MEDIA RELEASE   **16 June 2020**

Children's storytelling event data tells a story itself.

2020 'Storyathon' event shows an uptick in social awareness amongst children in lockdown during COVID-19.

Data from Oxford University Press in partnership with *Storyathon*, the largest story-writing event in Australia, reveals the impact COVID-19 has had on children's vocabulary, interests and social awareness.

More than 20,000 stories were submitted by children aged from 8 to 14 from around Australia on the topic 'A different world – living in lockdown'. And the breakdown of the language trends not only provides a unique insight into the development of children's language, but provides an opportunity to peer into the minds of children during this time in history.

A breakdown of the 5,653,404 words received shows a surprising increase in the usage of collective nouns young people are using in their writing. The word 'we' which last year was ranked as the 19th most used word, has skyrocketed to the number one spot, a 129% increase on the previous year.

Words that have appeared in submissions for the first time reveal a vocabulary driven by current affairs, including quarantine (ranked 27), isolation (ranked 31), pandemic (ranked 37) and restrictions (ranked 53).

Anne Bayetto, a literacy expert at Flinders University, analysed the *Storyathon* submissions and said they provide an interesting insight into the way children have experienced COVID-19.

"Analysis of the stories showed children appear to be more connected with the broader community in which they live during COVID-19. There were many references to the amount of troubling news stories being overheard and a lot of descriptions of stress and anxiety that came through in the narratives. Some writers wrote about the worry they had for their parents who were frontline workers and they were seeing less of than usual," Ms Bayetto said.

"But on the positive side, a number of comments were made about the pleasure of spending more quality time with family. And many were aware of the environmental benefits of the lockdown, stating that the world is healthier, cleaner and flourishing."

The trend towards togetherness can be seen in the increased prevalence of many other words including 'people' (283% increase), friends (572% increase), world (346% increase), family (327% increase) and everyone (183% increase).

Unsurprisingly, the word 'lockdown' increased 190,100%, jumping 14,040 places compared to the previous year to become the second most used word, after 'we'.

Lee Walker, Director of Publishing and Editorial at Oxford University Press said the way children describe COVID-19 itself pointed to an impressive level of comprehension and vocabulary acquisition.

"The virus is referred to as 'cold', 'dark' and 'lurking', which shows the way that news media and conversations with adults are perceived through a child's lens. The comprehension of these terms gives us a glimpse into the development of the English language too when you consider the word 'virus' is borrowed from the Latin word vīrus meaning 'poison, slime and venom', words which mirror those chosen by the children" Ms Walker said.

Other recurring topics found in the stories included dystopian futures, children wanting to be back at school and seeing friends and playing sport.

"The stories collected as part of *Storyathon* are being used to build the first Australian Children's language corpus, which is a collection of texts which records the development of children's linguistics over time," Ms Walker said.

Storyathon began in 2019, and is currently in its second year. Submissions are currently closed, but will reopen in School Term 3 with the theme of 'Australia'.

For more information about the *Storyathon* in partnership with Oxford University Press visit the website at https://www.oup.com.au/storyathon.

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For more information and interview opportunities, please contact Porter Novelli:

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ABOUT OXFORD UNIVERSITY PRESS

Oxford University Press (OUP) is dedicated to improving communication through an understanding of, and a passion for, language around the globe. As experts in children's language, OUP is constantly listening to Australian children, and reflecting on their use of language, in order to develop an understanding of the challenges they are facing.

The Oxford Children's Word of the Year is one of the ways OUP engages with the ever-changing language of Australian children. Previous Words of the Year: 'Creativity' (2018) and 'Equality' (2019).

About Storyathon

Storyathon is a new and exciting online writing event that encourages creativity through writing microstories.

Writing a microstory is an inclusive classroom activity that makes writing fun and accessible, even for the most reluctant writers.

Storyathon is the brainchild of Shane Hill who was a teacher for eleven years prior to creating programs such as Writing Legends, Mathletics, Spellodrome, Skoolbo and the da Vinci Decathlon.

About Anne Bayetto

Anne is a special education lecturer at Flinders University. She was previously a mainstream and special class teacher, disability support coordinator, founding member of the Learning Difficulties Support Team (SA), and a literacy policy and project officer. Anne provides literacy-focused professional learning sessions for leaders and teachers across Australia. She has been the reading expert for the Principals as Literacy Leaders (PALL) program, initiated by the Australian Primary Principals Association.

About Lee Walker

Lee is the School Publishing Director for Oxford University Press Australia and New Zealand and President of the Australian Publishers Association. Lee has more than 25 years of experience working in the Australian educational publishing industry.