

Storytime with Mr Skene

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Amid the uncertainty and change pervading daily life is a joyous little corner of the internet where stories are told and young minds are being nurtured.

It's also a corner of John Skene's classroom at Miranda Public School in Sydney's south, where a healthy dose of optimism, mixed with a smidgeon of silliness, transforms the room into the setting for "[Story time with Mr Skene](#)".

What started as a simple, and very contemporary, way to stay connected with his students during home isolation has steadily grown an online following that now extends to the United States.

"I love story time, and my students always express interest and enjoyment during these sessions," John, a special education teacher and Federation Representative, said.

"I truly just thought, 'How can I connect with the students in a simple, meaningful and engaging way?' Let's read stories, record them and share them online, and 'Story time with Mr Skene' was born.

"My first stories were actually chosen by a few students in my support class (autism) that were still attending school at the time. So, I started filming the stories in week 9, when students began to start learning at home, as a way for parents to engage their child in an educational activity, while they were trying to understand 'at-home learning' and the massive shift in routine and structure."

Story time is not just a read-aloud, picture-book session, it has education at its heart played out with funny hats, wigs and wit. The get-ups draw on John's award-winning efforts as the two-time best dressed on dress-up days award presented at the school's year 6 graduation.

"So a bit of thought does go into the staging and costuming, to bring a little added drama and excitement to the reading and bring the stories to life," he said.

Story time also goes to the core goal of maintaining learning in the home during the pandemic disruption.

"At first, I wanted a way to simply bring a regular classroom activity/routine into the home and support parents with a moment in their busy schedules to be able to set their child up in front of a screen and allow a familiar face to read them a story," John said.

"While the first few were silly, laugh-along stories for pure enjoyment, as the positive feedback came back, I began to think more along the lines of literature that could have linked activities and resources for curriculum engagement as well as general entertainment."



He is looking to expand his readings across sections of the curriculum as well as traditional culture.

"I have read mostly, fun and quality children's picture books that students connect with and build visual competency in," he said. "I've connected these to special events such as Harmony Day while also incorporating [personal development] to build emotional intelligence and social skills.

"I have begun reading traditional Aboriginal stories as well, to engage in the sharing of culture. I sought community consultation to ensure I respectfully addressed these stories in a way to share and uphold culture through the stories I was sharing, as a non-Aboriginal person."

John has been receiving nothing but praise from parents of his students and close friends, who have said that he is now their child's bedtime story favourite.

"I have had videos shared with me from parents of our support unit, with their child laughing hysterically at the story, as I'm someone familiar (and yes I'm probably acting a little silly) or that their child is expressing more verbally for 'Skene story', which is just beautiful to hear," he said.

As of 7 April, his catalogue of readings stood at 56 titles that can be found on Facebook and Instagram @storytimewithmrskene.

"In all honesty, it is keeping me positive and grounded at this time as well, and a way to keep focused on my charter; teaching, supporting and bringing joy to those around me, child and adult.

"It has truly had a positive impact, bringing a smile to almost all people I come in contact with, whether its students in my class, other classes or from afar. I have friends in the US sharing my stories with their colleagues, saying it was a chance to 'travel' by listening to my Australian accent."

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