Commissioner for Children & Young People

Cover Books in Nutella

and other creative ways to encourage children to read

Role of the Commissioner

The South Australian Commissioner for Children and Young People is an independent statutory position, established under the Children and Young People (Oversight and Advocacy Bodies) Act 2016 ('the Act').

The Commissioner's role includes advocating for systemic change to policies, programs and practices that impact the rights, development and wellbeing of South Australia's children and young people.

This work is informed by the experiences and issues of children and young people themselves, with a specific focus on those who struggle to have their voices heard.

The Commissioner's strategic agenda was formulated with direct input from children and young people. In particular children and young people asked the Commissioner to facilitate their involvement in decision making and to create opportunities for them to experience authentic participation in the adult world.

The Commissioner is working with a number of partners on this agenda, including ways in which children and young people can have input into the design and delivery of policies, processes and practices that relate to delivery of services aimed directly at them.

Acknowledgements

Thank you to all the young people who attended the 2020 Children's Stories event and shared their thoughts, ideas, insights and suggestions with me.

The Children's Stories event was presented in partnership with the Children's University Adelaide and Australian Children's Laureate Foundation to whom we extend our sincere thanks.

Special thanks to the 2020/2021 Children's Laureate, Ursula Dubosarsky and to SA author and illustrator, Andrew Joyner.

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Thanks to the following schools who supported their students to participate: St Aloysius College, Hills Christian Community School, Riverdale Primary School, Prospect Primary School, Elizabeth North Primary School, Morphett Vale Primary School.

The level of participation and engagement was significant and the feedback received from teachers and students alike was very positive.

Throughout the report, unedited quotes and responses from young people who participated have been used to ensure their ideas and suggestions are faithfully communicated.

All young people appearing in photographs throughout this report have given their permission for their image to be published.

Illustrations by Andrew Joyner courtesy of Andrew and the Australian Children's Laureate Foundation.

Video documentation and still photography by Reuben Gore Media (https://www.reubengore.com/)

View the 90 second summary video of the event @ CCYP_SA YouTube.

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Introduction

Gaining an education is one of the foremost protective factors to ensuring a child or young person can live a good life. Providing access to education is therefore essential if societies are to fulfil their social and cultural obligations as outlined in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and UNCRC (United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child) both of which promote democracy, peace, tolerance, development and economic growth.

Literacy is a human right that extends throughout each individual's lifetime, bringing our global community together and helping to keep us all connected. The resolution made to mark the United Nations Literacy Decade (2003–2012) states that 'literacy is at the heart of basic education for all and creating literate environments and societies is essential for achieving the goals of eradicating poverty, reducing child mortality, curbing population growth, achieving gender equality, and ensuring sustainable development, peace and democracy.'[1]

As a signatory to the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, Australia has made a universal pledge to end poverty, uphold peace and promote the wellbeing of people everywhere. Our national commitment to meeting the needs of Australian children and young people in education is expressed in the 2019 Alice Springs (Mparntwe) Declaration through which we aim to ensure that 'all young Australians become confident and creative individuals, successful lifelong learners, and active and informed members of the community'.[2]

Through the Alice Springs Declaration we have made a commitment to providing an education in Australia that builds children and young people's imaginations, knowledge, skills, understanding and values, thereby establishing and securing healthy, satisfying lives.[3] We aim to achieve this by supporting all children and young people in Australia to become successful learners, developing and building their capabilities, and strengthening these while they are still in primary school.

The most recent NAPLAN results show that compared to other Australian states, South Australia currently sits sixth and seventh in reading and writing rankings respectively. This means South Australian children are currently performing below the national standard in literacy, with those children in years three and five recording the second lowest proportion of students who met or exceeded the writing standard across the country next to the Northern Territory.[4] The 2019 NAPLAN report also revealed that fewer South Australian students undertook NAPLAN tests compared with other jurisdictions.

From these results, it is clear that more needs to be done in South Australia to ensure we meet our obligations as enshrined in the UNCRC and expressed in the Alice Springs (Mparntwe) Declaration.

Literacy is fundamental to supporting effective life-long learning, overcoming educational disadvantage and promoting social mobility. For children to be able to access opportunities and live the lives they deserve, we must do all we can to support development of their literacy skills.

Literacy development is generally the domain of adult educators, with children often considered as passive rather than active participants in conversations about how to support development of their literacy. However, just as in other areas of their lives, children have a right to be included in decisions that impact on them directly, including decisions affecting their education.

To enable children to be included in conversations about literacy, I invited 100 students from Years 3 and 4 from around Adelaide to attend a specially designed children's literature event. Known as 'Children's Stories' the event was presented in partnership with the Children's University Adelaide (CUA) and Australian Children's Laureate Foundation (ACLF).

The ACLF enriches the lives of young Australians through the power of story and by promoting the value of reading, writing and creating. The CUA is a charity that works in partnership with schools and other education providers to create learning experiences that take students beyond the classroom. By encouraging and promoting participation in extra-curricular activities in and outside of school, the CUA program aims to create a more level playing field of opportunity and access to education for children from diverse backgrounds.

The Children's Stories event was held on Tuesday 3 March during the 2020 Adelaide Writers' Week. It took place within the Mortlock Chamber of the State Library with all one hundred participants aged between eight and ten years.

At the event the children were asked what they thought about reading and imagination, and what ideas they have for encouraging more children to read. They were also invited to participate in a short workshop exercise in which they wrote and illustrated their own creative story under the guidance of the 2020 Australian Children's Laureate, Ursula Dubosarsky, with assistance from South Australian children's author and illustrator, Andrew Joyner.

The event provided the children with an opportunity to be readers, writers, and storytellers with the aim of building their confidence in expressing their own ideas and in using their creativity.

As well as hearing an Acknowledgment to Country from young Aboriginal man Isaac Hannam, the children also heard from a group of young 'Inspirational Speakers' who included a spoken word poet and radio host, SACE Tennyson Award winner, a comedy writer, an editor and writer, and Director of Writers SA. The speakers answered questions put to them by the children, as well as sharing their own personal experiences and reasons for why they love reading and writing.

What children think about reading?

Children who participated in the event on the day were overwhelmingly enthusiastic about reading. It was an activity they all wanted to do.

Despite a diversity of literacy skills the children recognised that being able to read and write is fundamental to social participation and progress. The children said that encouraging more children to read could be achieved by telling them why they should read and most importantly by explaining the direct link that exists between reading and doing 'better at school'.

- *'Read so they can get more smarter and scientific.'*
- *'So they can answer more book questions.'*
- *'Reading is a good thing it makes you learn.'*
- *'Reading can help you learn more words to become a better writer.'*

Children had a strong appetite for reading, writing and learning and said they wanted to do well and excel at school. They said they want to learn new things, be celebrated for their accomplishments, and help each other.

'Reading can help you understand the world in a better way.'

Children recognised the importance of reading as a tool that can help them learn more about themselves and others.

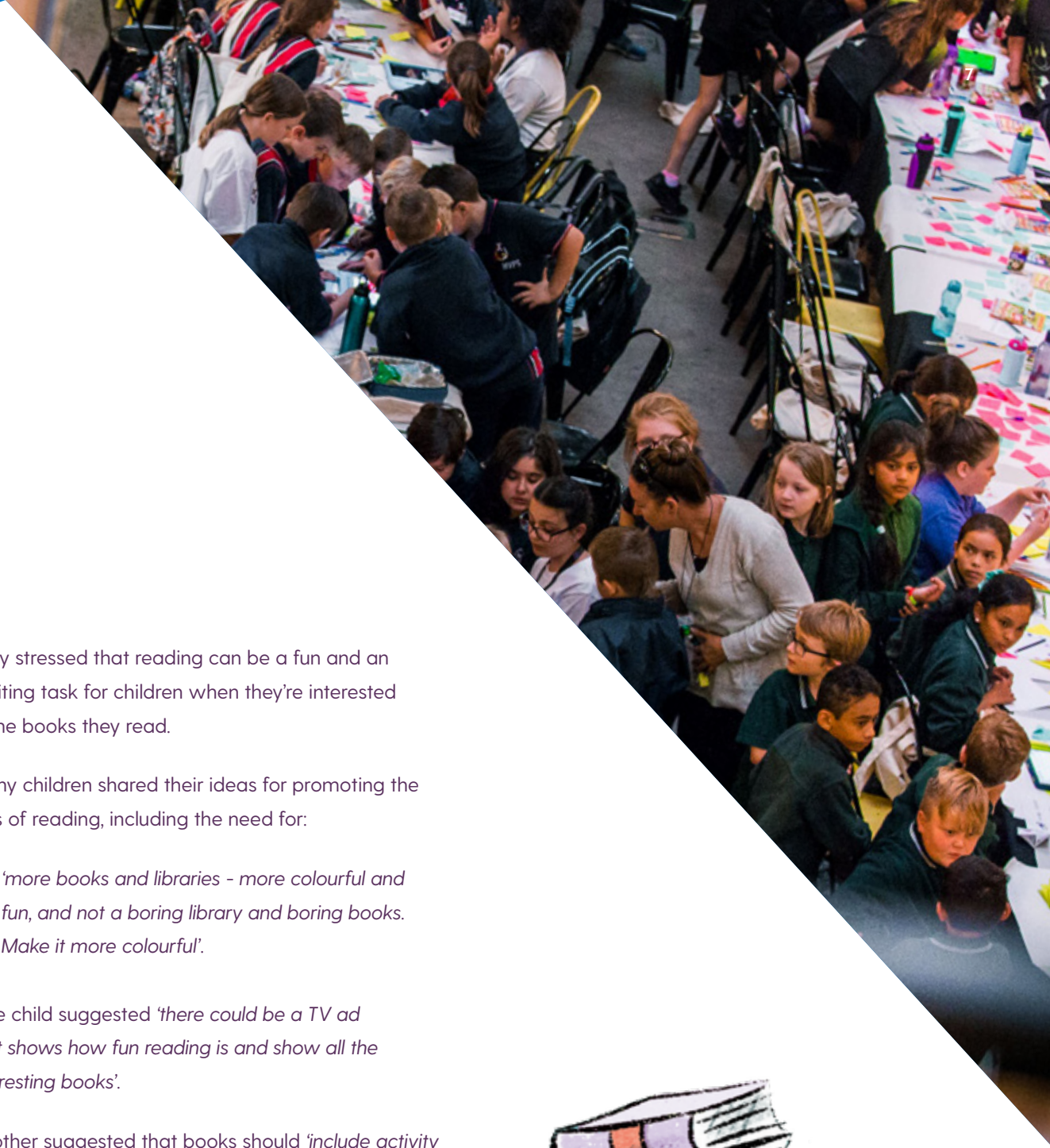
- *'By reading you can help others' and 'encourage others.'*
- *'If they want to learn different stories of different people'.*

Children don't necessarily see reading as an individual exercise, with a consensus amongst participants that there should be a group or team 'read-a-thon' to encourage everyone to read including 'giving children prizes at the end'.

Many children said they learn how to connect with different people when they read, both through the stories they choose to read, as well as the way in which stories are read to them.

Children value their peers and want to support each other at school. They want reading to be 'fun and engaging' and for books to 'take them places they've never been'. The insights and responses from children were inherently kind, encouraging and supportive.

- *'I would make more books in yellow pages so more kids with Dyslexia could read them.'*
- *'I think for kids to read you can let them choose the book and let them realise what their reading and to make it fun'*



They stressed that reading can be a fun and an exciting task for children when they're interested in the books they read.

Many children shared their ideas for promoting the joys of reading, including the need for:

> *'more books and libraries - more colourful and fun, and not a boring library and boring books. Make it more colourful'.*

One child suggested *'there could be a TV ad that shows how fun reading is and show all the interesting books'.*

Another suggested that books should *'include activity books'* which *'turn reading into play and offer rewards to kids when they read'.*

We know that play is crucial to children's development, learning and wellbeing. As children grow older the way they play changes. Children said that at their age (8 – 10 years) play can be an important component of encouraging them to read.

> *'Reading passes time, calms you down, distracts you from worrys. It helps you learn, [is] good for mental health, is fun, good for [your] imagination, exciting.'*

> *'Play games about the books they read to make reading more fun.'*

How can we encourage more children to read?

We know that by encouraging children to participate in decisions around literacy we help to validate their ideas. Children spoke at length about ways in which we can encourage them to read and write, thereby nurturing their imaginations and interests.

They told us in simple and straightforward terms that if we wish to encourage more children to read we just need to make reading more accessible. We also need to make it more fun and think of ways to work with children in a collaborative manner.

When learning new skills children said they would rather work together than be in competition with one another. They want everyone to be rewarded and celebrated for improving their levels of literacy. Whether they're a child living with a disability or one who can't afford many books they want to feel included. They want everyone to have opportunities to build their literacy skills and to feel good about themselves. They understood that literacy is a key component to achieving these outcomes.

Children want to have 'read-a-thons' where they can become part of a 'collection of readers' and be celebrated and rewarded together for their group achievements. They want their interests to be recognised and legitimised through reading and writing, and they want their imagination and play to be incorporated into their learning activities.

Children born in the 21st century are part of a generation 'who create what they consume and consume what they create'. It's not surprising therefore, that their ideas included children writing their own stories for other children to read.

> *'Should become authors and put everything they want in a book to read'.*

> *'We could encourage other kids to read by getting them to write interesting books so they will enjoy reading books'.*

In developing their literacy capabilities, children said that their relationships with adults are crucial to their success and important to their confidence, development and to building trust and feeling cared for.

The adults they rely upon might be family members, teachers, librarians or people in community centres. Children said they want more adults to ask them about their interests and to help them find stories that fit those interests, or to encourage them to write their own stories about those interests.

‘Think about what your child likes and give them a book about that.’

Having dedicated places where they go to read was also very important to the majority of children who said they have been and regularly go to a local library – either inside or outside of school, and that they go there to read. They said that having a space to read and write, both inside and outside of school, encourages children to find their own adventure stories, and to read stories about their own interests.

The children emphasised that it is important that libraries are available as spaces where children can hang out and feel encouraged to read, write and collaborate. They echoed that the ‘other’ people in the spaces are important to their feeling of being safe and of having a sense of ownership over the space, reinforcing their right to be there. They also said that access to entertainment such as DVDs and games through libraries was also important, particularly for children who would not otherwise have access to these items at school or at home.

Children want places and spaces in which to learn and play comfortably and safely. We heard that libraries inside and outside of school often serve that purpose for children. The support for libraries as community assets is important to children who view these places as critical to development of their literacy and learning skills and ultimately to better education outcomes.

What have children said about imagination?

When we encourage imagination we actively emphasise the importance of children's independent and creative thinking, thereby reinforcing their right to enjoy 'freedom of thought'.

Most of the children who attended the Children's Stories event saw their imagination as a tool that they can use to develop their own ideas and take them to their own imagined safe spaces and places.

By 'imagining' they understand that they are developing their own opinions, as well as their own ideas, approaches and stories, ultimately enabling them to think more independently. As one child said, 'using your imagination means you can do anything, you can be anything, whenever you want'. This power creates an immense sense of freedom in children, and is particularly important in balancing their thinking given primary school children are required to live so much of their lives under adult direction and supervision.

'Imagination is when you pretend to be in the 13 story tree house or when you're a character from your favourite book and replay scenes from the book'.

> *'Imagination allows children to be able to create their own identity, build their agency and form a sense of freedom.'*

> *'I can have another life/double life. I can be another person. Drawing/writing about things that nobody else could understand.'*

> *'Use your feelings, you can think about something and turn it into something. Think what you want to do. You can express your feelings. You can make words. You can pretend your a superhero if you like. You can use different words. You can dream freely even when your awake. Think what I want to do. You can day dream whenever. You can draw, write or tell someone. You can get all of your feelings out by using your imagination. Do anything with your imagination. You can think anything. Follow my dreams.'*

> *'A special place in my mind where I can escape from reality. Without it the world would be an awful place.'*

> *'It makes you forget about your problems. Sometimes it can remind you of happy memories. If you didn't have imagination your life would be boring, sad and upset....I think if we didn't have imagination we might not have dreams at all.'*

Having a space where there are no limits and where the possibilities are endless, is intrinsic to a child developing their own perspective of the world. Children are clear that imagination is an important part of being human and that using their imagination helps them to feel better about themselves and the world around them. It helps them to be more positive and to cultivate dreams and aspirations by enabling them to imagine futures in which they are doing different things. They describe imagination as 'a safe space for them to be themselves' and 'to express themselves in the way they want to'. Occupying a safe space in their imagination is pivotal to a child's ability to deal with life stressors and to maintain overall happiness.

> *'Imagination is a distraction from all my worries and problems.'*

> *'Imagination is about being yourself, feeling free and being happy.'*

> *'Imagination means to have fun and to use your creativity to live the best life.'*

> *'Creating stories and adventures, looking at the world in a different way, creative thinking, dreaming and imagining, being curious... I think imagination is imagining things. Imagination is a world where anything can happen. Thinking outside the box.'*

> *'Imagination means thinking of things you enjoy and like you also sometimes fall into your own world and imagine ideas to help people and problems.'*

Conclusion

Let's embrace our collective responsibility to promote children's literacy and do all we can to promote and support children to read, write and discover the power of stories.

We can all add to the learning opportunities available in schools by creating learning experiences that are enjoyable, empowering and relevant to the lives, interests and aspirations of South Australia's children and young people. Doing so will foster a lifelong love of literacy and ensure that all children benefit from all that the mastery of reading, writing and storytelling provides.

It is our responsibility to ensure that these essential skills are at the very least level with counterparts in other Australia states, but preferably achieving literacy outcomes that will produce readers, writers and storytellers that are world class.

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Endnotes

1 United Nations, 2002, https://digitallibrary.un.org/record/471229?ln=en
2 Alice Springs (Mparntwe) Education Declaration, 2019, https://uploadstorage.blob.core.windows.net/public-assets/education-au/melbdec/ED19-0230%20-%20SCH%20-%20Alice%20Springs%20(Mparntwe)%20Education%20Declaration_ACC.pdf
3 Melbourne Declaration on Educational Goals for Young Australians, 2008, http://www.curriculum.edu.au/verve/_resources/national_declaration_on_the_educational_goals_for_young_australians.pdf
4 National Assessment Program, 2020, https://www.nap.edu.au/results-and-reports

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