

Why Stories **Matter**



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“Learning to sing one’s own songs,

to trust the particular cadences of one’s voices, is also the goal of any writer.”

- Henry Louis Gates

“If there’s a book

that you want to read, but it hasn’t been written yet, then you must write it.”

- Toni Morrison

“Literacy is not a luxury,

it is a right and a responsibility. If our world is to meet the challenges of the twenty-first century we must harness the energy and creativity of all our citizens.”

- President Bill Clinton, 1994



What if helping kids to share their stories **could change the world?**

What might this mean for kids who are brimming over with brilliant ideas and insights who just need a caring environment with friends and adults who nurture their creativity, energy, and talents? By helping kids become powerful storytellers, we also help them to develop positive reader and writer identities, thrive in school, contribute to their communities, and build lives of dignity, hope, and joy. Can literacy, especially storytelling, change lives and the world? Absolutely!



Picture Rosie, age 9

She was so dreading the end of the school year, fearing that she would be put into summer school, a place where embarrassment, stress, and boredom are considered the norm. Her stomach hurt for weeks and it was hard for her to think about anything else.

Instead, she had the chance to thrive and have fun all summer in a joyful environment where she learned every day, made new friends, and built her self confidence. Rosie's community set up LitCamps for summer learning where the kids did not know who chose to be there or who was required to catch up academically. Children growing up in bi-lingual and multilingual households were encouraged to express themselves in the languages that made them feel most free, and everyone had access to relatable, inspiring books and stories.

In this environment, Rosie and all of her fellow LitCampers were seen for their strengths first and foremost. They had opportunities to engage with authentic books covering all kinds of diverse characters, topics, and genres. Above all, at LitCamp Rosie was encouraged to share her stories. She told

her teachers and "LitCamp bunk mates" that she was the first in her family to be born in America. When she is with her parents, she has to translate the English all around them, even though she is just learning how to read and write herself. She experienced the agency that comes with her own voice. She felt a deep sense of belonging in this safe space for learning, where she could be her full self.

Rosie accelerated her academic achievement during the summer, leaping up three reading levels in only five weeks. While on average, kids her age actually lose 20% of the literacy skills they gained in the prior school year (Thum & Hauser, 2015; Quinn & Polikoff, 2017), no one in Rosie's community experienced this "summer slide," and over two thirds of her fellow LitCampers jumped up at least one reading level.

Most importantly, Rosie came out of LitCamp more motivated and engaged as a learner, reader, writer, and creator. She finished the summer invigorated as a student, and hopeful and confident as a community member, ready to take on new challenges.

LitWorld's mission is to strengthen kids and communities through the power of stories

(LitWorld, 2019).

The global nonprofit, led by Dorothy Lee, and founded by literacy expert and children's advocate Pam Allyn, builds programs and partnerships to reach millions of children, educators, and families, working together to create a world of equity, opportunity, and joy. Since 2007, LitWorld has reached over a million children, educators, and families, across the U.S. and in more than 30 countries, with in-depth summer LitCamps and afterschool LitClubs. Like Rosie, all of these "LitKids" have had the opportunity to experience the joy and excitement that comes from participating in a caring, literacy rich community. As they developed as storytellers, listened to and read excellent literature, and shaped their reader and writer identities, they also improved their leadership skills, and their academic and life opportunities.

LitWorld embraces the belief that access to literacy and literacy development is a shared responsibility and a means to protect and advance all human rights (UNESCO, 2019). Every person has the right to meaningfully engage in their communities, whether this is in the classroom, work place, or other social spaces. Often literacy plays a vital role in how people participate in their communities, which has a direct impact on their quality of life, including understanding and engaging with the political process (Perrson, 2013). There are many connections between literacy, education level, and quality of life, such as life expectancy (Gilbert, Teravainen, Clark & Shaw, 2018) and civic engagement (Rudd, Kirsch & Yamamoto, 2004). Access to literacy and diverse stories also provide benefits and advantages that are more difficult to measure but equally important, such as a person's self-awareness, visual imagery, and cultural knowledge (Mello, 2001).

Literacy, especially storytelling, promises possibilities for all: personally, locally, and globally. A person who has access to the stories of others who have overcome challenges, enacted change, and pursued their dreams is more likely to imagine how he or she might do the same. Just as an author may be telling their story through a novel, poetry or play,

readers can imagine telling their own stories and seeing how their lives matter. Stories can empower - especially when they act as mirrors that reflect the reader's experiences, windows which allow the reader to look into new and unique cultures and ways of being, or sliding glass doors, which the reader can step through and experience new worlds and ways of being in a completely visceral way (Bishop, 1990). Children in LitWorld's programs have access to high quality, high interest, and diverse literature through interactive read alouds which literacy scholar Lester Laminack (2017) asserts is the best way to entice students and create a thirst for a reading life (p. 33). By listening to and reading inspiring stories, children can also shape and embrace their own reader and writer identities while developing critical literacy and leadership skills.

When communities have access to engaging books and powerful literacy education, they are able to participate more fully in the labor market, improve child and family health and nutrition, and reduce poverty (UNESCO, 2019). Not only are they changing their immediate quality of life, they are making positive changes that will impact countless generations to come. As Miller and Pennycuff (2008) assert, "literacy is an important issue for everyone because our success as a society depends on the innovation of the next generation" (p. 36).

Literacy has the power to transform and save lives, and storytelling is the vehicle to get us there. This is why a deep commitment and urgency to provide literacy rich environments and platforms for sharing one's story is critical. LitWorld provides these opportunities around the globe, and we are impacting the way children and adults view themselves and their potential to enact positive and powerful changes in their communities and beyond (Stern, 2018). LitWorld has been steadfast in this important work since 2007, across dozens of countries, because we understand that storytelling is a transformative literacy practice that humanizes and brings us together.



Sharing Stories **Makes Us Human**

When we tell stories from our lives, our imaginations, and our hopes, and when we read aloud and listen deeply to the words of others, we discover who we are and what makes us strong, and we build community around the parts of ourselves that matter most.

Meet Colette, who is lighting the way for her community

She uncovered her strengths when she began sharing her own stories. Colette says that, “smiling, laughter, and happiness” were challenging for her, and for the other mothers in her rural village of Rwinkwavu, Rwanda. They were all focused on getting through one day at a time. Since the 1994 Rwandan genocide, which resulted in the deaths of a million people, and an additional two million people fleeing the country, Rwanda has been steadily working to climb out from its status as the poorest country in the world. The challenge is immense, and Rwandan children are still on average only in school for less than four years of their lives (United Nations Development Program, 2019).

Seven years ago, Colette gathered together 15 women to form the very first Moms LitClub, a forum for mothers to engage with stories and literacy-based learning, with support from LitWorld and the local organization Ready for Reading. They were all HIV positive and had minimal literacy skills, so Colette had a hard time picturing what success would look like for this group, but she persevered.

She recognized that she needed to be a role model, so she began to tell stories from her own life of hard times and moments of success. Colette practiced reading picture books aloud, and “becoming the story,” bringing new ideas and perspectives to life,

and engaging her fellow mothers. As she shared her own stories, and discovered so many new ones, she began to see further and further into her own future. She felt more powerful, hopeful, and able to plan ahead, seeing the potential in her life, her children’s lives, and her community as a whole.

Colette is a good listener. She welcomes everyone with a smile and shows her Moms LitClub members her love and kindness without fear. Sharing their stories was painful at first, and many stories will always bring tears to the group, but the laughter and smiling outshine everything else, and they now all share without fear. They have formed a community rooted in belonging. They trust one another with their hearts, their pain, and their hope.

Ineza, Colette’s oldest son, is now 10 years old and in his own Boys LitClub. Growing up with a mother who actively shares and listens to stories, and works on her own learning, has made a huge impact on how he sees himself as a student and a citizen. He has written and illustrated over 20 picture books and counting, in a combination of English, French, and Kinyarwanda.

By engaging with her own stories and diverse books, practicing reading aloud and storytelling, and tapping into her inner strengths, Colette has experienced, witnessed, and sparked a powerful change.

Storytelling, an ancient practice dating back at least 27,000 years to the first cave paintings has been used to share important events, cultural practices, and beliefs from one generation to the next.

(Widrich, 2012)



Storytelling has been used to entertain with tales of heroic events and to offer a glimpse into how our ancestors lived and what they valued. For thousands of years, storytelling has served as a cultural process to amuse, teach, and communicate with one another (Kaye, 1979). From Gilgamesh (ancient Mesopotamia), to One Thousand and One Nights (Middle East), and Anansi tales (Ghana), storytelling has been a valued practice all over the world and speaks to our human need to share our stories and bring people together.

Storytelling is narrative and universal. As Henry Louis Gates asserts, “We speak ourselves into being” (Introduction, *Slave Narratives*). We also dream and speak to ourselves in narratives. Even without a written form, we can tell and retell our stories and engage in stories fully (Rosen, 1986). The benefits of storytelling are numerous and well documented in educational research (NCTE, 2000). We have learned that storytelling helps children remember the content of what they read, stimulates their imagination, and leads to higher cognitive levels in their responses to questions about what they read (George & Schaer, 1986). Storytelling of specific genres, such as mythic literature, can teach children about themselves and help them to write their own stories and legends (Reinehr, 1987). Children also develop an understanding of story structure through storytelling and increase their “language abilities, appreciation of literature, critical thinking and comprehension and understanding of community and self” (Alex, 1988, p. 2). When new information is shared in the form of a story, various parts of our brains are activated and we are better able

to learn since our brains are wired for storytelling (Widrich, 2012).

Sharing stories in all forms helps us all make connections to every element of our literacy lives: reading, writing, speaking, listening, and creating. As children and adults develop their understanding and appreciation of storytelling and storytelling skills, they enhance their literacy skills while improving their understanding of themselves and how they can interact with and contribute to a wider community. Through storytelling, individuals’ voices and experiences are validated and valued. Literacy skills developed through storytelling can offer many opportunities to participate in communities that require advanced literacy skills and this can significantly change a person’s life trajectory (World Literacy Foundation, 2018). As individuals improve their literacy skills, more doors are opened in terms of education, employment, and civic engagement. When parents make sacrifices for their children’s literacy education, they show their understanding of how literacy can serve as a pathway to an end - in this case, economic well-being (Morrell, 2017). Colette, a leader and member of the first Moms LitClub in Rwanda, is a perfect example of how telling her story has enriched her life and given her the confidence to encourage others to tell their stories and build hopes and plans for their futures. LitWorld is leading the way by emphasizing the value of shaping and sharing stories through art making, journaling, read alouds, and opportunities for public speaking, giving LitKids and their mentors a myriad of gateways to literacy experiences that may otherwise go untapped.



Literacy Knows **No Boundaries**

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To be literate is to be able to read the world around us—from written signs, to social cues, to cultural norms. Regardless of background, literacy tools help us navigate and build our future and leadership skills in all situations.

From a young age, we are “reading” the world by examining our environment and ingesting language. Young children quickly discover which words are most meaningful and useful for expressing their needs and desires. Paulo Freire, renowned Brazilian educator and philosopher, calls this “reading the world”, which happens before and while we read the printed word. Meaningful words make their way into our oral and printed stories, shape and reflect our identities, and express our ideas, beliefs and values (Purcell-Gates & Waterman, 2000). When we find the language to express our hopes and dreams, we can then take action in the world and use these personal and significant words to reread the world and tell our stories.

An additional layer on top of “reading the word and world” (Freire, 1985) is the ability to engage in cross-cultural communication. The Association for Childhood Education International (2019) defines cross-cultural communication as, “sharing thoughts and ideas through verbal and nonverbal ways, resulting in the ability to create and cultivate relationships with individuals from differing cultural backgrounds” (p. 1). Acquiring and applying reading and writing skills is certainly important; however, being able to convey ideas and feelings in a sensitive and respectful way to a diverse audience, and to feel empathy for people with all kinds of backgrounds, is equally valuable, especially in our widely multicultural and increasingly interconnected world.

Meet Lilibeth, who is building hope for her community



She uncovered her confidence and boundless potential by grabbing hold of every educational opportunity she could find.

Lilibeth grew up in a part of urban Manila, Philippines, known as “the squatters’ area” at the edge of the bay, where trash is heaped and families crowd, striving to do the best they can amidst toxic fumes, smoke, and dust. When Lilibeth was 12, the government relocated her family and many others to a rural area that is free of fumes and trash heaps, but where jobs are virtually nonexistent, so poverty is persistent. Across the Philippines, the number of children and teens unable to attend school has increased significantly since 2014, due primarily to overcrowding and under-funding (UNESCO, 2019b).

Lilibeth began receiving scholarships from a local organization, Project PEARLS, when she was 11 years old, so that she could stay in school. The next year, LitWorld brought LitClubs and LitCamps to her community to help fill weekends and school breaks with learning and sharing stories. Lilibeth was first in line because she could see that investing in her education meant investing in the future for her whole family. The consistency of weekly LitClub meetings gave Lilibeth and her friends a sense of stability when the government relocated them, and gave them a “second family” for support and inspiration.

LitWorld’s programs shined a light on Lilibeth’s optimism and charisma, and helped her turn inherent strengths into fully fledged leadership skills. She took charge of a LitClub for younger children locally and had the chance to travel and connect in person with LitClub members and mentors from all over the world at a Global HerStory Summit in New York City, run by LitWorld and our HerStory partners. The summit participants bonded with one another instantly through the shared language and experience of LitClubs, going beyond the boundaries of language and diverse home cultures without hesitation. There Lilibeth shared her ideas for how to improve her community, and instantly built a cross-cultural support network with her peers from across the globe. She first practiced sharing her stories and her unique perspective in the safe space of the LitWorld community, and then brought it to audiences at United Nations parallel events assembled for the Commission on the Status of Women.

Lilibeth is now in college studying to become a teacher because she wants to help children. She wants a career that will tap into her passions and give her the stability to give herself and her family a better life. She continues to lead a local LitClub and stays in touch online with her friends in Kenya, Nepal, and beyond. Lilibeth and her Kenyan friend Mordecai hope to visit one another’s homes in the near future.



Just as the world is rapidly and constantly changing, so does the definition of literacy

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No longer is literacy limited to reading and writing the printed word; rather, it is far more nuanced, complex, and social. Digital literacy has also become more important in everyday life and access to digital literacy can have a profound impact on academic achievement and life opportunities, particularly when we consider the digital divide (International Literacy Association, 2017). Keeping these factors in mind, we can reflect on how literacy acts as a tool to increase access to information that may come in multiple and varied forms (Morrell & Rowsell, 2020).

While there are various definitions for literacy, Silvia Montoya (2017) has shared UNESCO’s comprehensive two part description as:

“Literacy is the ability to identify, understand, interpret, create, communicate and compute, using printed and written materials associated with varying contexts. Literacy involves a continuum of learning in enabling individuals to achieve their goals, to develop their knowledge and potential, and to participate fully in their community and wider society.”

Learning happens in social contexts and through meaningful interactions (Vygotsky, 1978). As Lilibeth and her friends read inspiring books and

participated in their LitClub, they nurtured relationships and found ways to share their authentic selves with others through literacy based activities. The example of Lilibeth and her friends shows how literacy serves as a means to an end, rather than the end. Through these types of interactions, children can develop and learn countless valuable skills such as leadership, how to collaborate, how to listen, and how to fully express one’s self.

Thanks to their LitClub, Lilibeth and her friends had additional hours outside of their formal school day to develop valuable skills while reading inspiring books, writing and creating art to express their stories and hopes for the future, and listening deeply to one another. Children spend 1,000 hours in school and 4,000 hours outside of school annually, so we should be thinking about how to ensure that kids have the same kind of access, encouragement, and support in developing the personal leadership and literacy skills that Lilibeth and kids in LitClubs enjoy (Allington, 2014). Years of research has found that having kids read just 10 minutes a day outside of school improves fluency, comprehension, and academic vocabulary (Adams, 2006; Anderson, Wilson & Fielding, 1988; Beers & Probst, 2017), which can completely change a child’s overall learning experiences. It is not an exaggeration to state that ten minutes of reading outside of school can change a child’s life (Morrell, 2019). Imagine the impact 120 minutes a day in a LitClub or 360 minutes a day in a LitCamp can have on a child’s life!

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(Silvia Montoya, 2017)



Joyful Learning
is a Human Right



Children are built on hope and resilience, and regardless of circumstances, when you listen to young people and let them lead the way, joy will shine through as an absolute necessity, and is the key for learning to take hold deeply.

Meet Adrian, who has transformed from isolated and academically disengaged to confident and driven



Now everyone can see his limitless potential, since he has found a community where he belongs.

Adrian lives in Valle del Cauca, Colombia with his mother and two brothers. Drug cartels have had an extreme impact on his community and violent internal conflicts have created turmoil across the country for more than 50 years, leading to a devastating lack of equity.

Until he was 12 years old, all of the kids at Adrian's school avoided him because he suffers from a bone disease. This all changed when he joined a LitClub at their local museum, Museo Rayo. Adrian is

creative and imaginative and he bonded instantly with his fellow LitClub members, including other students from his school.

The safe space of LitClub allowed them to break down the fear and confusion that was holding them back from connecting. They removed superficial boundaries and replaced them with unbreakable friendships, finding common ground in the books they read together, and discovering that they had the freedom to express themselves fully - their hopes, their fears, their dreams, and, of course, anything that makes them laugh.

Now Adrian is bursting with confidence as the top student in his high school, and still never misses his weekly LitClub sessions. He is driven by a desire to help others. When he grows up, he wants to be a business manager at Colombina, a candy company in his home town that brings him great joy.



Joyful Learning **Environment**

What does a nurturing and productive learning environment look like? How does a child know they are a valued member and what types of activities might they be doing? For Adrian, school did not elicit excitement or positive feelings. This is true for many children around the world. Thankfully, it does not need to be this way! We have decades of research about learning and the impact the environment and self-concept can have on how students view themselves as learners and their confidence in accomplishing goals (eg. Bandura, 1997; Eccles & Wigfield, 2002; Marsh et. al. 2006). We know that joy and community, which are intimately related to environment and self-concept, are two key ingredients to becoming powerful readers and writers as Adrian and thousands of other children have experienced in programs with LitWorld and their local partners.



LitWorld's **7 Strengths**

LitWorld created a pedagogical framework called the “7 Strengths” in 2009 to bring together the power of literacy and storytelling with inner strengths that everyone shares. Ernest Morrell and Pam Allyn (2016) have written and spoken extensively on the 7 Strengths and how focusing on these strengths helps children become super readers and highly literate, engaged, and joyful learners. The 7 Strengths model is built on: Belonging, Curiosity, Friendship, Kindness, Confidence, Courage, and Hope. Foundational literacy skills, such as decoding and understanding academic vocabulary, are critical to becoming a strong reader; however, children need a purposeful context that is asset based, rather than deficit, and that honors a child’s social-emotional development. How a child views and feels about themselves as a reader and writer can have a profound impact on how excited they are to read, participate in a community of readers, take chances, and develop their reader and writer identity. A joyful learning environment incorporates these seven core strengths into daily activities (e.g., student led small group discussions) and shapes the norms of the learning environment (e.g., mutual respect and care for one another).

Applying What We **Already Know**

Stress impairs learning. Even short durations of stress lasting a few hours can hinder cognitive processes and memory (Nauert, 2019). More opportunities to engage in low-stakes activities over a longer period of time helps learners build confidence and competence (Anderson, Hiebert, Scott & Wilkinson, 1985; International Reading Association, 2018; Krashen, 2004). One way to decrease stress and offer individuals more time and opportunities to develop their literacy skills is through storytelling. Every person is an expert about their own lives! And as Vivian Paley (2011), renowned early childhood education researcher, confirmed through decades of working with young children in schools, children arrive to learning environments as storytellers and performers. When given the chance to narrate and write about their own experiences, we honor and validate every person's voice and recognize the power and importance of oral and written communication.

Voice and oral communication are clearly connected to storytelling, but how do these relate to how much and how we communicate outside of school? Research findings by Miriam Wilt (1950), which have changed very little in the intervening decades, showed that, "Many of us spend 70 to 80 percent of our waking hours in some form of communication. Of that time, we spend about 9 percent writing, 16 percent reading, 30 percent speaking and 45 percent listening". If the majority of our learning happens through oral communication and outside of school and we understand the academic, social and

emotional benefits of storytelling, we should incorporate storytelling into our learning environments! In turn, children can develop their understanding of narrative, hone their oral literacy skills, and share their voices and ideas. These oral stories can then become written stories. Perhaps most importantly, we can create humane and loving literacy-rich environments where everyone can thrive.

Finally, we want our children to develop and strengthen their reader and writer identities. LitCamps and LitClubs provide this type of support and encouragement in more formal and structured environments which we know makes a difference in overall literacy achievement. In their study of 155 5th graders, Anderson, Wilson and Fielding (1988) found that children who engaged in reading outside of school, similar to what LitClub and LitCamp participants do, improved their comprehension, automaticity, vocabulary, and status as readers. The responsibility of reading outside of school fell on the students; whereas, LitClub and LitCamp participants have direct access to engaging and inspiring literature, opportunities to collaborate with peers, and encouragement to create and share their stories across multiple forms. LitWorld programs take young people from honing writing skills to practicing public speaking, from drawing in notebooks to collaborating on multi-media art installations, from listening more deeply to their friends at school to hearing perspectives from around the world. Our world needs more of these opportunities.



The Way Forward

Through the vignettes, we have met Lilibeth, Adrian, Rosie, and Colette and her son Ineza, who come from various communities across the globe. Their lived experiences, dreams and goals are as unique as each of them; yet, what they do have in common is the inspiration to share their stories and ideas and to find joy and empowerment through their LitWorld communities. While we know that storytelling improves the academic skills measured and treasured in schools, it also honors the experiences of those narrating their lives. Storytelling has the power to bring individuals together, to find common ground, and to appreciate differences. Understanding the structure of the narrative, which occurs through learning to become a storyteller, is important. Using academic skills to articulate one's beliefs, hopes and dreams to create and tell one's story is powerful and promising!

There are many ways to reach a goal. We want children and adults to have access to texts and literacy learning, and we want this to happen in respectful and humanizing ways. Strengthening one's voice and building the confidence to share one's story orally and in print can lead to the conventional literacy skills measured through traditional schooling, alongside the more intangible literacy and leadership skills seen in successful and meaningful interactions with the world. While we want high academic literacy for all children, we also want to ensure that the 7 Strengths (Belonging, Curiosity, Friendship, Kindness, Confidence, Courage, and Hope) are embedded in this process, which is what LitWorld offers its program members. As the world continues to shrink and flatten into a global community, we can think of all children as our children. In the words of the great education philosopher John Dewey (1990), "What the best and wisest parent wants for his child, that must we want for all the children of the community."

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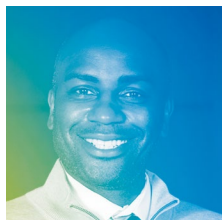
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LitWorld



LitWorld is a global nonprofit organization strengthening kids and communities through the power of stories. LitWorld creates opportunities for millions of people around the United States and the world with innovative programs and partnership models that highlight universal inner strengths and leverage literacy and storytelling tools to build empathy, equity, and joy.

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Animated by the vision of the University of Notre Dame's Institute for Educational Initiatives, the Center for Literacy Education conducts research, community outreach programs, and teacher formation programs to significantly improve literacy achievement and life outcomes for all students, especially those from vulnerable populations in public and Catholic schools.

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