

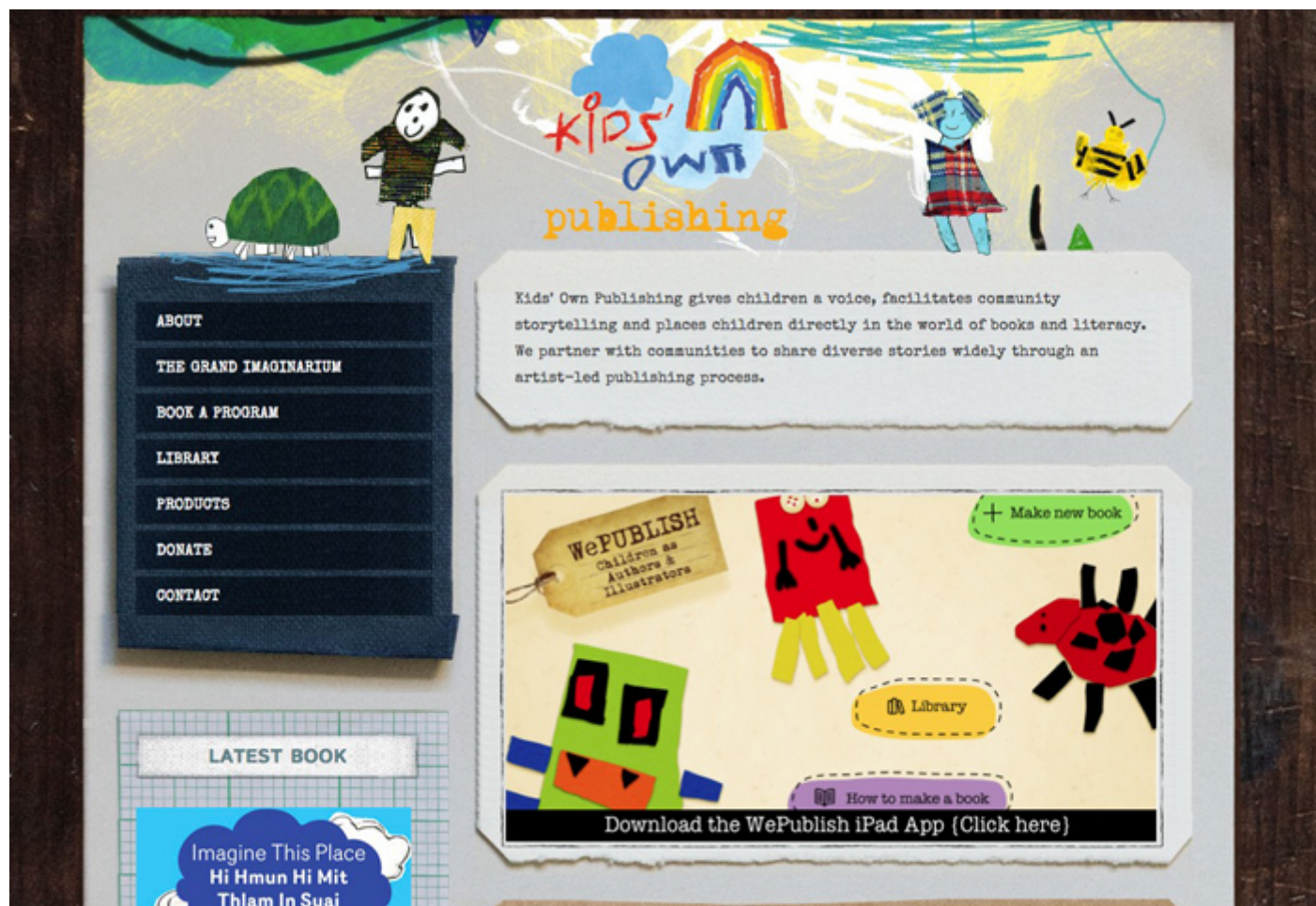
Authoring Your Own Story: Community Publishing in Schools

By Margaret Robson Kett

Kids' Own Publishing is a national not-for-profit social purpose arts organisation that harnesses the power of self-publishing to deliver innovative, educational and creative publishing programs working in partnership with a range of cross-sector organisations. Kids' Own Publishing gives children a voice, facilitates community storytelling and places children directly into the world of books and literacy.

In 1983, Victoria Ryle began teaching in a multicultural primary school in North London. One of her students, a young boy whose parents were from Gujarat, India, did not progress with his reading. One day Victoria sat with him, a book between them, open at a picture of a white woman in a kitchen. Beneath her the one word, 'Mummy'. Victoria pointed to the picture, reading the word, 'Mummy', encouraging the boy to join in. Eventually he turned to her and said, "That's not my Mummy". Victoria and the child found pictures of people who looked more like his family, wrote names beneath them and created a book. The boy read this book out loud, confident, again and again.

Out of this was born Victoria's conviction that children, especially those from marginalised and culturally and linguistically diverse (CaLD) communities, needed to create their own books. In the following years Victoria developed a community publishing model which unleashed children's creativity, engaged children in reading, writing and storytelling, and supported children's learning and self-belief. In the process she founded Kids' Own Publishing Ireland with partner Simon Spain in 1997. When the family relocated to Melbourne in 2003, Kids' Own Australia was founded.



Since then, over 100 books have been published under the Kids' Own Publishing imprint, made by communities who come together in kindergartens, playgroups, schools, libraries and cultural institutions such as ArtPlay. The books cover a wide range of genres including bilingual and community language texts, for ages 3 and up. Many of them are showcased in the Kids' Own Book Cubby – a pop-up library which is used in

libraries and community venues at special events, festivals and other celebrations of reading and writing. Last year the Book Cubby was even in residence at the Queen Victoria Market.

Partners are key to the success of Kids' Own Publishing. The Department of Education and Training has been a partner in several Kids' Own projects over the past few years. DET's *Linking Learning* is a program which looks at how educators, children and parents of a community's schools and kindergartens can work together in effective models of shared learning, with Cardinia Shire selected to be one of eight sites statewide. In 2015, four books were created in schools in two towns in the shire in partnership with Kids' Own as part of a community-wide publishing project designed to support effective transitions for children aged 3-7 years. (Cardinia Shire has supported joint Best Start - Kids' Own projects in the past with six books previously published by community groups.)

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Kids' Own has a team of artists who work with children and young people to create artwork in a studio experience in a school setting. In a series of weekly visits over a few weeks, circus and physical theatre performer Christy Flaws and visual artist Eddie Botha from KO worked with preschool children and their Year 5 and 6 'buddy' students at Nar Nar Goon PS and Lang Lang PS. Conversations around what it meant to leave kindergarten and to start school were the seeds to create artwork and stories to be published as four paperback books. Quirky 3D collage and watercolour wash illustrations accompanied the texts composed by children, giving advice for those starting school in four titles: Nar Nar Goon's *Let's Go to School* and *First Day Feelings* and Lang Lang's *When Dinosaurs Go to School* and *Bailey's Big Discovery*.

All great books have a launch. Alison Lester, former Australian Children's Laureate and local author-illustrator, launched all four books in Nar Nar Goon saying, "If you don't see yourself in a book, it makes you feel invisible – on the outside looking in. Being in a book establishes your place in the world."

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As well as the young artists and writers, the launch was packed with proud friends and family and community members. The books with Cardinia's own Book Cubby, were showcased at a Cardinia-wide professional development day for the early years in November 2015. Teachers who had participated in the project spoke enthusiastically about the project (one reported her children saying, "We are writers now!") and additional PD was provided on the day by Victoria Ryle and staff. Copies of the book (after each author-illustrator had received one) were distributed to every ECE and primary school in the shire, as well as the five branches of the Casey-Cardinia public libraries. They are also for sale from the KO website.

A formal evaluation of the *Linking Learning* project will be published later this year, but the last word should be from one of the young authors. His mother reported that he had taken a renewed interest in books at home. At his request, she read aloud the names of the authors and illustrators on the covers. His response was, "Which kindy do they go to?"

For further information about Kids' Own Publishing:

www.kidsownpublishing.com

Margaret Robson Kett is a Melbourne early years librarian, writer, reviewer and editor with a particular interest in books for under 5s. She worked for Kids' Own Publishing from 2012 to 2014 as a Project Manager.