

The Picture Book Project reconnects homeless youth to the joys of reading

1. Summary of the impact

Key College is a small 'second chance' alternative school run by Youth Off The Streets, which offers young people an opportunity to re-engage in education to complete Year 10. This comes in response to many young people being unable to break the cycle of poverty and disadvantage in mainstream schools.

UTS Senior Lecturer of the Teacher Education Program, Dr Kimberley Pressick-Kilborn, has been volunteering for well over a decade and has run the 'Picture Book Project' at Key College to improve the literacy, interpersonal and parenting skills of young people who are currently experiencing homelessness. The project involves learning how to read picture books aloud to pre-school aged children, and the authoring of their own original picture book.

As a result of this initiative, the program has made a community impact by equipping young people with a greater range of skills and experiences, which have seen many of them become active volunteers and productive members of their communities.

2. Problem

Many young people from dysfunctional families in Australia face a number of challenges which puts them at a disadvantage. Often, their lives are unstructured, their schooling is interrupted, there might be periods of homelessness as well as substance abuse.

Mainstream schooling often cannot offer them the support, flexibility and understanding they need in order to build a sense of belonging and achieve success. What is more, the affected students often become parents at a young age themselves, repeating the cycle of dysfunction for another generation.

3. Beneficiaries

The direct beneficiaries of the 'The Picture Books Project' initiative is homeless youth who engage in education at Key College to complete Year 10. In particular, the program focuses on improving literacy and interpersonal skills, giving the students confidence in their own learning and studying ability, and assisting them in the parenting of their own children.

As such, the indirect beneficiaries of this initiative are also the children of the enrolled students who will experience a brighter childhood as a result of their parents' improved education.

Finally, it is also the community as a whole which benefits as these students receive the skills and experience needed to become productive members.

4. Approach to impact

'The Picture Books Project' commenced in 2007, when Dr Pressick-Kilborn and then Head Teacher of Key College, Min Bonwick, discussed the importance of read-aloud experiences for children's literacy development. This is based on the understanding that literacy is fundamental to productive participation in society.

Key College, which has since moved from Surry Hills to Redfern, is a small school of around ten students. As an 'alternative school', it differs from mainstream schools both in its design as well as its curriculum and focuses specifically on providing education to students with chaotic and irregular lives. The school itself is designed and fitted in a way that resembles a home rather than a traditional classroom setting. As many of the students live on the streets or in refuges, it is an important aspect to have an inviting and comfortable environment with kitchen, breakout rooms as well as classrooms.

The curriculum is designed in such a way that it offers flexibility as well as a range of activities outside the school. There are certain periods of focused classroom time, but also outdoor and physical activity in which students can learn social and interpersonal skills.

As most of the students at Key College come from problematic homes and circumstances, very few have positive recollections of having been read to as children. Moreover, with troubled schooling experiences, very few associate reading with joy or success. As a result, these students tend to have weak literacy skills and require additional support for reading and writing tasks.

As a volunteer at Key College and former primary school teacher, Dr Pressick-Kilborn offered to develop a weekly literature program focused on picture books. In addition to providing students the chance to improve their reading and writing skills, the program also serves to instil the enjoyment for reading which many of them have missed out on at home.

The program focuses on two main activities. Firstly, it is the shared reading aloud of a wide range of picture books with simple and complex themes. This activity is designed to enable students to model their voices, become confident in reading aloud, and support the development of critical literacy skills. Between 2007 and 2013, Dr Pressick-Kilborn had her own preschool-aged children who accompanied her in delivering the program. This gave Key College students the opportunity to work with actual children, which Dr Pressick-Kilborn argues is much less threatening than reading to their peers or teachers. Moreover, the students were much more careful and mindful about their own words and behaviour when being surrounded by small children.

This story time was often followed by craft or cooking activities related to the books. As many of the Key College students become parents at a young age, this also served as an informal parenting program where they could learn how to read to their own children and engage in enjoyable activities that would create valuable positive memories for both parent and child. Further, the cooking activities also served to teach Key College students about healthy eating and preparing nutritious food for their own children.

The second activity is the writing and creation of an original picture book, a copy of which is made and kept by the school and one which is kept by each student. In 2011, Dr Pressick-Kilborn arranged for the Key College students to host the regular story time for pre-schoolers at the local Glebe Library at which they read the books which they had authored themselves.

She also hosted the craft activity and a picnic morning tea, and the Key College students were involved in the planning of this successful public event. Since 2015, the students have been using a picture-book creation app for their projects, resulting in a highly professional product.

In each year of the project, the program has expanded and evolved, and it is typically run over 3–5 months.

5. What has changed as a result of this work?

5.1. The Outcomes

There are a number of positive outcomes resulting from 'The Picture Books Project'. First and foremost, the program has helped students improve their previously weak literacy skills, setting them up for a future in which they are able to pursue a trade or continue with their studies.

Working with children also helped them improve their classroom performance. Dr Pressick-Kilborn explains that when children were present, students tended to be quite mindful and critical of the classroom dynamics and activity, and it gave them a focus and sense of purpose. Student feedback on the program indicated that they were incredibly touched by being able to hold babies and talk to children, that they treasure their own accomplishment in becoming authors and that they became more confident when it comes to reading and writing.

The program has also established greater connections to local community and has built students' knowledge of freely accessible resources provided in local public libraries. This has resulted in students becoming productive members in their communities and becoming more embedded. To take some examples, some students have gone on to

volunteer at libraries, and some have partnered with Indigenous students at Redfern's Jarjum College to collaboratively promote literacy.

On a personal level, the 'Picture Book Project' serves to demonstrate to these students that they are able to see a project through to completion. For many, it is the first experience of academic success leading to the creation of a product – their own picture book – which they feel immense pride in.

5.2. Impact

With only 10 students enrolled at any given time, the impact is arguably small. However, the approach used at Key College has seen positive changes in those who have completed the program and sets the tone for what success at alternative schools could look like.

According to Dr Pressick-Kilborn, one of the most powerful impacts of the 'The Picture Books Project' is the breaking of a vicious cycle that keeps these young people and their families in disadvantaged situations. The program makes a community impact by equipping young people with a greater range of skills and experiences, including interpersonal skills and future parenting skills.

She argues that the students' ability to nestle in with a book and read to children – often their own children – and experience this connectedness and shared enjoyment is invaluable in breaking the cycle of questionable parenting.

Undoubtedly, the local and wider community benefits when young people are empowered and when opportunities are created for positive participation.

6. What has helped you accomplish this work?

6.1. Personal enabling factors

Dr Pressick-Kilborn is a Senior Lecturer in the UTS Teacher Education program and as such, she is experienced in the design, coordination and teaching of subjects related to primary and secondary initial teacher education. As a former primary and pre-school

teacher, she is experienced in working with children as well as working within the independent school system.

In 1997, Dr Pressick-Kilborn was awarded the Teachers' Guild of NSW Award for Excellence in the Early Years of Teaching. She has been actively involved in the delivery of professional development courses for in-service teachers for more than 20 years.

Dr Pressick-Kilborn is also the Coordinator for Engagement, including School Partnerships, within the UTS School of Education.

Since the 'Picture Books Project', Dr Pressick-Kilborn has helped to develop and implement other literacy-based programs at Key College and continues to volunteer in other Youth Off The Streets Education initiatives that bring community benefit. Other involvement has included being a Selection Committee Member for Youth Off The Streets' National Scholarship Program (2007–2018). In 2018, Dr Pressick-Kilborn was awarded the Elizabeth Hastings Memorial Award for Community Contribution.

When asked what motivates her in her volunteering work, she explains that many of us are not far removed from disadvantage. Her own great-grandmother escaped a domestic violence situation with four children in tow. Dr Pressick-Kilborn argues that if it wasn't for the kindness, generosity and encouragement of others, her story might have been quite different. Thus, she is determined to use her skills and knowledge to help others get out of difficult circumstances and she involves her own children in the hopes of raising them with these same values.

6.2. External enabling factors

Dr Pressick-Kilborn has gathered support from her UTS School of Education colleagues for 'Youth Off The Streets' Education programs; activities included hosting students and staff during visits to campus, Christmas gift-giving drives for students in 2016 and 2017, and a book drive for Youth Off The Street schools in 2018.

UTS supports her work as part of her public engagement allowance which enables her to dedicate time to this important work.

Dr Pressick-Kilborn has also identified and encouraged UTS student teachers to become involved at Key College through professional experience placements or teaching roles.

7. Challenges

There is no doubt that it is challenging to work with homeless youth, many of whom have experienced trauma or lead very difficult and unstructured lives. Key College students are often volatile and difficult to manage in a classroom environment, which makes a teacher's role particularly challenging. Moreover, high school age is often considered 'too late' when it comes to intervention and reversing some of the damage that has been done.

However, Dr Pressick-Kilborn is an eternal optimist and clearly a passionate teacher at heart. As a true believer in the transformative power of education, she reiterates her mantra that 'you never give up on people'. She is encouraged by the many positive outcomes as a result of schools such as Key College and recognises the importance of alternative and 'second-chance' school systems. Further, she argues the experience of volunteering and working in this environment has given her a greater sense of gratitude for her own good fortune and has made her more sensitive to her own students' needs and circumstances at UTS.

8. References

<https://youthoffthestreets.com.au/programs/key-college/>