

In Memory of Lorraine Wilson: an extraordinary teacher

By Susan Mahar November 2023

I recently attended the wake of a remarkable educator, Lorraine Wilson, who influenced the lives of teachers and students for over 60 years. I had the good fortune to work with Lorraine during the seventies. This was a pivotal time for me as a young teacher and Lorraine's ideas influenced the way I taught for the next thirty-five years.

Lorraine moved from the Victorian Curriculum Branch during the early seventies and was appointed Assistant Principal at Helen St Primary School in Northcote where she introduced a Language Experience approach to literacy which was a radical departure from the norm. Junior school staff were invited to rethink the way we worked with early learners. Demonstration, discussion, shared ideas, team planning, parent information sessions and classroom support were critical to the embrace of the program by teachers as well as the wider community.

Helen St Primary school had an annual suburban rail ticket which meant any day of the week a class could travel from nearby Northcote station for a shared meaningful experience. Preston market, three stops away, was a popular destination. These experiences provided the foundation for language development. Cooking, writing, drawing, photography, and bookmaking were an intrinsic part of the program and students loved to talk and write about their experiences. Whole-of-class reports, recipes, retellings, and narratives provided structured opportunities for reading, word study, phonics, punctuation and spelling. These class-generated 'wall stories' were displayed and read constantly on any given day as children learned to search for words they wished to use in their own writing. The junior school building had a central room which was set up as a play area with balance beams, climbing frames, a puppet theatre and building blocks of all sizes. Students were encouraged to write signs if they wished to leave constructions in place.

It was during this time Lorraine created the widely read 'City Kids' series. She wrote and edited the books with individual students to make sure the language was theirs. One aim was to demonstrate to students as well as teachers how simple yet profound it was to write about meaningful everyday experiences. The City Kids books, and later Country Kids and Footy Kids, were loved by young readers and hundreds of Victorian children were inspired to write about their

own experiences. At Helen St PS a book-making machine made it possible for all children to have their own writing published to read and share.

Lorraine used the Helen St Primary School experience for her book, 'Write Me a Sign', which was published in 1979. This was a brilliant practical resource for teachers wishing to introduce a Language Experience approach, and beginning teachers today would find it an invaluable resource for getting started in a primary classroom.

Students were given responsibility and encouraged to problem solve. I fell in love with multi-age classes, which gave students an opportunity to progress at their own rate as prep, one and two classes were combined. It also meant cooperative learning, caring and mentoring were part of every classroom. Needless to say the school was abuzz with activity and Helen St Primary School was a very happy place. The original City Kids books tell the true story of a place where kids' experiences were valued, and kids wanted to be.

Lorraine moved from Helen St Primary School into consultancy work where she demonstrated classroom teaching strategies and assisted with the development of reading and writing programs in schools. She continued to write books about her experiences which resonate with classroom teachers today – 'Writing to Live: How to teach Writing for Today's World'(2002) and 'Write me a Poem: reading, writing and performing poetry' are two good examples. Lorraine was in demand at international literacy conferences where she presented with every international literacy expert of note, including in the USA. She was highly regarded by them all, especially as she had a wealth of practical classroom experience and impeccable records of a successful approach.

Lorraine enjoyed socializing and loved bringing practising teachers and literacy experts together. She continued to do this until her late seventies so she had the pleasure of knowing her ideas were enduring. And that is because Language Experience wasn't a fad. The process was sound and clearly structured. It was engaging and easily adapted to suit the needs of every individual. I went on to teach all levels of primary school in a range of government schools and found a Language Experience approach to reading and writing was suitable for every age and stage of development.

I would encourage all new teachers and those working in education policy to revisit Lorraine Wilson's literacy work. Reading is a complex process but when children are engaged in meaningful reading and writing effective instruction can

be remarkably simple. It is about timing intervention so children never lose sight of the main aim – to make sense of print.

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