



YEAR OF POETRY

YEAR OF NOVELLA

Evaluation Report

2024



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ABOUT THE TEAM

Lauren Siegmann and Ale Prunotto from String Theory led this evaluation in partnership with Story Factory. Hadil Albarqi provided valuable insights that informed the development of the wellbeing framework.

Three Alumni from Year of Poetry and Year of Novella were recruited as paid Peer Researchers: Israa Aly, Nickie Tran, and Hayden Field.

Six Alumni provided fictional and non-fictional writing and poetry describing their experiences and feelings about participating in the Year of Poetry and Year of Novella. Contributors were paid for their good work. Story contributors included the Peer Researchers, Amuor, Atoc, and Bea. Their work is included in this report.

THE EVALUATION STORY

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stories about story factory

This report is interspersed with fiction and non-fiction stories and poetry submitted by Alumni of Year of Poetry and Year of the Novella. We asked Alumni to submit a piece of writing that communicated their experience of and feelings about the programs. Alumni were paid for their submissions. In addition to being featured throughout the evaluation report, the Alumni submissions were combined with interview and survey data to analyse and develop findings.

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GLOSSARY

Construct	Definition	Contribution to wellbeing
Agency	Capacity to make choices and act on those choices ¹	Your ability to access resources in your environment ² Capacity to interact with systems, structures, and social groups effectively and positively.
Autonomy	Direct one's life in accordance with one's values	Decisions are meaningful ³ Improved motivation ⁴
Belonging	A feeling of deep connection to a social group ⁵	Access to social and community resources ⁶ Contributes to positive self-concept, self-efficacy, voice, empathy, resilience, and voice ⁷
Communication and collaboration skills	Communication: exchange of ideas. ⁸ Collaboration: building shared understanding. ⁹	Development of communication and collaboration skills contributes to cognitive empathy, voice, self-efficacy, and sense of self.
Critical and creative skills	Reason, logic, resourcefulness, imagination and innovation. ¹⁰	The development of these skills contributes to the positive development of all constructs.
Cognitive empathy	Recognise and understand another person's emotions.	Strengthens belonging and identity Contributes to sharing of resources ¹¹
External factors	Factors that interact with wellbeing that originate outside the individual.	Concerns the ways that systems and the environment interact with wellbeing.
Identity	Feel good about your place in the world ¹²	Contributes to belonging, positive self-concept, and autonomy Situates self-concept as a social construct ¹³
Internal factors	Factors that interact with wellbeing that originate within the individual.	Concerns the interaction between identity, self-efficacy, sense of self, and self-concept.
Relational factors	Factors that interact with wellbeing that relate to interpersonal matters.	Concerns access to connections and opportunities.
Resilience	Withstand and recover from difficulties ¹⁴	Interacts with all other constructs
Self-concept	How you feel about yourself,	Interacts with all other constructs ¹⁵ Improved motivation Improved resilience Improved regard for one's identity
Self-efficacy	Belief in your skills	Improved resilience ¹⁶ Improved agency
Sense of self	Your account of the characteristics that make up who you are.	Interacts with self-efficacy and self-concept.
Voice	Have a say in matters that affect you	Improved autonomy and agency

my magical experience at story factory

by amuor

Story Factory is a magical space. A dreamlab where creativity is nurtured by empowering students with skills, resources, opportunities, and a sense of community.

Despite Parramatta bustling with speedy commuters, curious pedestrians slow their steps to glimpse the special action inside the brick building.

It's easy to be lured by the warmth of the fluorescent orange lights and the curvy layout of the space. But what truly captures their gaze is the magnetic movement of engaged students. Toothy laughs, students striding across the room to trade stories with friends, heads reading screens over shoulders and hands raised in the air. It's a creative storm. A lab exploding with embers of ideas from exceptional minds and teachers eager to light the sparks.

My unforgettable experience of completing the Year of the Novella program in 2021 encapsulates the magic of Story Factory. The enchanting staff spoke spells over me! Not the cursed kind that'll turn me into a pumpkin, but ones that transformed me into an author! Words of expertise, encouragement, and faith in my writing abilities. During my weekly workshops at Story Factory, the charm of the place only grew with time. In moments of doubt and self-criticism of my work, the writing community would inspire and empower me. It's as if spirits of tenderness and encouragement possess anyone who enters the building.

These spirits still roam to this day!

I'm amazed that ideas from my mind have transformed from words on a screen to chapters of a novella. I still wonder how seeds of characters, story worlds and story lines grew and not shrivelled.

It's those Story Factory magicians and their spells!

One second I'm a curious student and the next I'm holding a novella titled 'Devil's Spawn' and it has my name on it!

SUMMARY

Story Factory is a Sydney-based community arts organisation with a vision for an Australia where all young people have a voice and the skills and confidence to tell their stories. The organisation delivers short-term creative writing programs in schools, public programs for young people, and creative writing programs across New South Wales.

Story Factory commissioned this evaluation to examine the contribution of the Year of Poetry and Year of the Novella programs to wellbeing outcomes.

Both programs hold workshops one evening each week during school terms between February and December. Two facilitators who work with approximately 12-15 students lead the workshops. The programs focus on supporting young people to create and publish a novella or book of poetry. Activities across the year include instruction on creative writing, poetry, and generating ideas, stories, and characters. Young people are encouraged to share their writing in peer feedback circles, where they provide and receive advice and feedback about their writing. Young people are linked to professional editors and graphic designers who assist with preparing and publishing their work. The programs conclude with a book launch, where the young people receive their published work.

The programs are held at Story Factory's Parramatta office in Greater Western Sydney. Western Sydney experiences socio-economic inequity compared to other regions in Australia, and many young people grow up in challenging social and economic contexts. Western Sydney is home to a vibrant multicultural community with residents from over 170 countries and 38% speaking a language other than English at home.¹ Young people living in Western Sydney express pride in this community, reporting that the Western Sydney community is connected, supportive and friendly, and that its people are welcoming and accepting.²

ABOUT THE EVALUATION

The evaluation took place over 2023. The methods were co-designed with Story Factory staff, the program facilitators, and two program Alumni. Evaluation activities included literature reviews, surveys, and interviews with the facilitators, Story Factory staff, and teachers. We then undertook further analysis to better understand the contribution to wellbeing outcomes.

Our approach to implementing the evaluation drew upon the traditions of participatory evaluation. Three Alumni were recruited as paid Peer Researchers who undertook training in research methods, interviewed Alumni, analysed evaluation data, and presented their findings to the Story Factory team. We also recruited and paid Alumni to write stories that describe their experiences of the programs. These stories are included in this report.

The rationale for a participatory approach was ethical. If young people are the intended beneficiaries of the programs being evaluated, they should sit at the evaluation table. They should get to decide what works and what doesn't, and they should be part of the sense-making and valuing process.

FINDINGS

The findings examine the contribution of the programs to three long-term outcomes associated with wellbeing: agency, belonging, and identity. We define wellbeing as ‘feeling good about yourself and your place in the world.’

Context

We examined contextual factors that interact with young people’s wellbeing. The findings are summarised below:

- Many young people have negative experiences of school and sometimes experience challenging home environments. They do not often feel valued for creativity.
- Young people have limited access to connections and networks outside school and home, and limited access to creative opportunities.
- Young people internalise the stigma associated with their social identity and experience negative self-concept.

Program approaches

The evaluation examined the contribution of program approaches to wellbeing outcomes.

A safe and welcoming environment

Facilitators focus on creating a safe and welcoming environment that young people want to return to. They employ a scaffolded approach to workshops in the first term to avoid intimidating their audience. Engaging in creative work for its own sake is a cornerstone of the programs.

Creative collaboration

The program facilitates creative collaboration, including peer feedback, and connects young people to arts, publishing, and literary professionals.

Ownership and exploration

The program emphasises ownership over creative processes. Young people are encouraged to explore creative ideas without judgement.

Wellbeing outcomes

The table below summarises the short-, medium-, and long-term wellbeing outcomes.

SHORT-TERM

- **Critical and creative skills** Examples included improved vocabulary, editing skills, development of strategies for assessing writing quality, generating ideas, creating a structure for a piece of writing, and factoring the purpose of the writing when planning their work.
- **Pride in achievement** Young people benefit from ongoing engagement and completion of challenging work. They expressed satisfaction, fulfilment, and increased confidence.
- **Improved connections** with other like-minded young people and adults and connection to creative communities.
- **Communication and collaboration skills** Young people give and receive feedback and engage with diverse perspectives. Contemplation on how to structure their ideas in a piece of work and write for an audience hones communication skills.

- **Sense of self** Through creative writing, young people explore issues and negotiate their relationship with themselves. Writing supports the ability to clarify a point of view.
- **Rejection of stereotypes** Young people engage with creative writing as a tool to explore and reject negative stereotypes about their communities.

MEDIUM-TERM

- **Resilience** Young people were more likely to take positive risks, especially with creative work, and undertake activities that felt uncomfortable.
- **Self-efficacy** Young people experience awareness of and confidence in their skills.
- **Cognitive empathy** Feedback and writing processes require young people to consider the point of view of others. Writing for an audience requires the writer to consider how others will receive their work.
- **Voice** Participation in feedback sessions builds young people's capacity to express views, be heard, and be represented in a process.
- **Autonomy and positive self-concept** The opportunity to exert creative freedom in producing a substantive piece of work, creative writing to explore the self, and the socio-political implications of rejecting negative stereotypes contribute to autonomy and self-concept.

LONG-TERM

- **Agency** Resilience and self-efficacy contribute to improved agency. Agency contributes to your capacity to interact with systems, structures, and social groups effectively and positively.
- **Belonging** The programs significantly contributed to young people's sense of belonging. They feel connected to the Story Factory community and their peers.
- **Identity** Young people told us that they experienced a transformation in their identity due to their participation in the programs. They experienced positive changes associated with understanding and accepting who they are, understanding those around them, and feeling connected to a community of like-minded peers.

INTRODUCTION

STORY FACTORY

Story Factory is a Sydney-based community arts organisation with a vision for an Australia where all young people have a voice, and the skills and confidence to tell their stories.

Story Factory's mission is to enrich the lives of young people in under-resourced communities through creative writing and storytelling. The organisation delivers short- and long-term creative writing programs in schools and community organisations across New South Wales.

In 2023, the organisation delivered 300 short-term (typically seven or eight weeks long) creative writing programs, reaching 6,200 young people at primary schools, high schools, and community organisations across NSW. Forty-two after-school programs (open to anyone and lasting approximately one school term) were held in Parramatta and Redfern, reaching 1,107 young people.

History

Story Factory was founded in 2012 by Dr Cath Keenan and Tim McGregor. At the time, they were seeking ideas for programs that could provide creative writing opportunities for young people who live in under-resourced communities. During the discovery phase, the pair visited the 826 Valencia program, a non-profit program in San Francisco established by Dave Eggers and Nínive Calegari. The program was established to support teachers and connect the writing community to students who wanted assistance with their writing. The organisation believes students can access writing opportunities and tell their stories when they feel confident in their writing skills. This is of particular significance for young people whose voices often go unvalued and unheard because of the stigma and discrimination experienced by the communities they grow up in.

826 Valencia has established multiple chapters across the United States and influenced the development of many more programs worldwide. Today, Story Factory is a member of the International Alliance of Youth Writing Centres, an informal global network of like-minded organisations that seek to collaborate and share learning. The Alliance seeks to support access to safe spaces for young people, especially those living in immigrant communities, where their minds and words can be celebrated.

The benefits of creative writing programs

A literature review completed by the consulting team in 2023 found that creative writing programs contribute to improved wellbeing. Creative writing programs can facilitate a closer connection with the self, facilitate a sense of belonging, and help young people develop agency.

Monitoring data collected by the organisation in 2023 shows that for Story Factory's school-based programs, 77% of young people enjoyed writing in Story Factory workshops. Teachers reported that 76% of students' literacy skills increased because of participation in Story Factory programs. 93% of teachers reported that participating in Story Factory programs impacted their teaching practice. For Story Factory's after-school programs, 87% of students enjoyed writing with Story Factory, 61% felt more confident about writing, and 84% reported that they were better writers.

YEAR OF POETRY, YEAR OF THE NOVELLA

This evaluation investigates the outcomes and effectiveness of Year of Poetry and Year of the Novella and their contribution to wellbeing outcomes. The programs are open to young people living in Sydney, though most come from Western Sydney. Both programs hold workshops one evening each week during school terms between February and December.

Two staff who work with approximately 12-15 students facilitate the workshops. The programs focus on supporting young people to create and publish a novella or book of poetry. Activities across the year include instruction on creative writing, poetry, and generating ideas, stories, and characters. Young people are encouraged to share their writing in peer feedback circles, where they provide and receive advice and feedback about their writing. Young people are linked to professional editors and graphic designers who assist with preparing and publishing their work. The programs conclude with a book launch, where the young people receive their published work. Works created by past Alumni are for sale at the Story Factory website: <https://shop.storyfactory.org.au/>



The programs are held at Story Factory's Parramatta office in Greater Western Sydney. Western Sydney experiences socio-economic inequity compared to other regions in Australia, and many young people grow up in challenging social and economic contexts that contribute to disengagement from school and difficult transitions to further work and learning.¹ Many young people in Western Sydney report that secondary schools in the region do not adequately prepare students for work and learning or foster growth, independence, and wellbeing.



Western Sydney is home to a vibrant multicultural community with residents from over 110 countries and 38% speaking a language other than English at home.² Young people living in Western Sydney express pride in this community, reporting that the Western Sydney community is connected, supportive, and friendly and that its people are welcoming and accepting.³

Program model

The Year of Poetry and Year of the Novella programs are implemented across the four terms of the school year. The goal is to have each young person publish their own novella or book of poetry by the end of the year.

The structure of the programs is intentional and designed to facilitate good writing. Young people reported that they felt they were there to write when they stepped into the environment. The programs take young people from ideation to writing and conclude with a book launch and publication of a book that is then sold on the Story Factory website.

TERM ONE

Term one of the programs involves contemplating the shape of their work. In workshops, students learn how to participate in ideation and generating ideas. Facilitators assist students in deciding on a clear vision for their work. Students are developing skills in generating ideas, considering the content of their work, and assessing alternative ideas and strategies. At the end

of term one, the goal is for young people to have a pitch, a description of what their book will be about.

TERM TWO

In term two, young people have begun writing. The facilitators provide information about different types of stylistic and language choices. They assist with helping young people to think about what styles of writing they like and what their writing style might look like; they guide how to consider the intended audience for the writing when making creative decisions. Facilitators coach young people on how to provide feedback to others. Young people form feedback groups where they read their writing to others and get feedback. Young people learn communication and collaboration skills; giving and receiving feedback supports young people in viewing other participants and themselves as writers. Students learn skills in building and applying creative processes to create a course of action, clarifying and redeveloping ideas, putting advice into action, and processing and organising information. The goal at the end of term two is to have completed or be near completion of a first draft.

TERM THREE

In term three, there is more focus on workshopping and receiving feedback on work from the facilitators and other young people, ready for professional editors, most from Penguin Random House, to review the final drafts of the work. Young people also meet with graphic designers to begin planning the design of their front cover. In term three, students are building skills in reflecting on processes and evaluating the outcomes of the process. At the end of term three, the goal is to complete a final draft.

TERM FOUR

In term four, young people prepare their completed manuscripts. A book launch is held each December for friends and family of the participants. The book is then sold on the Story Factory website.

churned

by atoc

This place I know, knows me too.

For years

it's known my breath; wind of words brewed from the heart. This place

Isn't hard to find.

It travelled with me. Since childhood; the foundation of my craft.

Classrooms

messy with tools of creation; glue, glitter, cluttering thoughts

Jewels birthed with the chief's guidance.

I've known words could make me feel. Strange patterns and twisting tongues

Held power,

before I could describe

Pencil hidden behind my ear. Notebook beneath my belt.

They taught me

Pens and pulses from the heart

transform paper to palaces, palaces to planets.

I'm growing.

My words have confidence now. Years of trial and error.

This village, opposite the tracks

Tracts my growth.

I have a book now. 'Sons of Ash'

Ten chapters developed in a magic factory

My mind

Bent words and rhythms to create this world.

My factory churned and challenged me to create.

if nothing else, story factory is a place of love

by bea

I play a game with every person I interact with. Well, it's kind of a test, really. I count every time I mention Story Factory, or someone I know through Story Factory. If it were my own personal Bechdel Test, I would fail every time. One of my friends the other day said if it were a drinking game, we would never be sober.

When I talk to my mother, she knows there's a 70% chance I will mention something or someone related to Story Factory (or that I am at least thinking about how I can). And when I do bring up Story Factory to my mother, she says I am obsessed. And I suppose, in a way, I am. But I am not addicted the way an alcoholic cannot turn down a drink. And I am not addicted the way a pathological liar finds mistruths thrilling. I am addicted to Story Factory the way a patient on life support cannot give up their oxygen.

I mean, I love Story Factory so much I literally went and made myself permanent free advertising via a tattoo for the books I wrote with them!

Last week I realised that I haven't had a serious suicidal thought in four years. And I know that is because of the people at Story Factory. It was the first place I loved, and felt loved, without hesitation. It was the first place I could be myself. The first people I came out to. The first people to consider my accessibility needs, and then also actually act on them. The first people to not only listen to, but genuinely care about what I have to say, and then guide me in finding the best ways to say it.

I often try to explain to people how important and beautiful Story Factory is. How it changed me in so many immense and minute ways. But it's difficult to describe something so wonderful and so magical to someone who hasn't experienced that same thing firsthand. Even as I write this, I know I am not doing Story Factory justice. For I have only one story, and there are so many others who can tell you the different ways in which Story Factory can heal and comfort and provide.

Like a wholesome paradox, it is because of Story Factory that I am alive to write about it. It is because of Story Factory that I have the confidence to pursue my interests (those creatively or otherwise). It is because of Story Factory that I have the friends, the resume, and the joy I carry with me.

Story Factory is more than just a company, more than just a writing centre. They are the little pockets of light between the shadows of trees. They are the soft, cool breeze on an October evening. They are the feast with family after a years-long fast.

This kind of love lives loudly within the company, but also extends beyond it, connecting everyone fortunate enough to meet even one person from Story Factory. It's a love and a light that burns within me, that keeps me going day after day after day and sometimes it is the only thing I have to hold on to. But my, do I hold onto it!

I sometimes am told I am being dramatic when I talk about my love for Story Factory. But how else am I supposed to talk about the thing which continues to save me every day?

How can you expect me to be casual about the thing that allows me to be so confidently vocal? How can you expect anyone to not talk about the people and places that keep them alive?

METHODS

We undertook the evaluation over 2023. The methods were co-designed with Story Factory staff, the program facilitators, and two Alumni of the programs. Evaluation activities included literature reviews, surveys, and interviews. Three Alumni were recruited as paid Peer Researchers who undertook training in research methods, interviewed Alumni, analysed evaluation data, and presented their findings to the Story Factory team. We then undertook further analysis to better understand the contribution to wellbeing outcomes. Two Peer Researchers assisted with cowriting some parts of the final evaluation report.

Our approach

Our approach to implementing the evaluation drew upon the traditions of participatory evaluation. We decided upon this approach for practical, academic, and ethical reasons.

On a *practical* level, the Story Factory program staff supported a participatory approach and were prepared to invest time supporting its implementation. The program staff had strong relationships with Alumni and successfully recruited three Alumni to act as Peer Researchers.

Academically, we were influenced by the academics and practitioners before us who have collectively shaped the normative standards and processes that define participatory evaluation. Evaluation thinkers and practitioners assert that engaging program participants in evaluation design, data collection, data analysis, and sense-making can improve the quality of evaluations. Program participants often have a strong understanding of the program's theory of change (because they experienced it). This knowledge aids evaluation planning, data analysis, sense-making, and judgment. Program participants may be better placed to gather data and insights from other program participants – because these participants may feel more comfortable sharing their experiences with another person who has a common experience and understanding of the program. This leads to greater insights into participant experience of the program.

The final rationale for employing a participatory approach is *ethical*. If young people are the intended beneficiaries of the programs being evaluated, then young people should have a seat at the evaluation table. They should get to decide what works and what doesn't work. They should be part of the sense-making and valuing process. Finally, young people have a right to determine the means of their representation, hence the inclusion of their stories in this report.

What we did

PLANNING PHASE

Literature review

Story Factory requested us to undertake a literature review examining how creative writing programs contribute to wellbeing. A report detailing the findings of this review was delivered to Story Factory in March 2023.

Planning workshop

The planning workshop was held at Story Factory's Parramatta office on 18 May 2023. Three Story Factory staff and two Peer Researchers attended the workshop. An evaluation plan was delivered to Story Factory in June 2023.

PEER RESEARCH ASSISTANTS

Three Alumni were recruited as Peer Researchers and paid as casual workers under award rates. Peer Researchers interviewed Alumni of the programs, worked with us to analyse data, and wrote and delivered a presentation on their findings to the Story Factory staff. Two Peer Researchers assisted with writing some parts of this report.

We held interview training for Peer Researchers at the Story Factory Redfern office on 5 August. We held discussions with the Peer Researchers about good interviewing techniques, ethics and privacy, and self-care. The Peer Researchers wrote their own interview questions – we felt this was important because asking questions in their own words would contribute to seamless interviewing.

We worked with Peer Researchers to analyse the transcripts of the interviews with Alumni. We held our first data analysis workshop on 22 October at the Story Factory Parramatta office. Further online workshops were held on 22 and 24 November.

We worked with Peer Researchers in online workshops on 1 and 2 December 2023 to create their findings and write a short PowerPoint presentation. Two Peer Researchers presented the findings to the Story Factory team on 3 December 2023.

We held online workshops with two Peer Researchers on 9, 10, and 11 February, where we reviewed the findings and data, and cowrote some of the sections of this report.

GATHERING PHASE

Program observations

We observed the Year of Poetry and Year of the Novella programs at the Story Factory Parramatta office. The observations occurred on 2 and 3 August, and 29 and 30 August.

Interviews

We interviewed the Story Factory CEO, three program facilitators, two teachers whose students had participated in the programs, and one Alumnus and their parent.

Story Factory staff arranged interviews between the Peer Researchers and the Alumni. Most of these interviews took place at the Story Factory Parramatta office in September and October 2023. Nine Alumni were interviewed. The Peer Researchers recorded the interviews and uploaded them to a secure cloud folder; the evaluation team then had the recordings transcribed.

Survey

We created an end-of-year survey for participants completing Year of Poetry and Year of the Novella in December 2023. The survey asked questions about Story Factory's contribution to changes they experienced and their satisfaction with the program. The program facilitators administered the survey in December 2023. A total of 28 responses were received.

Alumni stories

Alumni were asked to submit stories about their time with Story Factory. They were instructed that the stories could be fictional, non-fictional, poetry, or narrative. Alumni were paid for their submissions. Seven stories were received. We included these stories as data in our analysis. The stories are featured throughout this report.

ANALYSIS PHASE

Work undertaken by the Peer Researchers

Participatory analysis

The three Peer Researchers analysed the Alumni interviews. We began the analysis by asking the Peer Researchers to read their interview transcripts and highlight with a marker the parts they thought were important. The group reviewed and summarised these highlights to create a framework for organising our findings. Analysis was conducted through rounds of brainstorming, synthesising findings, and then using these findings to facilitate another round of brainstorming. With each brainstorming round, the findings became increasingly distilled and focused.

Presentation of findings

We hosted online sessions with the Peer Researchers, who prepared the presentation of the findings for Story Factory staff. The Peer Researchers identified the most important findings, divided the findings so that each person presented one section of the findings, and prepared their presentations.

We (one member from String Theory and two Peer Researchers) presented an early draft of evaluation findings to four Story Factory staff in an online presentation held on 2 December 2023.

Analysis undertaken by the evaluation team

We analysed the staff and teacher interviews and the stories provided by Story Factory Alumni (featured in this report). The Peer Researchers' findings informed the framework for this analysis.

Contribution to wellbeing

We undertook further analysis to assess the contribution to wellbeing. This analysis built upon and continued the analytical work undertaken by the Peer Researchers.

We defined wellbeing outcomes and factors that interact with wellbeing and then reviewed the evaluation data to assess the contribution of the programs to wellbeing.

Defining wellbeing

We define wellbeing as 'feeling good about yourself and your place in the world'.

'Wellbeing' as a construct is multi-dimensional and malleable; its meaning and presentation are responsive to context. We constructed a working definition of wellbeing relevant to the program context. Our approach to defining wellbeing involved the identification of categories of outcomes and factors that interact with wellbeing. This involved a multi-step process involving examining multiple sources and types of information. Crafting cohesive categories to inform analysis was challenging; categories can overlap and are often interdependent. However, this categorisation was valuable when assessing program contribution to wellbeing.

Categorising factors that interact with wellbeing

This was a multi-step process:

1. We extracted topline findings from the literature review on the contribution of creative writing programs to wellbeing (this review was conducted at the beginning of the evaluation).^a
2. We undertook a document review to understand normative definitions of wellbeing and identify factors that interact with wellbeing and young people in Australia. This literature review identified eight categories of factors that interact with wellbeing.^b
3. We then examined the evaluation data against the findings from steps 1 and 2. This examination identified seven factors across three categories that interact with young people's wellbeing. These are outlined in the table below.

Categories	Factors
External Factors that originate outside the individual.	Systems Structured and predictable ways of doing things are realised through government, laws, organisations, and policies. Environment Your natural environment, where you live, spend time and your home.
Relational Factors that focus on relationships: cultural, spiritual, and interpersonal.	Opportunities Access to situations to do what you want to do. Connections Relationships with family, friends, community, and others you spend time with.
Internal An individual's inner life includes cognitive and emotional capacity, health, and disability status.	Identity The interaction between a person's view of themselves and their affiliation with a group or community. Self-efficacy An individual's belief in their skills. Sense of self Your account of the characteristics that make up who you are. Self-concept How you feel about yourself

Table 1: factors that interact with wellbeing

^a Topline findings from the literature review. **Being present.** Creative writing programs, especially those with a group workshop component, can help participants be present in the moment and with others. **Connection.** Creative writing programs can facilitate a sense of belonging and shared experience for participants within the program itself and communities beyond it. **Yourself.** Writing creatively can facilitate the discovery of self. **Voice and agency.** Creative writing programs can help youth gain a sense of agency: the feeling that they can 'do something'.

^b The eight categories of factors we identified: **Systems.** Structured and predictable ways of doing things, realised through government, laws, organisations, and policies. **Your environment.** The natural environment, the place where you live, and your home. **Your connections.** Positive relationships with family, friends, community, and others you spend time with. It also includes access to opportunities for participation and connection. **Your health.** The health of your environment, those around you, and your physical and mental health. **Your identity.** Understanding and accepting who you are, understanding those around you, and feeling accepted by those around you. **Your resources.** Access to assets that are required to function effectively. Resources can be environmental, geographical, material, cultural, spiritual, and interpersonal. **Your culture and spirituality.** Freedom to engage in cultural and spiritual practice. Opportunities and support in public and private spaces for positive expression of culture and spirituality. **Yourself.** Your skills and attitudes.

Categorising wellbeing outcomes

To identify wellbeing outcomes, we reviewed evaluation data against the factors that interact with wellbeing (Table 1). This analysis allowed us to examine a pathway from program implementation to short-, medium-, and long-term outcomes. The wellbeing outcomes are listed in Table 2.

Short-term	Medium-term	Long-term
Critical and creative skills Pride in achievement	Self-efficacy Resilience	Agency
Communication and collaboration skills Improved connections	Cognitive empathy Voice	Belonging
Sense of self Rejection of stereotypes	Autonomy Positive self-concept	Identity

Table 2: categories of wellbeing outcomes

storyfactory surprise

Foreword

Dear Reader,

I present to you this recipe from the *Writer's Commonsense Cookbook*. During my travels, I have cooked and tried many fantastic recipes I have managed to write down. But Storyfactory surprise still holds a special place in my heart. I was compelled to write this all down as I share your struggles with writing. Especially with the doubts and fears between my ears. Nonetheless, please indulge in these homey recipes and feel free to try these at home, as writing and reading are excellent hobbies, particularly for hosting dinner or writing parties.

Happy Writing!

Love,

Lou

Storyfactory Surprise

Ah Storyfactory Surprise. I first made this in 2018. Never had I made a more pleasing nor insightful desert. One of my favourite memories is making this in the Novella cooking class in the Bankstown Arts Centre on Sunday mornings.

- 1 disenchanted teen
- 1 ½ cups incredible staff
- 1 high energy Bilal
- 16 ounces dedicated volunteers
- 4 tablespoons butter
- 3 eggs
- 3 cups patience & compassion
- 1^{1/3} cups encouragement
- ¼ tsp salt (optional)
- Pinch of determination
- 5 cups flour
- 1 cup milk

Method

1. Melt butter and patience along with compassion in a heated saucepan.
2. Add flour, salt, and determination; stir well. Then add one disenchanted teen. *Make sure that they are truly disenchanted with the education system. I find that Storyfactory surprise can help teens with their writing.*
3. Add milk, 1 ½ cups of incredible staff and stir over low heat until thick.

4. Add Bilal and volunteers stir until just melted.
5. Separate whites from yolks of eggs.
6. Then add 16 ounces dedicated volunteers.
7. Stir the sauce mixture into the yolks and allow to cool.
8. Beat egg whites in a bowl until stiff with encouragement for more flavour. I find this more flavourful than stale teacher bias.
9. Fold gently in a pinch of determination to the mixture.
10. Place into a well-greased ovenproof dish with mixture at least 2 cm from the top of the dish.
11. Bake in a slow oven, 150-180C, for 30 to 40 minutes.
12. Serve at once on heated plates.

This recipe, as stated, is one of my favourites as it is always lurking at the back of my mind. The Story Factory provided a positive experience with writing which I'd never had till this. It is only due to them and those around me and the help they provided that I am where I am now.

Bon Appetit!!

APPENDIX

1. See Home Economics Institute of Australia Inc, Common Sense Cookery book \$34.00. www.Booktopia.cooking.com. The simple cookbook for those who are just beginning their career.
2. sic. Storyfactory George St. Parramatta. Sandstone building. Catch the Emu Plains or Penrith train the T1 Train line from Lidcombe station.

wellbeing

by Israa

Sixteen, new Year 12 student, preparing for a HSC that feels so far away yet so close. Confused about who I am, confused about what I want to do, confused about how after day in, and day out of classrooms, I can somehow find a love and passion for learning.

My little cousin Mays who has just completed Year Seven informs me that she's just published a book and she has picked ME out of anyone to come to her book launch. At this point I'm just trying to grasp the idea that this little munchkin that I used to burp and babysit has published a bloody book...

How is this possible?

The day of the book launch arrives, and my curious mind is prepared to see what on earth is about to go down. Mays' parents drop us off at the book launch which was located in The Granville Centre, and I walk in with her unaware of what to expect next.

It is a space filled with children of all ages, and 'Story Factory' signs everywhere. There are rows of seats lined symmetrically and so I sit down as close as possible to the front so I can obviously get the best view. I give Mays a good luck hug as she walks off with her friendly facilitator Rebecca.

My eyes met the stage with what looked like Story Factory workers preparing to speak. As I analyse the stage, I recognise a face...

I'm pretty sure I have seen that curly headed, friendly Arab somewhere on YouTube performing poetry.

I now know this curly headed, friendly Arab as the one and only Bilal!

After my incredible experience at lil cuzzy's book launch and being introduced to Bilal and so many kind people, I was sure I wanted to be involved.

The next day I walked into school. I was confident. I was excited. I was ready.

I knocked on my library teacher's door, a teacher I had grown close to. I enthusiastically asked her, 'So there's this writing organisation called Story Factory and basically I can become an author and publish a book with them, how do you feel about me joining?' She pauses and portrays a 'hmmm' type of face. She tells me, 'Do you want my honest opinion?' I laugh and tell her, 'Well obviously, why would I be asking you then?' She says, 'I don't think you're capable of juggling this program with your HSC if you want to do well. I don't think you should do it.' I said 'Okay' and left the room. As I was walking back to my class, I was sooooo OFFENDED! Does she know who I am?! Does she know what ISRAA is capable of?! The AUDACITY to think of ME as INCAPABLE..... Crazy if you ask me.

So there I was sitting in class and all I could think of in my head was, 'I'll show her, she thinks I can't do this? WATCH, WATCH ME DO BOTH, AND WATCH ME DO AMAZINGLY WELL IN BOTH!'

So I signed up and was ready to prove Miss library teacher wrong!

Now reflecting on this experience two years after publishing my poetry book 'Sorry I can't hear your BS through my hijab', I smile and exhale with relief. Who would have known what my life would look like had I not believed in myself. Having had Story Factory consistently pushing me to exceed past my limit and still doing so as I speak today, has given me the confidence and belief that I could, and CAN take over the world if I wanted to. I can't help but wonder what is possible for our future generations of youth if they are involved in these programs.

This is more than just a writing program. It is an incredibly healthy workplace environment to the point it makes every other workplace feel toxic. It sets the standard for what you should expect from the people in your life. It feels wrong to think that the facilitators actually work there... and aren't there just to hang out with the students and I....

Apart from the endless writing skills I have received I have found community, connection, guidance, love, acceptance, and a peaceful space when life gets too much.

I like to observe my environments, and after secretly observing Story Factory for two years (shhhh don't tell them) I have recognised a specific behaviour pattern. Story Factory values your comfortability first. They understand that in order for you to express yourself through your work to the best of your ability, you must be in a state of complete comfort. I have been in and out of Story Factory every week for nearly three years now, and I have failed to catch them in a moment where they are out of 'character'.

As soon as I pop babies out of my uterus, best believe they're attending Story Factory. I'm sure by then Story Factory will be a university. My eight-year-old sister is already involved with Story Factory and if it's made me realise that experiencing Story Factory yourself is one thing, but witnessing your baby sister flourish and find her voice and sassiness at the age of eight, it's an unexplainable feeling of gratitude.

So cheers to Story Factory, and may the impact continue to be generational.

(Also with the Library Teacher, she loves my book and has it up in the library and is very, very proud of me)

FINDINGS

The findings describe the contribution of the programs to wellbeing. We define wellbeing as 'feeling good about yourself and your place in the world'.

STRUCTURE

We developed a wellbeing framework to assist in developing findings.^c The framework can be viewed on page 24. Findings are disaggregated to examine the contribution to three long-term wellbeing goals in this framework.

Agency	Capacity to make choices and act on those choices
Belonging	A feeling of deep connection to a social group
Identity	Feeling good about your place in the world

Table 3: structure of findings

KEY FINDINGS

Context

We examined contextual factors that interact with young people's wellbeing. The findings are summarised below:

- Many young people have negative experiences of school and sometimes experience challenging home environments. They do not often feel valued for creativity.
- Young people have limited access to connections and networks outside school and home and limited access to creative opportunities.
- Young people internalise the stigma associated with their social identity and experience negative self-concept.

Program approaches

The evaluation examined the contribution of program approaches to wellbeing outcomes.

A safe and welcoming environment

Facilitators focus on creating a safe and welcoming environment that young people want to return to. They employ a scaffolded approach to workshops in the first term to avoid intimidating their audience. Engaging in creative work for its own sake is a cornerstone of the programs.

Creative collaboration

^c A glossary of terms is included at page

The program facilitates creative collaborations and collaborative feedback and connects young people to arts, publishing, and literary professionals.

Ownership and exploration

The program emphasises ownership over creative processes. Young people are encouraged to explore creative ideas without judgement.

Wellbeing outcomes

The table below summarises the short-, medium-, and long-term wellbeing outcomes.

SHORT-TERM

- **Critical and creative skills** Examples included improved vocabulary, editing skills, development of strategies for assessing writing quality, generating ideas, creating a structure for a piece of writing, and factoring the purpose of the writing when planning their work.
- **Pride in achievement** Young people benefit from ongoing engagement and completion of challenging work. They expressed satisfaction, fulfilment, and increased confidence.
- **Improved connections** with other like-minded young people and adults and connection to creative communities.
- **Communication and collaboration skills** Young people give and receive feedback and engage with diverse perspectives. Contemplation on how to structure voice in a piece of work and write for an audience hones communication skills.
- **Self-awareness** Through creative writing, young people explore issues and negotiate their relationship with themselves. Writing supports the ability to clarify a point of view.
- **Rejection of stereotypes** Young people engage with creative writing as a tool to explore and reject negative stereotypes about their communities.

MEDIUM-TERM

- **Resilience** Young people were more likely to take positive risks, especially with creative work, and undertake activities that felt uncomfortable.
- **Self-efficacy** Young people experience improved awareness of and increased confidence in their skills.
- **Cognitive empathy** Feedback and writing processes require young people to consider the point of view of others. Writing for an audience requires the writer to consider how others will receive their work.
- **Voice** Participation in feedback sessions builds young people's capacity to express views, be heard, and be represented in a process.
- **Autonomy and positive self-concept** The opportunity to exert creative freedom in producing a substantive piece of work, creative writing to explore the self, and the socio-political implications of rejecting negative stereotypes contribute to autonomy and self-concept.

LONG-TERM

- **Agency** Resilience and self-efficacy contribute to improved agency. Agency contributes to your capacity to interact with systems, structures, and social groups effectively and positively.
- **Belonging** The programs significantly contributed to young people's sense of belonging. They feel connected to the Story Factory community and their peers.
- **Identity** Young people told us that they experienced a transformation in their **identity** due to their participation in the programs. They experienced positive changes associated with understanding and accepting who they are, understanding those around them, and feeling connected to a community of like-minded peers.

WELLBEING FRAMEWORK

Context		Program approaches	Wellbeing outcomes		
			Short-term	Medium-term	Long-term
External	School Home	A safe and welcoming environment	Improved critical and creative skills Pride in achievement	Resilience Self-efficacy	Agency
Relational	Connections Opportunities	Creative collaboration	Improved connections Communication and collaboration skills	Cognitive empathy Voice	Belonging
Internal	Identity	Ownership Exploration	Sense of self Rejection of stereotypes	Autonomy Positive self-concept	Identity

Table 4: framework of evaluation findings

AGENCY

Context	Program approaches	Wellbeing outcomes		
		Short	Medium	Long
School Home	A safe and welcoming environment Centring creativity	Improved critical and creative skills Pride in achievement	Self-efficacy Resilience	Agency

We define agency as your capacity to make choices and act on your choices. This section examines contribution to agency.

Context

In this section, we examine two external factors that interact with wellbeing: school and home.

SCHOOL

Young people told us they experience stress because of their education and feel pressure to succeed academically. They told us they had limited opportunities at school to engage in creative work that was not tied to a school output. Young people who identify as being particularly creative and imaginative can feel overlooked in an academic system.

Up until then, I hadn't experienced anything positive with pursuing anything creative. The education system is not very forgiving towards creative students. I would describe Story Factory as highly inclusive, immersive, positive. There's no bad idea. They truly do help their students. Whereas my education system failed me severely. My teachers said more than once to my parents that I'm too imaginative, my imagination should be toned down. They would actively try to stamp out any creative pursuits. I'm a very creative person. It is as second nature to me as breathing. And they would just deny me every time. Whereas Story Factory was the opposite. I felt more comfortable in five minutes with Story Factory than I have in 12 years with teachers. The systems are flawed, and that honestly is abysmal. A couple of teachers didn't think I was smart enough to write anything at all. So, when I did kind of drop the bomb that 'oh, by the way, I am publishing'... some of the looks I got were amazement. They did not think I was capable enough. Story Factory goes 'everyone here is capable'. There is no right or wrong. It's very relaxed.

Young person

Teachers told us that opportunities to learn creative skills and engage in creative work are missing in schools.

Pressure on kids to perform academically, and this is the time they should learn about who they are as a person. Don't spend all your time stressing. There are other ways to achieve.

Teacher

Creative writing is so important. Essential for building voice and confidence, it is fun. Teaching creative writing to students...the fun has been conditioned out of it. We need an emphasis on creativity, but it is not valued as much. The traditional essay needs creativity.

Teacher

HOME

Whilst the evaluation did not explicitly ask young people about their home environments, the data suggests that some young people experience challenges in their home environments.

There are students who need this program the most in ways that I don't even want to get into. But knowing those students and then seeing them come in and have the best time is different than me just saying some random students are coming in and loving this space. Like, you see these students coming in and getting something that they probably aren't finding other places in their life.

Story Factory facilitator

Program approaches

Many young people are nervous when they first begin the program and often lack confidence in their ability to undertake the task ahead.

The typical generic story is they join the program, and at the start, they are like: 'I'm quiet, and I'm not sharing my ideas. I am unsure and mostly convinced actually that I can't publish a book. And also, I don't read a lot. And I've never written something that's larger than 1000 or 2000 words. And I've never really written outside of a school context or done creative writing in my own time.' That's not every single student, but that's the majority of the students. And then, by the end of it, it's just the opposite of all those things.

Story Factory facilitator

A SAFE AND WELCOMING ENVIRONMENT

The facilitators are committed to creating a safe and welcoming environment that young people want to return to. They employ various strategies to foster ongoing engagement: workshop structure, warm and genuine interactions, and safe boundaries. Students directly attributed the environment to the successful completion of the work.

Workshop structure

The facilitators employ a scaffolded approach to workshops, initially covering smaller topics and facilitating less intimidating activities, especially in the first term.

We build the weekly workshop programs in a way that we give them opportunities to share things that are low stakes. So, it starts off with really kind of gentle warm-up activities, like: "what would you put on hot chips?" We celebrate their opinions and their preferences, whether or not it has to do with creative writing. If you listen to them for the small things, the big things are easier for them to talk about.

Story Factory facilitator

Genuine engagement

The facilitators told us they were committed to genuine interactions, listening, and support.

We listen and ask questions. We actively listen because I think that's a really great way to make someone feel comfortable. I think that it does a disservice to the students to be like, I'm just listening because it helps me do my job because I do genuinely listen to them because I care about them.

Story Factory facilitator

Young people told us they felt heard and seen by the facilitators. They told us that the facilitators engaged in genuine listening and genuine support. They reported that this happened consistently throughout the program.

In the 2023 end-of-year survey:

- 96% of the 2023 participants agreed that facilitators showed interest in them as a person, and
- 93% agreed that the facilitators took time to connect with every person in the room.

You feel like they're putting a focus on you. And they do. That's exactly what they do. I've never felt disrespected by anyone, not one day, never.

Young person

Story Factory has always been like my safety net. Every time I had a rough week, I always looked forward to Story Factory. It was something that was like a sanctuary. They recognised me, that was enough. It was just a good space because everyone was passionate. I've never been in a room full of passionate writers who were good at what they were doing as well. When I was low. The encouragement was enough, that sincerity was enough.

Young person

Boundaries

Facilitators engage in a delicate balance of building strong, safe, and supportive relationships with young people and simultaneously being clear and consistent in their boundaries.

It's actually quite hard to sit with a teenager for 90 minutes and not have them say something about their life that you need to go and report. We make sure that we are subtly leading conversations in such a way that they are not potentially disclosing to us. I don't want to end up on the phone [to make a report to Child Protection]. It's not a time thing; it is not my role in their life. That is not the way I help them. I give them the tools to be able to talk about the things that they want to talk about. If you're genuinely putting them first and you're thinking about their needs, then you think about what is best for them.

Story Factory facilitator

Young people told us that whilst the facilitators were not as distant as teachers and were warm and engaging, they set respectful boundaries. They told us that when sensitive topics were raised, they were not disregarded but discussed respectfully. Sensitive topics did not become the focus of the workshops but were addressed when needed to advance creative goals. As a result,

young people did not feel like they were being assessed or scrutinised while they were in the workshops.

Valuing creativity

Engaging in creative work for its own sake is the cornerstone of the programs. Facilitators immerse young people in new ways of engaging with and thinking about creative writing. Young people told us that being part of these programs was the first time they felt appreciated for their creativity.

In the 2023 end-of-year survey:

- 82% agreed that the facilitators helped them structure a process for developing work;
- 96% agreed that facilitators gave helpful feedback;
- 100% agreed that facilitators supported them to progress their work;
- 89% agreed that facilitators taught in a way that was easy to understand;
- 89% said facilitators supported them to continue their writing when they felt stressed, and 89% agreed that facilitators told them their strengths as a writer.

I've never written poetry. Poetry was introduced in a way that was contrasted to academic writing, and I really appreciated that. They started with really simple poetry, and I was just introduced to a world where it was a bit more lawless. Small, more personal, more rich, I never experienced that before. No one teaches you how to write poetry in high school. Nobody. Like, that's not part of the curriculum. You don't write poetry in high school. You analyse and you write essays about them but you don't write your own poetry.

Young person

Some of them are not convinced that they can do it, but you build a relationship where they will come along, because you have told them that you believe that they could get through this year. It's the way we, as an organisation, make them feel like creative people. And that encourages them to continue.

Story Factory facilitator

Wellbeing outcomes

This section examines the program's contribution to short-, medium-, and long-term outcomes.

SHORT-TERM OUTCOMES

Critical and creative skills

Young people told us that participating in the programs improved their critical and creative skills. Examples included improved vocabulary, editing skills, development of strategies for assessing writing quality, generating ideas, creating a structure for a piece of writing, and factoring the purpose of the writing when planning their work.

In the 2023 end-of-year survey:

- 89% of young people said they felt confident in coming up with new ideas for stories;
- 79% were confident in moving from idea to creation of a piece of writing;
- 79% of young people felt confident in creating their own writing pieces, and
- 89% felt confident in pursuing their interests in writing.

Like, just being able to write better helped with a lot more things than just writing a story. It made me just really good at editing and any type of writing. When I'm doing assignments, I know what I'm looking out for.

Young person

Poetry was extending my vocabulary as well, and really allowed me to feel more freedom and less stressed out while I was doing my English. At the beginning of Story Factory, I was ranked 56 out of 160 students. And, by the end of Year 12, I was in the top 10 in my grade. It was so fulfilling to achieve that. I really do dedicate that to taking part in the Year of Poetry.

Young person

Pride in achievement

Writing a novella or book of poetry is a challenging exercise and an emotionally vulnerable experience for young people. Young people experience the benefits of continuing to engage in the work even when it feels difficult. The regularity and consistency of engagement with the programs over months, combined with the positive attitudes of the facilitators, supported young people to continue their writing projects in the face of challenges and other commitments.

Young people told us they felt satisfaction and increased confidence.

It was really fulfilling at the book launch. Like a year's worth of work in your hands... it was very gratifying. And in a way that isn't really the same anywhere else. Like, you get a school report... it's like, okay, I get a number, a letter. But this work, I was in control the entire time, and I made it, and it actually paid off.

Young person

Once students have those achievements, that takes the pressure off other things: 'I have done something amazing'. Once students hook into something like Story Factory, it gives that confidence boost, it is something that they did, and it will always be theirs.

Teacher

MEDIUM-TERM OUTCOMES

Resilience

We define resilience as an individual's capacity to withstand and recover from difficulties. Teachers observed that students who participated in Story Factory were more likely to take positive risks in their schoolwork. Students also described being more inclined to take positive risks, especially with their creative work, and undertake activities that felt uncomfortable.

This student was a Type A personality. She wants to do quite well, but she puts a lot of pressure on herself. She was less confident taking risks. Always wanting to ask teachers what they thought and more scared to fail. Now she is leading the critique circles in class. Class teachers saw that she was more resilient with criticism. Now, she is not afraid to take different approaches and use different ways to get answers because she has experience in [program] learning environment.

Teacher

Initially, I didn't feel confident about my writing. I've never felt confident enough to like share my work. But when you realise they spent so much time and energy and money into this, it kind of makes you think: 'if my writing was not worth anything, they wouldn't be putting this much effort into it'. I guess that built my confidence. I'm more likely to share my work now with people, even on Instagram and things like that, because of the foundation they built.

Young person

Self-efficacy

Young people told us they experienced improved awareness of and confidence in their skills. They told us about observing improvements in their writing over time and the sense of achievement. Some young people said they observed improvements in their schoolwork over time.

In the 2023 end-of-year survey:

- 68% of young people felt more confident in identifying their strengths as a writer and
- 75% had a better understanding of their strengths and areas for improvement in their writing.

I didn't know I was good at public speaking. I did not know that I could speak in public and not be nervous about talking in front of people. It was not until I was allowed to actually go out there and speak in public for Story Factory in front of hundreds of people.

Young person

Looking back at your poetry and your writing and looking at it now, and how your writing has changed, and being able to track your progress. The same teachers that I had when I first began are still around now. And the fact that I can say: 'hey do you remember me when I was at this stage of my life, and I was at that stage of writing and look at me now.' And you can reflect on that - that's so empowering. So much of the reason why I pursue writing is because I can see how far I've come.

Young person

LONG-TERM OUTCOMES

Our wellbeing framework hypothesises that improved resilience (capacity to withstand and recover from difficulties) and positive self-concept (ability to feel good about yourself) contribute to improved agency.⁴

Agency is considered a foundational skill that enables individuals to cope with uncertainty and complexity in their external environment.¹ Agency contributes to your capacity to interact with systems, structures, and social groups effectively and positively. Researchers assert that agency significantly contributes to wellbeing, generating a sense of control and leading to increased uptake of opportunities in your environment.²

⁴ The evaluation is not resourced to assess the contribution of the programs to long-term outcomes

BELONGING

Context	Program approaches	Wellbeing outcomes		
		Short	Medium	Long
Connections Opportunities	Creative collaboration	Improved connections Communication and collaboration skills	Cognitive empathy Voice	Belonging

We define belonging as: ‘a deep connection to a social group’. This section examines contribution to belonging.

Context

We examine relational factors that interact with wellbeing: connections and opportunities.

CONNECTIONS

Young people's connections are often limited to their homes, local communities, and schools. Outside of caregivers and teachers, young people have limited interactions with adults. Young people told us that their status as residents of Western Sydney influences their views on what types of connections are possible for them.

As people from Western Sydney, we've been told our whole lives that we are the less fortunate and that we live in a low-socio economic area. We always feel like people from North Sydney and all that they are always ahead of us, and that they have more to give.

Young person

OPPORTUNITIES

One of the intended outcomes of the Year of the Novella and Year of Poetry programs is to connect young people to local literary communities. Young people perceive these types of communities as exclusionary and challenging to engage. Story Factory staff assert that literary communities stand to benefit significantly when young people engage.

Arts communities would benefit from more diverse participation and equitable distribution of resources. A literature review on diversity in the literary and arts communities depicts inequitable access to leadership and funding opportunities:

- The Towards Equity report released by the Australia Council for the Arts in 2020 found that First Nations people, CALD Australians, and young people aged 15-24 were more likely to attend arts events and engage creatively in arts. Each group is less likely to receive arts funding and grants and less likely to be in leadership roles in arts organisations. People with disability are more likely to be making art but less likely to earn an income from it.¹

- The Shifting the Balance report released by Diversity Arts Australia in 2018 found that CALD Australians are underrepresented across every leadership role in every cultural sector and organisational type. Approximately 51% of major cultural organisations have no CALD representation at the leadership level.²
- Researchers at Victoria University reviewed the output of the Australian publishing industry between the years 2018-2022 and found that out of the 1,531 works in the sample, 3% were by First Nations authors, and 7% were by People of Colour.³

Young people from under-resourced and CALD communities miss out when they cannot create connections with arts and literary communities. However, literary and arts communities experience a more profound loss. The lack of diversity in leadership and funding in the arts results in industries that are insular, that are limited in the contributions they can make to their communities, and that increasingly risk irrelevance.

One of the biggest issues in publishing at the moment is a lack of diversity. You don't hear a lot of voices. These are those voices that should be heard. They [Story Factory participants] have a lot to contribute to the literary community. There's also a bigger issue in the arts sector, which is a pathway into arts. It's all about the pathways into it. Arts is very white and middle class.

Story Factory staff

The Eastern suburbs [of Sydney] are just going to become more and more homogenous. Western Sydney is where it is at in terms of all the next creatives.

Teacher

Program approaches

CREATIVE COLLABORATION

Writing for an audience

Young people are encouraged to consider the viewpoints of their prospective audience when writing. This encourages reflection on the intent and purpose of their writing and consideration of effective communication with the audience. This contributes to an improved capacity to effectively communicate a point of view and adapt messaging to context.

When you're, like, workshopping a piece with a diverse crowd, you kind of get a sense of how each of them perceives your work. The contrast is really interesting. And I feel like as a young writer, watching how other people perceive your work in like, real time is pretty cool. Especially when you're passionate about it.

Young person

Collaborative feedback

The workshops are structured to foster creative collaboration among young people. The programs employ a structured and purposeful approach to feedback. Young people receive feedback from facilitators, are coached in providing feedback to others, and participate in structured peer feedback. In the 2023 end-of-year survey:

- 89% of young people agreed that the facilitators got them and others to practise giving and receiving feedback, and

- 71% of young people said they felt confident identifying other people's strengths as writers.

In terms 2 and 3, young people read their peers' writing and provide feedback. They learn how to listen to feedback from others and provide constructive feedback to others.

Young people appreciated the way that feedback was provided. They found feedback provided by facilitators relevant, helpful, and constructive. They valued the opportunity to hear the diverse perspectives of their peers. They told us that the feedback processes contributed to the quality of their work. In the 2023 end of year survey:

- 75% of young people felt confident to provide feedback to others, and
- 89% felt confident to receive feedback from others.

The facilitators are very deliberate. Like, they have a real skill in navigating students' feelings. No one has ever been upset with the feedback.

Young person

Working with the literary community

Young people are supported by professionals in the literary and publishing industries. They work with graphic designers to design their book covers and volunteer editors from publishing hours to edit their work.

Wellbeing outcomes

SHORT-TERM OUTCOMES

Connections

Young people told us they experienced improved connections with other young people and with adults. They were also connected to a community of writers.

Young people's views on what types of connections are possible were transformed due to the connections made during the program.

With networking, I've been introduced to so many people that I look up to, and I would like to see myself being in the future. In Western Sydney, you don't hear of students doing things like that. And so you don't imagine yourself doing something like that.

Young person

Connections among young people

Young people told us they connected with others in the program and enjoyed bonding over shared interests and a love of writing. In the 2023 end-of-year survey, 96% of young people reported enjoying connection to a community of young people who enjoy writing.

In high school, you have your little friend groups. But at the programs, everyone's open-minded and welcoming. I feel like because we have something in common, we just get along, like a community.

Young person

Adults/Facilitators

Young people experience transformative connections with facilitators. Many young people's experiences of being around adults take place via parents, family members, and teachers. These relationships are often regarded by young people as controlling and patronising.

Kids are quite scared of adults. I had kids who were super confident in class. But they clam up outside class and are very shy in front of adults they do not know. That has always stuck with me. Having adults come expressing interest in their ideas and then getting to know adults who are not from their school is a very new experience.

Teacher

I've never ever met anybody so kind. I think that was the one thing I took out of it. I knew what kindness meant. I knew what kindness looked like. Like genuinely, everyone was so kind. I can't emphasise that enough. They were just good people and empathetic, understanding, caring, forgiving, and selfless people who just wanted the best for young people. And I think that really set the example for me, and that really softened me. And I knew what good teaching looked like. And I want to apply that in the future. Because I saw what Story Factory did, and I want to make a point that this is how I want to raise young people like the future generations. This is how we should treat young people.

Young person

Connection to creative communities

Staff actively promote opportunities to Alumni. Story Factory has an informal partnership with a publishing house, sometimes placing Alumni as interns. Staff facilitate connections to opportunities in literary industries and to subcultures of creative writers based in the Western Suburbs of Sydney.

In the 2023 end-of-year survey, 82% of young people agreed that the facilitators connected them to people who work in literary jobs.

There are opportunities to write and perform and just to be involved with creative industries. Organisations reach out to Story Factory, and they filter opportunities for us. So, we are getting constant exposure to opportunities.

Young person

The fact that the programs are in Southwest Sydney, affiliated with the Bankstown Poetry Slam and the Fairfield Poetry sSlam and just this subculture of diverse people. You are in a place where everyone has come from a different part of life.

Young person

Communication and collaboration skills

Young people said they experienced improved communication and collaboration skills due to their participation in the program.

The workshops are designed to foster collaboration and communication among young people. Young people learn how to listen to and integrate feedback and provide constructive feedback to others. The feedback process increases the capacity to identify and positively engage with

various perspectives. Creating a piece of work and thinking about how to communicate your message to your audience hones young people's communication skills.

In the 2023 end of year survey;

- 68% of young people felt more confident to explain how they feel to others, and
- 86% felt more confident to share their ideas with others.

With critique, the way you worded it was like, positive reinforcement. So instead of saying this is wrong, you'd go and say, 'I like where you're going with this, can we make it more this? Can we turn this into something that is this?' It's kind of that wording.

Young person

The creative writing workshops helped with writing, but it also gave me a lot of skills just in terms of being in, like, an adult workspace. I found it really useful, and I learned a lot in real time about how to address differences in styles and stuff like that. It just really helped with communication.

Young person

MEDIUM-TERM OUTCOMES

Our wellbeing framework hypothesises that increased connections and changes in communication and collaboration skills contribute to improved cognitive empathy and voice.

Cognitive empathy

Cognitive empathy refers to the capacity of a person to recognise and understand another person's emotions.⁴ This is distinct from emotional empathy, where a person feels what another person feels. Cognitive empathy correlates with positive social connections and good psychological and physical health.^{5 6}

Voice

Voice is closely aligned with participation and inclusion. Voice is similar to but distinct from, agency: agency refers to an individual's capacity to undertake interactions in a complex environment. Voice centres on the capacity to participate and be heard in representative processes.

Contribution

We assess the program's contribution to cognitive empathy and voice.

Regarding cognitive empathy, young people are taught to consider their audience when writing; they consider what their audience might think and feel as they finetune their authorial voice. Participation in peer feedback exposes young people to a variety of viewpoints and perspectives in the group. Young people hear feedback as to how others perceive their work. Reading the work of others takes the reader directly into the inner voice of their peers.

Regarding voice, learning how to provide constructive, honest feedback to their peers builds their capacity to express their views, be heard, and effectively and positively be represented in a process.

LONG-TERM OUTCOMES

The wellbeing framework hypothesises that the program contributes to improved belonging.

Belonging

A sense of belonging is viewed as a fundamental need and is a powerful predictor of social and emotional wellbeing.⁷

The programs made significant contributions to young people's sense of belonging. Young people told us that their views on what types of connections were possible for them were transformed. They told us about their increased connection with each other, with the program, and increased participation in arts communities. The belonging they feel in their peer groups is amplified by their shared interests and collective identity as residents of Western Sydney, which they reported contributed to a camaraderie among the group. They told us that their program group felt like a community.

IDENTITY

Context	Program approaches	Wellbeing outcomes		
		Short	Medium	Long
Identity	Ownership Exploration	Shift in self Rejection of social stereotypes	Autonomy Positive self-concept	Identity

We define identity as feeling good about your place in the world. This section examines contribution to strengthening identity.

Context

We examine the interaction between identity and wellbeing. Personal identity is interconnected to the identity of the community you associate with. Young people told us their identities were interrelated with their experiences as residents of Western Sydney. They told us they live in communities that tend to experience stigma and marginalisation.¹ Young people told us their perception that young people in their community lag behind those in other regions. They told us that this view was reinforced by the attitudes of their schools and teachers.

Program approaches

OWNERSHIP

The program emphasises that young people are in control of their progress and directors of their creative journey.

Young people are provided with a structured pathway but are responsible for managing their progress. The program design includes regular goals and deadlines for stages of completion of the work. With support, young people are expected to manage their own workloads and progress. The goals and deadlines built into the programs provide structure for young people and are helpful indicators for evaluating progress. The facilitators demonstrate flexibility and leniency with deadlines, engaging in discussions with young people who are not meeting timelines and supporting young people to continue progressing the work. Young people enjoy and appreciate the responsibility of managing their own work, and they also appreciate the flexibility of the facilitators.

In the 2023 survey, 96% of young people said that the facilitators gave them and others in the group space to work at their own pace if needed.

The programs promote creative freedom. Young people can choose the themes of their work, make stylistic decisions, and design the image on the book cover.

Ownership over the process contributes to ownership of the work and amplifies the sense of achievement that is experienced when the book is published.

They give you full control over your work, which means they trust and take you seriously. The cover design can be whatever you want; the title can be whatever you want, and the storyline can be whatever you want. I feel like they just support

you to make your work as original as it can be. But like, they still take it seriously. And they don't treat you like a child.

Young person

All kids, to some extent, can often feel like they're not in charge of their lives. In this, you're actually in charge; you can make whatever you want to happen, and you can make all kinds of impossible things happen. I do really believe that writing kind of helps you sort of find ways forward for yourself and makes you feel that you can do things.

Story Factory facilitator

EXPLORATION

The programs allow young people to explore creative ideas without judgement. They are encouraged to approach creative writing as a tool for self-expression. Writing clarifies young people's points of view and helps them work out what is on their minds, what is going on in their lives, and what they want to say.

In the 2023 survey, 82% of young people said that the facilitators helped them to think about how to best represent who they are in their writing.

When you're in school and you're doing essay writing and stuff, their focus is like HSC, and how you can get marks and things like that. Whereas here, you get to explore everything that you want to explore. And they kind of have a way of, like, guiding you and encouraging you to explore ideas and concepts.

Young person

Wellbeing outcomes

SHORT-TERM OUTCOMES

Positive sense of self

Sense of self is your definition of the characteristics that define you.

Young people told us that creative writing helps them to explore issues and negotiate their relationships with themselves. Through writing, they explore what is on their mind and what they want to say. Over time, they become skilled in clarifying their point of view.

Some Alumni told us that they were not necessarily aware at the time of writing that they were engaged in exploring the self, but with hindsight, they now see that this was happening.

In the 2023 survey, young people reported improvement in understanding how they feel about things.

Especially when you're at an age where you're trying to understand a lot of different emotions and stuff. You discover a lot about the world and you are trying to navigate everything. What I was writing was somewhat a reflection of how I would perceive the world around me and things like that.

Young person

Rejection of stereotypes

Young people told us they engaged with writing as a tool to explore and reject negative stereotypes and lay claim to a new positive identity for their community. The change in consciousness regarding their identity changes their perspectives about the worth of their voice and what is possible in their lives.

As people from Western Sydney, we assume that because we've been told our whole lives that we are the less fortunate and we live in a low socio-economic area. We always feel like people from North Sydney and all that they are always ahead of us. And they have more to give. But when, with writing, you realise that actually, you are the advantaged one. Because you have so many stories to give, so much uniqueness.

Young person

MEDIUM-TERM

Autonomy

We define autonomy as the capacity to direct one's life according to one's values. Autonomy involves asking oneself questions, making independent decisions, and maintaining individuality across contexts. Socio-political engagement is considered an aspect of autonomy.²

Self-concept

Research on self-concept (how you feel about yourself) in young people claims that self-concept is fundamental to wellbeing.^{3,4}

Contribution to autonomy and positive self-concept

The opportunity for creative freedom in the production of a substantive piece of work, the use of creative writing to engage in exploration of the self and the socio-political implications in the rejection of negative stereotypes contribute to autonomy and positive self-concept.

LONG TERM

Our wellbeing framework hypothesises that changes in autonomy and self-concept contribute to transformation of identity.

Identity

A strong and stable identity is associated with understanding and accepting who you are, understanding those around you, and feeling accepted by those around you.⁵

Young people told us that they experienced a transformation in their identity due to their participation in the programs. In the 2023 survey, 79% of young people said they felt stronger and prouder in their identity.

Young people told us they experienced many positive changes associated with understanding and accepting who you are. These included positive changes in self-efficacy, resilience, self-concept, and autonomy. They also developed improved critical and creative skills.

Young people experienced positive changes associated with understanding those around them. They told us they developed improved communication and collaboration skills. Writing for an audience and participating in participant feedback contributed to cognitive empathy.

Young people told us they formed positive connections with their peers and arts communities. They reported a sense of belonging with their peers at Story Factory, amplified by their shared interest and collective identity as residents of Western Sydney. Finally, they rejected negative stereotypes and embraced their community.

feature story!

by hayden

On my first day of storyfactory, I didn't know what to think. The space was small. Smelled of wood and hot chips, thanks to some of the students already sitting in the same. I saw the man I had emailed to get into the program, who greeted me with a smile. Both my friend and I sat in the corner of the room. Afraid to mingle with the other people. After all, this was my first session. Some people around me were talking about their previous project and how fun the book launch last year had been. It seemed so foreign to me, yet once class started, our hearts opened and we listened to the teachers.

The teachers, they aren't really teachers. They call themselves storytellers, and they told us that they will help us to achieve our goals for our novellas. The two men went through the basic rules, an acknowledgement of country, and a reassurance and expectation of kindness. They used humour to lighten the mood, and got people to mingle and work on their future projects. One by one, each storyteller spoke to us privately, super excited to find what we were working on. When I told one of them that I was stuck on my story idea, that I had a book of stories with 50 pages, with each page containing at least 4 ideals. He suggested, 'look at what you want to achieve, and what you reasonably can'. That advice informed my decision of what story - or stories - I was going to create.

As we wrote down ideas, brainstormed plots, fleshed out characters, I found myself working at the speed of sound. I was ahead with the first part of my novella, but still barely managed to hit the deadline. Because the formatting was different, they held me to different standards of where I should have been. That's one thing I enjoy about storyfactory. They always treat you like a person, rather than a vessel for a project.

And never, to this day, have I received feedback like they gave. They took in everything - my writing style, the themes I was trying to write, the characterisation of each personality on the page. They took these things and weaved through my brain. "I love the stakes in this scene that set up this foreshadowing, maybe this could help?", "You write in this tense so well, maybe you could use this technique to make it stronger?" - they were suggestions, not answers. At school, all you got were answers. Dead, impersonal corrections that I couldn't even argue against. Teachers know better than students. But with the storytellers, it felt like we were learning together. They genuinely wanted me to succeed.

It wasn't just the feedback that made me want to stay, and continue. Being surrounded by like minded people, fellow writers, each with their own goals and characters? It was a dream come true. I only knew two friends who wanted to write and had very similar themes they wanted to explore. The way the room was organised and the activities throughout the year encouraged us all to shed our shells and share our ideas. Seeing the variety - from horror, to fantasy, to crime and then contemporary - made me realise how much potential I had, how much I could master if I followed through with projects.

This was even exemplified at the book launch. Before this, the poetry and novella students had never met, unless they were doing both. I met really talented and kind spirited poets, and it was a shame I could only meet them at the end of the storyfactory journey.

And having that final copy? I would sell my soul to get that feeling again. The whole process really, the writing, the editing, the cover reveal. Not to mention the supportive environment, mentors who fundamentally changed my perspective of teaching and kindness, and finding my first spelling mistake in my final copy. All of it, I wish I could do again. Novella truly saved my passion for writing.

writing is everywhere

by nickie

The beginning of StoryFactory for me never started at StoryFactory.

I didn't put a pen to paper, nor did the characters exist yet.

I was in Year 10 – juggling the pressure of the looming senior years, fleeting crushes and whatever teenage angst the Western Sydney suburbia produced. I knew I loved writing, I knew I wanted to see my words printed on page, and I think my English teachers at the time noticed.

I remember it was autumn, or at least it had to be. A new teacher had been digging around for students who had a good grip on their pen and had the academic results to show for it. I first met him while I was walking upstairs to the library foyer. My homeroom teacher struck out her finger and two pairs of blue eyes targeted me to come in for a conversation. The new teacher had a highlighter for a shirt and my homeroom teacher carried her high, snappable ponytail upon a slender figure.

“That’s her. Our star student. You’re good at writing, aren’t you, Nickie?” She asked.

The highlighter teacher had a goal-driven look on his face — like a headhunter. “How would you feel about a writing workshop every Wednesday? Four-thirty to six pm. You’ll be writing for the whole year,” he said. “Best part is, you’ll publish a book at the end.”

I remember our height difference. He presented these news to me like a gleaming oracle. My hopes to begin *something* to do with writing started to look less half-baked. I stared down at the flyer. Maybe it was blue and pink. Or blue and yellow.

“The only catch is, you’ll be travelling to Parramatta from here,” the highlighter teacher continued.

Except, I didn’t quite hear the last part. It didn't matter to me. I would’ve caught a ferry there if I had to. I would’ve skipped school. I would’ve travelled to half the globe. The flyer dangled in front of me like candy, and I was already imagining myself waiting at the train station after school, sweaty uniform and all. Those weeks I spent making up characters, scribbling bits of myself, digging deep into thoughts and the world around me – they turned into a month, six months and eventually, two years.

I began seeing the world a bit differently. My characters were walking home with me, commenting on the clouds with me. *This one was bubblegum pink. The other was a beige whipped cream.* The stories I started to knit together weaved into scarves I hugged tight for winter – keeping me company during class, listening to the conversations I had, nagging me to take note of people’s clothes, the way their hair fell, the way they walked or ordered coffee. During July when the sun was in a hurry to set and nights slept early, I trudged on anyway because I knew I would leave the centre with a thousand ways to describe the sky, conversations between strangers or techniques to make yourself open up. I started to write more spontaneously, finding romance in chips and gravy after school, silly mischief and

friendships built around park swings or Hungry Jack's. I paid attention to people's speech patterns, their eating habits, the way varsity jackets sat on broader shoulders and the way some socks are rolled back neatly.

The writing haven I found extended beyond the claustrophobic cluster of a mess my bedroom was – I found a place that welcomed me anytime and made space for how ever much room I felt like relinquishing that day.

Some days I could only afford to sleep and the greater half of my energy was spent travelling and showing up. But it didn't matter. Every Wednesday, if my notes weren't filled with counsel or prompts, they would be filled with gratitude.

Poems don't have to rhyme.

Be open to editing. Workshop your ideas.

Don't let the perfect get in the way of the good.

You deserve to get paid for your work.

Repeat the last word of the sentence if you blank.

You know at first, I thought the name 'StoryFactory' was so industrial. I've come to realise that StoryFactory doesn't produce just authors. At its heart, StoryFactory represents everything I admire about the writing community. Diversity. Kindness. Growth. Safe spaces. It defined what writing was for me and what writing should feel like. Their message to nurture, inspire and raise the young generation of writers and storytellers is clear, and this ubiquitous energy continues to intertwine the community together.

So the beginning of StoryFactory, or rather, the beginning of me being a writer, perhaps started simply when I realised that writing is important to me. Young writers with love and truths to do justice are sitting everywhere – at the coffee shop around the corner, at dinner, or even perhaps, on the way to Parramatta.

CONCLUSION

The Year of Poetry and Year of the Novella programs have generated positive wellbeing outcomes for many young people.

The programs contribute to wellbeing in many ways and generate many outcomes. The contributions and outcomes traverse changes in the conception of self, skill development, connection with others, increasing capacity to represent oneself in complex social systems, and engagement in a socio-political examination of identity.

Academics who engage with the concept of wellbeing have outlined concerns and criticisms about the socio-political implications of the term.

Researchers argue that wellbeing has been positioned as a personal responsibility instead of a structural issue and that this positioning represents a fragmentation of the self from the community and society. Researchers argue that our structures and institutions must bear responsibility for young people's wellbeing and ensure equitable access to mental health services.

Research on young people and wellbeing in Australia suggests that young people view wellbeing as something they are responsible for and which they must perform to normative standards.¹

Researchers have proposed that programs focusing on identity-building be used as an alternative to wellbeing and mental health programs.² Programs that focus on identity would focus on understanding the strengths inherent in culture and community, the ontological value of 'knowing oneself' and the opportunity to conceptualise identity as something that is the best of you, the best of the people around you, and the best of the community you live in.

Year of Poetry and Year of the Novella function effectively as identity-building programs. Young people's reflections on their school experiences, their negotiation of discrimination and stigma, and the dismantling and regeneration of the self, identity, and community emerged as a compelling narrative.

One advantage of the programs is that they hold no explicit or implicit assumption that a participant might just be fundamentally lacking in some way that requires intervention. Young people are simply free to be. It just should not have to be so hard to access these types of spaces. The program focuses on the inherent value of creativity and participation in creative processes for their own sake. Because we find joy in it.

Glossary

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