnings in 2012, **In Other Words** has become a self-sustaining project incorporated into the early years classrooms.

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The success of **In Other Words** is clear evidence that children, even young ones, have valuable and important stories to tell. They also enjoy listening to and learning from the stories of experts and their peers. Their stories were illustrated and told rather than written, but equally shaped and crafted to be meaningful to the student and the audience, as were those in the published Pigeons collections. The children's language developed as students watched themselves on the recordings, reflected and improved. They learned to use their voices to animate their tellings, to think about their story, and how they would present it visually. It was their story and they knew it well. They learned to listen to others and to offer thoughtful and polite feedback: 'I liked the way you did this, but you could try this . . .'

Children used elaborated, extended language, such as 'When my sister was tired, she had a cup of tea with my Mum', and the take up of literary language was evident in such examples as 'the stroke of midnight', and 'all the stars came out'. Visual literacy understandings and skills were also displayed in the use of colour to convey mood, use of saturated colour, choice of focal points and perspective.

Chapter Three: Inspiration and models

> *We read to them everyday. They know about storytellers through books and authors. But to actually meet a storyteller, for them, was inspiring* (Ivy, teacher).

Three expert storytellers provided inspiration over the eight weeks of the project. Writer and lawyer, Alice Pung, an ex-student of the school, whose published work draws on her family's experiences of coming to Australia from Cambodia, told of an event when she was a student at the school. This evocative story captured the imaginations of the children and modelled for them that their experiences hold rich possibilities for storytelling. Many students chose to tell stories about their families.

Performance poet and actor, Tariro Mavondo, originally from Zimbabwe, works with African and Indigenous community storytelling, musical and poetry groups. Her active, animated, poetic storytelling provided rich rhythmic oral language for students and teachers to draw on.

Bernard Caleo, comic creator, inspired the students through his knowledge and experience with the ancient form of Japanese visual storytelling, Kamishibai, which uses words and pictures together to tell the story. So engaged were the students by this form of storytelling, that telling stories through Kamishibai directed the project from that point.

Fifty-eight student stories were presented at the culminating Film Premiere at the school, which demonstrated to all present that confidence building and the development of oral literacy were clear outcomes. All kinds of stories were shared: some were fairytales, about playing sport, or vampires; others were touching stories about arrival at the school, about having no pens or books at home, about the struggles of families.

The telling story of her journey to Australia for a grade two girl, brought out something deep for her, and she gained the confidence to write from the oral storytelling experience. Initially reluctant to draw, a less engaged student created strong illustrations, and was the first to complete his story. He was captivated by Bernard Caleo's story, which he reshaped and added to until it became his own. He demonstrated willingness to share, perform, use the equipment, and offer feedback to others. He demonstrated pride in his story and was often the first to tell it in class. A timid Prep student who was initially reluctant to speak, at the end of the eight weeks, had grown in confidence, wrote about her picture, and was 'flying in the classroom'. Her parents had become eager to come into the school, and her whole family became excited about her learning and progress. Conversations within families flourished. As Lachlann said: 'The children were good little marketeers . . . [they] really wanted people to see what they had created'.

Chapter Four: Successes

There are valuable lessons here for all educators wanting to support student engagement and involvement in learning, and to support the literacy skills and practices of their students. We place emphasis on the tangible, measurable reading and writing in our schools. However, oral language plays a vital role in the development of successful literacy. Researchers such as James Gee tell us that rich oral language is a strong predictor of literacy success. So expanding repertoires of oral language, encouraging students to tell and listen to stories, to enjoy words and language can be a great pleasure for teachers and learners as can the sharing of meaningful, crafted stories.

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The stories that are products of both Pigeons and In Other Words demonstrate that storytelling and story making partnerships foster communication, cooperation, creativity and identities. However, these outcomes do not happen without careful consideration given to creating environments in which children are supported and learn best, within school and the wider family communities. The richest and most powerful learning happens when students' interests, existing knowledge and experiences are acknowledged as valuable and worth pursuing, and when families and the community are invited to share in the learning. As Gee identifies:

> *Learning takes place in a social context and a supportive learning community that encourages dialogue, apprenticeship and mentoring . . . involves socialization into particular communities of practice . . . the learning community can include the classroom, the school, the family and broader communities* (Gee, 2003, p.27).

Chapter Five: The end of the beginning

Stories can be told in various ways: orally, in images, in writing, and in combinations of all three. The creative partnerships between young storytellers, writers, teachers, adult mentors described in this article, provide exciting evidence of the social, personal, familial, educational and creative benefits to all those who participate. Shared experiences are valued; bonds and identities are created and confirmed; knowledge and learning are distributed (Gee, 2000-1). Central in this are the young creators, who have important stories to tell, imaginations rich with ideas, and who are willing to partner with adults to create stories that are shared and appreciated.

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