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Writing unlocks a maze

by EMMIE DOWLING

A NINE-YEAR-OLD boy with Aspergers went from being unwilling to participate in class, to being more attentive and displaying a positive attitude—in five weeks.

The catalyst: a creative writing program.

Lover of literature Gae Oaten says the program, run by volunteers at her not-for-profit organisation A Maze of Story, has helped children and pre-teens from various cultural backgrounds become more creative and social.

Astounded by the talent of children, once given the opportunity to let their imaginations run wild, she gave the *Voice* a taste of one of the students' stories.

It starts by introducing Bob and Mary, who are in love. Bob is brown.

"Then his next line is, "oh and by the way, Bob is a mouse'," Ms Oaten, of Northbridge, says.

"It was so well put."

Children start the program brainstorming with coloured pens on large paper.

Creative juices flow as volunteers play games to exercise the imagination: one involves putting an inanimate animal on their heads, and children have to explain

what it is without being direct.

Then, only after a few weeks, volunteers and "story weavers" (experienced writers) start aiding the children with editing.

It's important to let children to have the freedom with their own stories, Ms Oaten says.

The former psychotherapist says some of the children—most are disadvantaged—have written about subjects such as domestic violence and suicide: "A volunteer helps two children develop their stories so it's almost one-on-one, and children are in a nurturing environment," she says.

At Embleton primary school, Marylin Makubaru, 11, wrote about a mother surrendering her two daughters for adoption.

"I love reading dramatic books," Marylin says.

The *Voice* asks: "So do you want to be a writer one day?"—"Yeah, sure, why not?" she replies.

Her story, and those of 11 of her classmates, have just been published with the help of A Maze of Story.

The organisation was modelled on the success of 826 Valencia, based in San Francisco. It needs more volunteers. For more information, visit amazeofstory.org.au.



• Gae Oaten, founder of the not-for-profit organisation A Maze of Story, with Embleton primary students, aged from 7-12, who were part of a five-week creative writing program. Photo by Matthew

Dwyer