

Text Talk by Children

On the street: Primary children's personal literacies

Louise Phillips

For many years now we have acknowledged how social and cultural diversity and multimodality influence texts and text practices to form a multiliteracies landscape (as coined by the New London Group in 1996). Literacy education is typically defined as what children should know. The *Australian Curriculum: English* is a clear example of this. Unfortunately, with overriding pressure on 'what children should know' enforced through outcome based curricula and standardised assessment, little space is given to the breadth of children's interests, knowledge and skills in literacies. A case for recognition of children's home and family literacies has been urged for (e.g., see Allen, 2009; Comber & Kamler, 2004), but what about children's street literacies: their literacies of urban spaces and citizenship. Due to widespread public concern for child safety in western societies, children have little access to public spaces; they are understood to exist in the private worlds of home and school (Roche, 1999). There is clear demarcation of child and adult spaces and close adult chaperoning and chauffeuring of children between these spaces. Such practices and socially imposed delineation of space overrides and limits children's participation in the public sphere. In 2012, community cultural development organisation, Contact Inc, facilitated *Walking Neighbourhood hosted by children* in which a group of twelve 8 to 12 year old children curated and led walks of Brisbane's Fortitude Valley. The intent of the project was to foreground children's place, interest and inclusion in public spaces. The Valley is a neighbourhood commonly perceived as child unfriendly and marketed as an adult entertainment district. The project was a social arts practice designed to challenge commonly held views of children and public spaces. *Walking Neighbourhood hosted by children* was a public event that operated out of the Judith Wright Centre for Contemporary Arts and attracted 330 audience members, with each child leading up to twelve walks across two days with groups of 4–10 walkers. The child curated walks foregrounded children's interests, streetscape observations, and funds of knowledge (see Moll, Amanti, Neff & Gonzalez, 1992). The breadth and strength of children's literacy practices were made visible, and point to the value of this project in cultivating urban citizenship literacies. To gain a window into the literacy practices of some of the *Walking Neighbourhood* child hosts I will introduce

you to three children and take you on their walks through the streets of Brisbane's Fortitude Valley.

Mali's imagination walk

Mali is a quirky curly haired 10 year-old boy who discovered a video store in the Valley packed with figurines from cult movies, cartoons, and popular television shows. His eyes were lured into the world of fantasy, just like he is drawn in when he views fiction films and television. Nothing else exists; he is teleported into that story. When he walked around the store with a buddy (volunteer young adult on project) in a rehearsal for the walks he readily name a wide range of popular culture character figurines from Bugs bunny to Wolverine to Beauty and the beast to Scooby doo to Darth Vader to Luke Skywalker to Spiderman to Daleks to Avengers to Hulk to Caroline to name but a few. He revisited scenes from Star Wars films and Doctor Who episodes with his buddy with comments such as, 'That was when ...' and 'I remember that...'

With this magnetic attraction to fiction, Mali wanted to share the store's wide range of popular culture icons with others, imagining that many others would be thrilled to find a figurine of their favourite character that they could purchase and take home. However the store did not support Mali's request to lead his walk there. They thought it was an additional burden to the management of the business. Their perceived burden overrode any vision of potential business opportunity. Mali was quietly disappointed. His co-walkers were outraged; declaring their loyalty with plans to boycott the store.

Another walk location needed to be found within the space of one workshop before the public event. Mali eventually settled on going to a vacant shell of a building and telling a story of what he imagined on the other side of the wall. He created a story in which behind the wall there was an inventor who was making a time machine that could pull you into a parallel universe. In there, there was another Mali, exactly the same but with green hair and without a twin brother. Everyone looked a bit different. Mali was known as b-boy trix who could break dance. Mali drew images of the wall, the time machine, the parallel universe, himself with green hair and himself break dancing. On the walk he told his story whilst scrolling through his drawings for each scene on his iPad and then invited walkers to share their imaginings of what was behind the wall. Adult walkers shared their visions creating dialogue of all kinds of fantastical imaginings.

Through this glimpse of the development of Mali's walk, we see his interest in fiction video, his breadth of knowledge of popular culture, his visual and digital literacy skills and his colourful imagination. The experience also exposed Mali to the work of negotiating required in public spaces, as the video store did not support Mali bringing his walk there, so an alternative needed to be sourced. Further to this Mali initiated and managed a conversation with a group of adults based on his strength of imagination, inviting adults to reignite their imaginations at a space that would usually be passed by unremarked. This is the great attraction of walking as an arts practice and a method, in that the invisible becomes visible, and what is usually unremarked becomes remarkable (Phillips, 2005).

Sisi's bookstore walk

Delightfully cheery Sisi (aged 8) dressed in white tulle skirt, white stockings, pink converses and pink corduroy jacket, was reminiscent of classic children's literature characters such as Pippi Longstockings and Eloise. She lifted our spirits and captivated our imaginations asking us about our favourite books and favourite authors whilst leading us to a quirky hidden lane with a very small bookstore (the size of a small bedroom) at the end. Before entering the lane Sisi said, 'It's sort of a guessing game, if you guess both of the words in the poem from London you win being the winner.'

Then standing on the front steps (as our group of 10 couldn't all fit inside) of the store Sisi recited her self-authored poem:

This poem is called 'The Valley'. I hope you enjoy it.
If you come to visit Brisbane, the valley is the place
to go.
If you didn't do it there's nothing you would know.
Look at the shops, look at the buildings, look at the
art works that costs shillings.
The markets have all sorts of things:
Hats and clothes and shiny new rings.
Get to be active, go look around.
A beautiful dress -
I hope it doesn't cost a hundred pounds
Here is the bookshop, the place I love most brought
to you by your beautiful, talented host.

The group cheered.

Then we squeezed into the bookstore and fossicked around, chatting about the books and objects we noticed in the store. Then Sisi asked, 'Have we got enough time to read a blurb?' There was plenty of time.

Sisi searched for something that everyone would like. Her 5 year-old friend suggested, 'Read this one Sisi,' while holding up 'A visit to fairyland'. Sisi warmly obliged, 'Sounds like someone wants me to read this'.

On the return walk back to the Judith Wright Centre,

Sisi pointed out yarn bombing (or graffiti yarn art) of a tree on a wire fence and a mural painted on a lane way wall. Along the way she asked us, 'Did anyone guess the two words from London?' One walker guessed 'pounds' and another guessed 'shillings'. Sisi declared: 'You are both winners'. When a walker asked Sisi if she wrote the poem herself, she replied, 'Yes I did. Who else would write a poem about the Valley?'

There were a number of roads that needed to be crossed along the walk, one with traffic lights and one without. Sisi safely and confidently managed these crossings for the whole group, carefully waiting for signals (green man and chootickticka sound), choosing high visibility locations for crossing, and instructed the whole group when to cross. On arriving back at the Judith Wright Centre, Sisi pointed out the display on Judith Wright noting the awards she had won for poetry, and invited walkers to engage with the interactive display (of videos, listening station, drawing and street watching) for the Walking Neighbourhood.

Sisi's love of literature (both reading and creating) is at the core of her walk; a delight for any literacy/English teacher. Beyond these recognized classroom literacies, Sisi also demonstrated street literacy practices for road crossing, and awareness of street art (yarn bombing and mural). She also confidently managed leading the conversation throughout the entire duration of the walk. Road safety and conversation are typically managed by adults, as children are regarded adult responsibilities when in public spaces (Myall, 2000), yet Sisi competently managed both of these.

Kosha's Burger walk

Kosha is a vocal 8 year-old boy who decided to take his walk to a burger shop, but it's not your average burger shop. Kosha chose to take people there because he likes eating healthily. The burgers are made with fresh unprocessed ingredients. On commencement of his walk, he explains, 'They give us tokens at every meal and you can put them in the charity that you want'. Once we arrived at the café he further explained their charity donation system, by leading walkers to the shelf with the jars for donating tokens. He held up the chart that listed the funds collected last month, 'Here is the one from last month. They give you tokens, then you decide which one you want to give to.'

Kosha then led his group to his allocated table, then went to the counter to place the order. On his return, he invited conversation with, 'While we are waiting, let's talk about each other. I'm Kosha, I'm a student, and my favourite subject at school is Maths and my least favourite is writing. What do you do?' He asked each person in the group of six individually, by going around the table. The burgers then arrived and Kosha announced, 'And there is still going to be chips'. As

the waiter laid plates on the table, he announced the names of the burgers. Kosha proudly declared, 'I know that one. I'm getting to know them all'. Then the store manger came over to our table and introduced herself to the group. Kosha and Steph have come to know each other through his walks, so he confidently prompts: 'Yesterday we got 2 for 1 vouchers.'

The store manger smiles and replies, 'We might have some I'll check. How many do you want?'

With a cheeky grin, Kosha requests, 'Ahh one for everyone?'

'Got it just for you!'

Kosha then told the group of walkers how yesterday he got 5 two for one vouchers. Whilst they munched on burgers, a walker asked Kosha how he got to know the neighbourhood and choose the location for his walk, to which Kosha replied, 'It was pretty simple, because it wasn't far to walk (just across the road) and the healthy food.' After chatting about the burgers, the chips and tomato sauce for a while, Kosha posed a hypothetical question to the group of walkers, 'If you couldn't have the job you have what would you be?' This question provoked deep thinking, imaginings and humour, with suggestions of being a rock star, working in a burger shop, being a zookeeper, and disturbed combinations such as making zebra burgers. The walkers finished their burgers, selected a charity to add their token to and were safely led back to the Judith Wright Centre by Kosha.

Through Kosha's walk we see how he has mastered urban citizenship literacies required for dining out, negotiating deals (the two for one vouchers), and donating to charities. His skills in facilitating conversation are also highlighted, through sharing his likes and dislikes at school, inviting each walker to share what they do, and then the wonderfully provocative hypothetical question, 'If you couldn't have the job you have what would you be?' By closeting children within the walls of schools, they so rarely get the opportunity to engage with sectors of the public and learn these street literacies required for accessing goods and services, and conversing with unknown adults.

Implications for education

Mali, Sisi and Kosha interpreted texts in their surveying of the streetscapes and created texts for their walks. They used language to express and connect ideas, to interact with others, and knew how to vary their language for different audiences and contexts. So, much could be ticked off against curricula achievement standards, if that is what literacy education seeks. But what is most notable is that these children were self-motivated, they relished the opportunity to curate and lead adults on walks of a neighbourhood they knew and loved.

They were given the opportunity to share their expertise, to be visible, to lead: to actively participate in the public sphere. There is a whole body of literacies that children typically have limited access to, yet are necessary to being an active citizen who engages with others in the public sphere negotiating the sharing and workings of public spaces. *Walking Neighbourhood hosted by children* was an orchestrated social arts practice; imagine if the children at your school led walks of their local neighbourhood. There could be great potential for blurring the boundaries between school and community, through the sharings of local knowledge and creation of rich texts from a space of belonging. As Kalantzis and Cope (2012) propose we need a:

literacies pedagogy for active citizenship, centred on highly literate learners as agents in their own knowledge processes and capable of contributing their own ideas as well as negotiating the differences between one community and the next (p. 52).

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