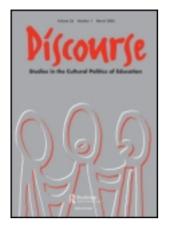
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Positioning the school in the landscape: exploring Black history with a regional Australian primary school

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This paper deals with a project establishing an Indigenous Australian artistsin-residence program at a regional Australian primary school to foreground its Black History, Primary school students worked with Indigenous Australian story tellers, artists, dancers and musicians to explore ways in which they could examine print and non-print texts for a critical appreciation of ways in which their school has been positioned in the physical landscape on the land, and in the historical landscape, where Indigenous Australian roles and contributions have continued to be marginalised. From such critical engagement, the children have created non-print texts of their own: tangible, durable artefacts of acknowledgment of their own school's Black History. Constructed as texts which may be read by all who enter the school, the artefacts produced are visual texts that have formed part of a continuing critical engagement with creators of Indigenous Australian texts, and interpretation by the children of the texts that they have engaged as part of this project.

Keywords: visual literacy; Aboriginalism; indigenousness; Australianness; artistsin-residence

Introduction

The project has been funded by the University of Ballarat, and developed within a framework of partnership with local Indigenous Australian interest groups and associated volunteers, as well as Indigenous Australian artists of the region. It addressed a local problem that had earlier become evident in relation to schools in the region. A photographic survey of the entrances to the 120 primary schools used by Education students at the University for the conduct of their teaching practice has indicated that only four of these schools in some way have publicly acknowledged traditional and current Indigenous Australian presence in the schools' histories, or the schools' occupying traditional owners' land. This suggests that every Indigenous Australian child who has entered any of the remaining 116 schools of the survey has had no formal, sustained acknowledgment of their school being built on the land that has once been the domain of Indigenous Australians, or had been in some way connected to a history that has spanned more than that of European settlement of the region.

Every school in Australia is built on Indigenous Australian land, land which has become Crown Land in the process of a series of European dispossessions. Where this is not acknowledged, every Indigenous Australian child who enters the school is

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denied this aspect of their heritage as far as these schools are concerned, and thus is covertly excluded from traditions and heritages to which they might otherwise lay claim. In similar vein, the historical understandings of European and other migrant children are diminished while this aspect of their history is not addressed. The project therefore addressed twin concerns of comprehensive engagement with historical and cultural markers of the region by Indigenous Australian, European and other migrant background children alike in its focus on the creation of visual texts that may be read as part of inclusive practices of the school.

Background

The project was conducted in the sorts of social, cultural, political and economic contexts that situate critical literacy projects. The results of the Census of 2002 present a bleak, not to say appalling, set of figures underscoring systemic inequality that affects Australia's Indigenous population. The figures as measures of quality of life – infant mortality rates, life expectancy, working life, full and part-time average earnings, home ownership, unemployment – all indicated a standard of living for Indigenous Australian people in what was once styled The Lucky Country (Horne, 1971) little different from those in Third World countries (see, for example, Zeegers, Muir, & Lin, 2003). Of particular concern to this project are the numbers in relation to education: the current cohort of Indigenous Australian students in higher education is only one-third the number of Indigenous Australians currently serving in custodial orders (Wright & Burchell, 2002). The Indigenous Australian population is 2.4% of the total population of about 20 million, that is, about 480,000 people. Yet 1727 Indigenous Australian adults per 100,000 of total population are serving custodial orders, compared with 115 per 100,000 non-Indigenous Australians, and double the number of Indigenous Australians with university degrees (8%) are unemployed, compared with non-Indigenous Australians (4%) (Wright, 2002; see also, Zeegers et al., 2003).

The children at the school in which the project was conducted may be considered as part of a cohort at one school least likely to be identified with Indigenous Australian enrolments. The principal described it as one of the most middle-class schools of the region, which of itself presumes a tiny proportion of Indigenous Australian children. Even so, we could not be sure of just how many children were aware of any Indigenous Australian background they might have. European perspectives on Australian history that have traditionally denigrated all things Aboriginal or associated with Aboriginality have promoted a practice of keeping such information secret, a practice explored in the work of Morgan (1987).

What is more, the project did not aim specifically at Indigenous Australian children but at the whole cohort of Grade 3–4 children (ranging in ages from 7 to 10 years of age). This has been a significant feature of the project's attempts to generate more complete understandings of what it might mean to be Australian, in that it has engaged a history that goes further than in curricula that focus on Eurocentric concerns. Thus, the project addressed at least one aspect of systemic inequality in relation to Indigenous Australian children's education. It began with a focus on a most basic level, that of their entry, and the entry of their classmates, through the front gate of the primary school. In doing so, the project proceeded on the concept of

visual texts being read in similar ways that print texts may be read, constructing the entrance to the school as a text that may be read by all who enter.

The notion of the school being able to be read in ways similar to that of a written text (Groundwater-Smith, Ewing, & Le Cornu, 2003) has been an important informing aspect of the literature that guided this project. Much of the current literature on positioning is consistent in representations of contexts and situations as texts (see, for example, Knobel, 1999; Knobel & Healey, 1998; Lankshear, with Gee, Knobel, & Searle, 1997; Macken-Horarik, 1998; Makin, Jones Diaz, & McLachlan, 2007; Zeegers, 1996). Figure 1 illustrates this point.

At this point there is nothing remarkable about the entrance seen here from the front gate. This section is an extension built onto its original 1850s building, and some thought has gone into making it blend into the original architecture as seamlessly as possible. Not only that, its large, working clock shows its conventional approach to punctuality and the self-discipline that this entails (and anybody entering knows whether they are on time or not). There is a flag pole (provided in 2005 by the Australian government) from which the Australian flag, which came into being with Federation in 1901, will hang once it is raised later in the morning.

The building itself has a certain appeal in its architectural attention to design and form, with its various planes blending into an aesthetically satisfying whole. In appearance, there is nothing to distinguish it in any substantial way from any other school in the district or state: it is obviously meticulously maintained, it has trees and grassed play areas, and seating for outside activities over breaks. The school would appear to value its role as facilitating physical and social development of children as part of its function.

What is perhaps more telling is what is not there. This raises the idea of critical literacy as a tool to enable children to analyse texts, starting from the principle that all texts (written, oral, visual, electronic, and so on) are to be considered in relation to the social contexts of their construction. The project has taken the stance that no



Figure 1. The entrance to the school before the project was begun. All photographs were taken by the author.

text is neutral or innocent – it always carries meanings which are socially embedded (Vick, 2001) – that the entrance of the school in question is one to be viewed as part of discourses of schooling, which function to normalise ideas, beliefs, actions, and cultural practices, making them seem natural when they are really cultural. Given this, the project has worked towards raising the consciousness of non-Indigenous Australian children in relation to that systemic inequality at the point of entry to the school. It has used critical engagement with text as a literacy skill through which this could be done.

As Lankshear (1994) points out, 'critical' has related terms – 'criticism', 'criticise', 'critique' – which suggest that something is to be subjected to evaluation of some kind (p. 9). It is in line with Shor's (1992) suggestion of analysis, which is to 'go beneath surface impressions' and 'discover deep meaning'. The project not only worked with concepts of naming and positioning, but also investigated by whom this naming and positioning is done, making visible to the children the nature of power and power relations in texts they have encountered. When the project looked to critical literacy for analytical habits, it looked to children's interrogation of texts to examine ways in which language works to establish subjectivities and subject positions that are then normalised to the extent that readers do not question what they encounter in them.

Taken to its logical conclusion in promoting awareness on important political and social levels, critical literacy implies some sort of political or social action. Informed by the work of scholars in the field of critical literacy (e.g., Kress, 1997), the project invites viewers to consider a number of features about this picture of the school entrance with its flagpole. The flag that will be hung later in the morning will not be the 1971 Aboriginal flag designed by Harold Joseph Thomas, a Luritja man from Central Australia with its symbolic representations of the red earth, black people, and yellow sun, the constant renewer of life. The Aboriginal flag is premised on more solid conceptualisations of life in Australia in its emphasis on the land, its people, and the sun, than is the Australian flag (which could be said to emphasise political and commercial ties). The flag that will be raised as part of the school's morning ritual will be the national Australian flag, rather than the Aboriginal one.

What is also absent is any sort of acknowledgment that this school has been built on traditional owners' land. I am using the word 'owner' here, as it fits with European-based notions of individual, social and commercial groups and the Crown on the issue of land and their relationships to it as a matter of owning land. A more relevant term for Indigenous Australian perspectives on the issue of land and their relationships with it would be 'custodianship' (for a detailed discussion of custodianship of land, see Clarke, 2003). The idea is encapsulated in a popular song in its lines about the same piece of land, sung first by a European farmer – 'this land is mine' – and then by an Indigenous Australian resident on that land - 'this land is me' (Hannan, Carmody, & Kelly, 2001). The difference in the two lines may seem small, but the use of the possessive is different, and this reinforces a crucial aspect of cultural attitudes to place and one's relation to the land that the particular space occupies. What is also absent from the picture, then, is any visual sense of cultural perspectives other than privileged European concepts of land ownership, such as land custodianship. Indeed, the notion of land ownership is not thrown up for consideration, as not even a plaque with a simple statement like: 'X School acknowledges the traditional custodianship of the land by the Wauthaurong people', in the style of the handful of other schools in the original photographic survey.

Examining the entrance to the school at the end of 10 weeks of work on this project shows a different perspective, which may also be read as text.

As shown in Figure 2, the Australian flag has been raised at the front of the school, certainly, but the right-hand wall has a mural in the shape of a boomerang, and on that boomerang are 82 colourful tiles that have been created by the children as part of their responses to texts they have engaged as part of the project. The children's selection of the Aboriginal flag, or their own interpretations of it, recurs across the mural. In this picture, the mural with the Aboriginal flag and other tiles that are dominated by the colour system of that flag, sits opposite the Australian flag at the front of the school. This has been an interesting outcome of the project, as none of the transcripts of taped sessions with the artists-in-residence have suggested that this has been a significant feature of their stories or their discussions about the work that the children would produce. Neither has this been a significant feature of the texts the children have studied as part of the project. It is perhaps suggestive of a greater significance as far as the children are concerned of the symbolic importance of flags that adult members of the project team had not realised. The representations of the Aboriginal flag here function as an extension of Australianness as perceived by the children, along with the official flag, at the entrance to the school.

The entrance thus transformed has constituted a new text that each child who enters the school grounds may read differently from the one of the first picture of the entrance. The mural has been positioned in a prominent position in the treed and grassy grounds, near the big clock, on part of the building that is solidly attached to



Figure 2. The entrance with the visual texts produced by the children.

its Victorian-era origins. This is a result of the children working with Indigenous Australian artists-in-residence in a program that has questioned what they have taken for granted about schools and schooling even before they physically enter their own schools as potential successful learners in Australia's education system.

The Artists-in-Residence program has established a mechanism whereby local Indigenous Australian artists, musicians, story tellers and dancers have worked with classes of children and their teachers to explore ways in which their school may acknowledge its position on traditional owners' land, and within frameworks of history that have included those which precede white settlement. Indigenous Australian and other children have worked with Indigenous Australian artists to produce concrete and enduring visual texts, items that have acknowledged and displayed that acknowledgment in the form of visual texts as tangible and enduring artefacts placed prominently at the school entrance.

Informing literature

The literature on Western conceptualisations of Indigenous cultures has been important in informing the project. A major work drawn upon is that of Said (1995) and his concept of Orientalism, represented as 'a way of coming to terms with the Orient that is based on the Orient's special place in European Western experience' (p. 1). This project has drawn on Said's (1995) work, starting with a paraphrasing of a sentence of his to focus on what might be called 'Aboriginalism', and which might be represented as 'a way of coming to terms with Aboriginality that is based on Aboriginality's special place in European Australian experience' (cf., Hodge & Mishra, 1991). The project took up the concept of Aboriginalism as a tool which enabled it to raise serious questions in relation to academic boundaries that have become established, that have in effect structured ways in which both Indigenous Australian and non-Indigenous Australian children have been taught, ways they have engaged in learning, and knowledge formations that have resulted. Drawing upon concepts of Orientalism to develop concepts of Aboriginalism, the project created a space for seriously interrogating discourses of Aboriginalism as having ignored the socially constructed nature of schooling and ways in which this has been evaluated and valued (Zeegers et al., 2003).

A further feature of the project has been the notion of Aboriginalism in relation to ensuring that the children worked with Indigenous Australian artists, rather than with teachers from other backgrounds. Drawing on the concept of Aboriginalism presenting a concept of Other in relation to the school and the texts it currently produces, the project was concerned that very little may have been achieved by children working with non-Indigenous Australian teachers for whom that Other was as real as it was to the children themselves. Non-Indigenous Australian teachers would necessarily have worked at one remove from a first-hand knowledge base of Aboriginal cultures, no matter how well read, experienced, or well intentioned they may have been. Basing the program on Indigenous Australian artists working alongside non-Indigenous Australian teachers foregrounded ways in which Indigenous Australian children's rich cultural heritage may provide texts to be explored as part of the wider school communities' engagements with Indigenous Australian culture and cultural markers.

Children's critical engagement with these texts enabled them to explore the ramifications of a 'hidden curriculum' (McLaren, 1993) that failed to make visible the Black History of every Australian. That invisibility subtly undermines government inclusivity policies (Department of Education Employment and Training, 2001) regarding Indigenous Australian and non-Indigenous Australian children in schools. Perhaps one of the best articulations of the benefit of such a project as the one described here is that of Australia's Governor General of the time, Peter Jeffery (2005), who said:

what I was suggesting at Uluru was that perhaps those people with real knowledge and wisdom could think deeply about this and look at the enduring features of aboriginal history, culture, tradition, with a view to bringing it, perhaps, into the education system. Because my feeling is that if indigenous history and culture was really taught well and consistently across the nation, it would do much for Australia to understand where it has come from, rather than just say from 1788, European settlement. If we all understood that our history went back through the indigenous culture 60,000 years and that European settlement was just one component of that history, I think we'd do a lot for reconciliation and indeed national pride.

In the case of this project, it has been the Indigenous Australian artists with firsthand Indigenous Australian knowledge and wisdom, to which Governor General Jeffery refers, who have undertaken the task of bringing those features of Indigenous Australianness into this small part of the education system, and endowing concepts of Australianness itself with the further dimensions that a rich cultural heritage provides.

Informed engagement

Children's critical engagement with texts used as part of current schooling practice in this project has been designed to lead them into informed mainstream social and economic participation without sacrifice of personal cultural markers. The project has provided a further dimension to the findings of the Johnston Report (Johnston, 1991), specifically examining the adequacy of the schooling system in this case in this one region, thereby giving a more detailed perspective on the recommendations of that Report:

School based education systems have been either unable or unwilling to accommodate many of the values, attitudes, codes and institutions of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander society. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander participation and achievement in education, as defined by the wider Australian society, has been limited and this in turn limited the real choices available to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in Australian society. (Johnston, 1991, p. 511)

The prospect for change has been given a fillip with the change of government in Australia in 2007, and the almost immediate public declaration of 'Sorry' on behalf of the Australian Parliament by the new Prime Minister, Kevin Rudd (2008). It was an occasion of great cultural significance and attendant emotion, broadcast on national television, with front page features in the national press. Rudd's (2008) words are important:

We apologise for the laws and policies of successive parliaments and governments that have inflicted profound grief, suffering and loss of these our fellow Australians ... For the pain, suffering and hurt of these stolen generations, their descendants and for their families left behind, we say 'Sorry'. To the mothers and fathers, the brothers and the sisters, for the breaking up of families and communities, we say 'Sorry'. And for the indignity and degradation thus inflicted on a proud people and a proud culture, we say 'Sorry'. We the Parliament of Australia respectfully request that this apology be received in the spirit in which it is offered as part of the healing of the nation ... (2008, p. 1)

These are important words as they acknowledge what has been backgrounded in Australia's history. While this project predates the national apology, it has foregrounded issues that have been taken up at national levels.

Literacy

The project was grounded in concepts of literacy in relation to ways in which language is used and the influence of this on individuals, especially regarding their relationships within cultural groups which determine which literacy practices are relevant and worthy (Anstey & Bull, 2004; Emmitt, Komesaroff, & Pollock, 2006; Gee, 1990, 1991). Taking issue with dominant Eurocentric depictions of Indigenous Australian presence in Australian history, the project provided a means by which such depictions could be contested and alternative meanings of that presence generated and articulated. While an outcome has been the generation of visual texts acknowledging Indigenous Australian custodianship of land, to get to that outcome print, oral, music, dance, and visual texts have been engaged by the children concerned.

As a preliminary exercise, the children at the school engaged a rather beautiful picture book, *My Place* (Wheatley & Rawlins, 1987). This book, which is referred to in the remainder of this paper, is not to be confused with that by Morgan (1987) of the same title.

At this point it is useful to give some consideration of discourses and discursive fields. This paper treats written and spoken texts as constituting and being constituted by discourses, taking teaching and learning practices in literacy teaching and learning as discursive practices which constitute and are constitutive of discursive formations, and it takes up elements of discursive formation as verbal, written or manifest practice. When taken all together, these elements constitute a discursive formation, what Foucault (1974) sees as occurring 'wherever one can describe, between a number of statements, a system of dispersion; whenever, between objects, types of statements, concepts or thematic choices, one can define a regularity' (p. 38). Pursuing this line of thinking, it is possible to see that human beings do not create unified social theories or observe an objective reality, but operate through discourses that construct and constitute social reality. Discourses then become major considerations in human social activity, such as teaching and learning, as they constrain the possibilities of thought, keeping the unthinkable at bay so that certain discourses are privileged over others by virtue of their unquestioned application. These considerations opened up concepts of marginalised and privileged discourses, and the networks of conditions that maintain their position within fields of knowledge. Further, they allowed a consideration of the books that were used in the project as discursively constructing a social reality in

which Indigenous Australians have been largely absent, and where present, positioned in particular ways.

Wheatley's My Place is no different from any other book in this regard. In this case a piece of children's literature has been a foundation for both the students' literacy program activities and the basis of the project's visual literacy focus. Indeed, its subtitle of The Story of Australia from Now to Then has suggested scope for the integration of Literacy, Literature, Art, Music, Studies of Society and the Environment (SOSE), and Mathematics at the same time as it anticipated the mooted affective learning features of the incoming Victorian Essential Learning Standards (VELS) (Victorian Curriculum and Assessment Authority, 2005) in Victoria.

What is missing in *My Place* is any Indigenous Australian presence between the 'now' of the book (shown in a small aboriginal flag in a window in the opening illustration of the book), and the 'then' of 1788 (with the girl, Barrangarook, in her family situation when the European ships are spotted in the harbour). What has happened to the Indigenous peoples in between? This is part of an Australian history not present in the pages of this book. From an estimated Indigenous Australian population of 300,000 in 1788, to 60,000 in 1921, and to 2.4% of the current population in 2007, presently 480,000 people (Hodge & Mishra, 1991). Enormous social upheavals have affected Indigenous Australians in their displacement and dispossession after 1788.

It ought also to be noted that Wheatley worked with the Anangu staff and students at Papunya School to produce the text of another beautiful book, *Papunya School Book of Country and History* (Anangu Staff and Students at Papunya School, 2001), where such gaps in the history of a region in Australia do not feature in the same way as they do in *My Place*. Wheatley's work on the equally beautiful, timely and relevant *Going Bush* (Wheatley & Searle, 2007) has the statement, 'We are on aboriginal land' and the Aboriginal flag on the inside front cover. I am not suggesting that her work in general is anything but remarkably insightful and sensitive to Australian Indigenousness, but when even a major author such as Wheatley leaves this sort of gap in relation to Indigenous Australians' presence in Australian history in one of her more significant works, it is a point worth raising with the children who turn to her books.

Hodge and Mishra (1991) and Bradford (2001) explain the sorts of absences referred to above in relation to discursively constructed and symbolically managed regimes of truth that serve to normalise Indigenous Australian absence in the literature such as that of *My Place*. Thus, questions of who can speak about issues that are faced by Indigenous Australians are managed in relation to not only what is to be said but also in relation to ways they can be spoken about, and with what authority. This is consistent with Foucault's (1974) delineation of features of discursive fields. It is also reminiscent of Said's (1995) notions of Orientalism.

The gaps left in the *My Place* book and others of its ilk have been filled by story tellers, as artists in this project; the project enabled questioning and the answers thus generated, to help fill the gaps discursively created in the children's concepts of Indigenous Australian roles in history. Dance played its part as well, as stories were told in dance, shown in Figure 3.

Having taken up such issues, the project explored other texts, such as the oral ones of the story tellers. They told tales of mission life, when governments implemented their policies of containment of Indigenous Australians rather than



Figure 3. Engaging music and dance in story telling.

have them pursue their traditionally nomadic existence. They told of their own families' experiences of Stolen Generations children, a particularly reprehensible policy of removing Indigenous Australian children from their families, treating them as orphans, and institutionalising them or placing them with European foster families. Heiss' (2006) story of Mary Tallence explores this theme, and it has been one taken up by one of the children, asking one of the story tellers how it was that if he had six fathers and four mothers – uncles and aunts serve as parents in Indigenous Australian family structures, so that technically no child can ever be an orphan – that he grew up in the local orphanage. Real life experience of engaging story tellers allowed an immediate and relevant exploration of this issue raised in print texts, allowing the children to confirm or clarify knowledge gleaned from a variety of sources in their literacy program.

At the same time, the children learned what it means to be a hunter gatherer, and to be an active member of a sophisticated application of The Law; that was unchanged (for 40,000 years) and unchanging rule that governs complex Indigenous Australian social relationships. This meant the telling of warrior stories and retribution stories (spear in the thigh stories) and re-enactments. Figure 4 is a picture of a boy (we do not know his ethnic or racial background) practising his defence against a spear-in-the-thigh punishment under the guidance of one of the artists.

Children's production of text

As Anstey and Bull (2000) put it, we learn a lot about what children learn from their engagements with texts when we ask them to produce their own. The words that the children have heard in the project have been represented in peculiarly Indigenous Australian styles, and the children engaged them as they produced their own artistic



Figure 4. Practising spear-in-the-thigh dodging.

productions. There were bush walks and explorations of the land itself and its significant physical and cultural features discussed with an Indigenous Australian guide on the walks. There were dance sessions, music sessions, and story-telling sessions. There were combined sessions as each child painted their own tiles in discussion with the artists, with story telling integral to painting sessions. Details of stories were checked by each child with the artists, and there were sessions where the teachers read texts like Heiss' (2006) as the children worked on their tiles. All production of texts was done in the context of story telling and music and dance production; stories were listened to and details explored as painting was being done, and traditional visual symbols experimented with as production proceeded apace.

The symbols

The symbols which formed part of the frame of the mural itself, reinforced notions of community, meetings, water supplies, and so on. Figures 5 and 6 indicate the use of visuals in the creation of the visual texts of the stories in the mural. Here we have symbols for campsites, water sources, and other such concerns of the traditional custodians of this part of the land.

The mural itself consists of 82 texts created by the children, each text a story on an individual tile painted by a child and telling something of the story of the traditional custodians of this piece of land on which the school is built. None of the tiles used print in telling its story.

Children who created these texts could read them. Other children could too. It is a sophisticated visual representation using a combination of the children's understandings of Indigenous Australian representations of a story that can be told in this landscape, with the mountain just behind the school, and the water hole behind that mountain, with people going for water as the meeting group (on the right hand edge of the mountainside, which is a traditional meeting place). As they travel through thick bush, there are snakes to be avoided, and unwelcome Dreamtime beings in the form of Lizard Men who must be driven away.



Figure 5. The symbols in the frame.

Conclusion

The project discussed in this paper was small scale. It simply could not tackle the enormity of the problem and the context of Indigenous Australian issues in relation to the history of European-based conquest and its ongoing legacy in which this one school and its students have been positioned. This school could serve as a model for similar projects across the state, and then across Australia, to produce similar acknowledgments in all Australian schools of a marginalised perspective on just what happened and indeed is still happening in this country. It is a project that produced a number of visual, oral and written texts by the children and by the artists themselves. The only print text of the project is shown in Figure 7, written by one of the participants in the project.



Figure 6. A visual text created.

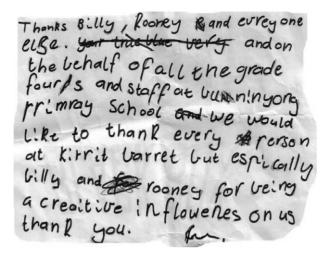


Figure 7. A print text.

This tells us that the project was an enjoyable experience for the children. Our reading of the tiles that were produced tells us that the children internalised the information that they engaged with, reproducing it in their own interpretations and retellings of different texts they have encountered throughout the project. These outcomes give the teachers and the artists-in-residence real encouragement to proceed, to take the original idea to further levels of curricula which embed Indigenous Australian perspectives, and to undertake similar projects in other schools. Indeed, several schools in different areas of the state have enquired about conducting similar projects in partnership with their local Indigenous Australian community groups.

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