
Every child deserves a rich cultural life.

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1.0 Executive Summary

The following is a preliminary investigation using desktop research and initial interviews that starts to define the weaknesses and challenges besetting our youth arts sector. It is hoped this will be the first step towards designing a strategy and then specific policy to determine where and how we choose to invest in the future of Australia's Youth Arts sector and positively impact children's lives.

Youth Arts is a sprawling complex landscape with a mixture of artforms and philosophical approaches. A representation map of the components has been developed and included to try and visualise this complexity. For the purposes of this first phase, the problem statements focus on the performing and visual arts for ages up to 18 across Australia.

While Arts Education and Creative Learning are vitally important components of a child's life, a full analysis of the Arts Education aspect of the sector is beyond the scope of this document (although some observations are contained here as pertinent). The focus here is on companies and/or individual artists who have children and young people as central beneficiaries of their vision, mission and programming. Professor Robyn Ewing's publication: *The Arts and Australian Education: Realising potential*, is influential, insightful, and forensic – I highly recommend it be reviewed in the context of Arts Education.

Australia has been previously celebrated globally as a youth arts powerhouse. For example, Australia is the only country to have ever held the international ASSITEJ¹ Congress twice, in 1987 and 2008, and up until the pandemic, several companies regularly toured extensively to North America and beyond.

Despite global recognition for excellence, Australian youth arts have borne the brunt of increased funding pressure over the past decades. This has resulted in an alarming erosion of expertise, capacity, infrastructure, and organisations who prioritise and specialise in working with children and young people. The last time the federal government introduced a youth arts policy was in 2003.

Paradoxically, robust, academically peer-reviewed research-as to the benefits of children engaging in quality arts experiences has continued to grow. Professor Robyn Ewing (2013) states: "There are a whole range of international and Australian studies that demonstrate unequivocally that children who are embedded in quality arts experiences do better academically, do better from a social point of view, are more well-rounded emotionally and affectively."

A review of the history of Australian youth arts, and how it has interfaced with education, shows children and young people's access has been disregarded over time. We can also see the extent to which children and young people are not respected for the contribution they are able to make to Australian culture. There are structures, attitudes and models in place that exclude children's participation in high quality arts experiences and what remains of the undervalued youth arts sector is fragmented.

A broad, encompassing definition of 'youth arts' is emerging where it is considered as a stand-alone artform in and of itself. However, the rationale for youth arts is persistently framed as an instrument for achieving outcomes, for example future audiences, future artists, economic return, improved well-being, enhanced mental health and social bonding, school re-engagement, improved academic success. A comparison of WA Youth Orchestra and WA Symphony Orchestra points to the nature of measuring economic impact over valuing the social impacts of children and young people's engagement.

¹ ASSITEJ is the International Association of Theatre for Children and Young People. (French: Association Internationale du Théâtre de l'Enfance et la Jeunesse-ASSITEJ) Founded in 1965, it is a global organisation and network with links across 100 countries.

There have been several examples of wonderful initiatives, commissioned works, pilots, and research projects over the years, however an absence of consistent policy, adequate funding, or unified national advocacy means there has been little progress in bending political will towards prioritising children and young people when it comes to Australian cultural participation. Ensuring this will require leadership, tenacity, respect, and creativity. The challenge is great, but the rewards will be even greater.

2.0 External Mapping

2.1 Historical Overview

Pre-1960s, there wasn't much in Australia for children, except for The Young Elizabethan Players, The Australian Children's Theatre (Travers, 1987) and The Tintookies (Meacham, 2019). A classical repertoire of fables and popular European stories was generally produced. These shows were viewed by some Australian artists as conservative and patronising to children and better framed as commercial school-holiday entertainment.

In 1968, Commonwealth funding for the arts commenced. It was set up in such a way that the sector was carved up by artform and therefore focussing on products and output, as opposed to focussing on artists and their needs. Katharine Brisbane (2021) noted: "This decision made *the form* the focus of the Boards that were duly set up, rather than artists and their needs... As a result, over time, the output has been allowed to overshadow the benefit to society of artists themselves".

1970s: Theatre in Education

In the 1970's there was a flourishing of the arts in Australia generally and this included an accepted view that children should also participate in the arts. The pathway to children's access was driven through schools and the model adopted was Theatre in Education (TIE). Sue Giles (2018) writes "at its heart TIE was about theatre access for all children by taking theatre out of traditional venues and embedding it in a schools' context. In its earliest forms TIE was about the arts examining social, political, and contemporary issues through works made specifically for an extremely diverse cohort of children. TIE was art that 'lay alongside the curriculum', it did not necessarily draw inspiration from it".

TIE productions may have been anything from theatre, music theatre, physical theatre, storytelling, a band, circus or puppetry. Two things characterised the nation-wide adoption of TIE. Firstly, it was subsidised by state-based education departments, and secondly it was philosophically based on the idea that it wasn't provided to specifically teach curriculum.

For the next 30 years, TIE was to remain a dominant force in schools. There were subsidised and unsubsidised artists and companies, and there was a sound economic base to these shows. Few performers, minimal sets, and props, one-hour bump in, 60 min performance and months of touring across the country. In-schools' touring would provide long-term employment for artists and shows stayed in repertoire for years.

Dance was often part of the sports curriculum, and often primary schools employed specialist teacher librarians with a strong knowledge of quality literature, as well as visual art specialists.

1980s: Changes in the Wind

By the 1980s, a key piece of youth arts infrastructure, *Lowdown* magazine, distributed to over 70 countries and to every school in Australia, covered youth arts in six continents and in every State and

Territory, and provided an essential forum where the Australian youth arts sector could express itself and reflect the vibrant diversity of youth arts across Australia and the world.

“Over two million school children experience a performance each year. In 1986, 17 drama companies, seven puppet theatres and one dance company, all specialising in theatre for young audiences received an annual subsidy from arts or education authorities... At least 25 companies received erratic sponsorship.”

(Travers, 1987)

According to the ABS, there were 3,320,000 school-aged children in 1986. Therefore, if this *Lowdown* statement is correct, then 60% of Australian children saw a live performance in the '80s. This represents a significant market and plenty of year-round work for artists.

In-schools' touring was a financial backbone for many small organisations and was a significant part of annual programming. Off the base of in-schools' touring, artists were also able to experiment with new productions that engaged with contemporary issues and explored new artistic forms.

During the 1980s there was a global financial crisis and Australia wasn't immune, with interest rates rising to 18% and unemployment above 11%. Arts funding was coming under pressure and the arts needed to start being economically accountable, engaging with business processes such as strategic planning, and initiating ways to generate 'earned income'.

The 'business mindset' continued, and a growing number of commercial TIE operators offered lower-priced shows to schools with variation in artistic quality. Additionally, teachers began to have less exposure to the arts in their undergraduate training, so their capacity to fully leverage a performance presented at the school started to drop.

The interconnectedness of the arts and education starts to drift apart. The arts were seen by those in education as needing to directly link to the curriculum and/or deliver 'messages' to children - tick the right box. The resulting productions began to suffer artistically more and more from what Prof. John O'Toole described as 'moralisis'.

Optimistically, new companies were forming, and others attempted to adapt from TIE. There was a desire for deep understanding of children and young people as current sophisticated audiences of today.

The emerging shifts were:

- defunding of Theatre in Education by state-based education departments,
- artists themselves wanting to pursue more sophisticated work for children and young people,
- The Australia Council's view that "performances in schools should be guided and judged by the same push for imagination, risk and innovation as other subsidised theatre practice in Australia (Wood, 1990)".

1990s Shift from 'Arts for Arts sake' for children and young people

Across 1992-1993, funding by the Australia Council and state-based education departments for issues-based theatre TIE would be almost completely phased out. Annual funding for TIE and youth theatre companies was also abolished.

“... the council never really saw the grants for young people's theatre companies as annual grants, but rather support for professional artists within those companies... there has been an historical precedent set for the support of annual activity by youth companies, but we are not coping with the number of excellent applications we are now receiving... there is just not enough money to meet

demand so the change in policy is seen as a way of creating a more equitable spread of money available for youth arts”.

(Wood, 1990)

Despite demand for youth arts, and its increasing professionalisation and sophistication, the response to funding challenges was to weaken the very infrastructure that made success possible – artistic directors and administrators of youth arts companies were no longer able to be employed year-round.

In a recent conversation, Fraser Corfield, Artistic Director of ATYP (Australian Theatre for Young People), remarked: “Without annual funding it was difficult to have an ongoing identity, stable artistic leadership, the capacity to envision and forward plan. It also shut down opportunities for artistic directors to have career pathways in youth arts or for companies to develop their marketing and non-government funding strategies.”

At the close of the decade, the Australia Council decided on 28 companies that would be supported, and (as a result) would be able to survive, known as the Major Performing Arts Companies. They were protected from future funding cuts through arrangements with the states. There were no companies that focussed on children and young people in this cohort.

Major companies were obliged to provide access and education programs. Today, major cultural institutions say and report they are doing many things with young people, but claims and programs are not carefully verified, benchmarked, or measured by governments or others who fund them. Moving forward, there is the opportunity to investigate this further, noting it will require some delicate conversations and framing. It is also noted that it is extremely rare for an education or youth arts specialist to be part of senior executive teams in these major companies and institutions; they are often entry-level positions.

2000s: Rise of Arts Education, Creativity and Innovation

The highly influential *Champions of Change: The Impact of the Arts on Learning* was a meta-analysis of US arts education programs, and identified their impact on learning and socialisation. The Fiske (1999) study “demonstrated how involvement in the arts provides unparalleled opportunities for learning, enabling young people to reach for and attain higher levels of achievement”, and that “learning in and through the arts can help ‘level the playing field’ for youngsters from disadvantaged backgrounds”.

In 1999, Sir Ken Robinson led a national commission on creativity, education and the economy for the UK Government. *All Our Futures: Creativity, Culture and Education* (Robinson, 1999) was published to wide acclaim, including in Australia.

Ideas of utilising the arts for supporting innovation, and that creativity was a necessary ingredient for the future of work, became reasons for the arts to come into prominence in schools. *Education for the Creative Workforce: Rethinking Arts and Education* was generated by ARC Centre for Excellence with the Australia Council (2007).

In 2002, the Theatre Board of the Australia Council decided to undertake a national review of Theatre for Young People, and found it was funding performance for young audiences less than it had been a decade before, and was still relying for policy in the area on the notes from the December 1991 Performing Arts Board meeting (that was harshly critical of work for young audiences).

In 2007 there were 21 federally funded youth arts companies. In 2023 there are four funded youth arts companies and three funded theatre companies that specialise in work for children. Over the past two decades, the federal government through the Australia Council has significantly reduced

funding in the areas of the professional industry focussed on children and young people – from youth orchestras and youth dance companies, to youth theatre companies.

While the Australia Council had to make difficult funding decisions in the past decade, it must be acknowledged that decisions by the Australia Council are emblematic of the low prioritisation of children and young people when it comes to ensuring access to arts and culture in Australia.

State Parties recognise the right of the child to rest and leisure, to engage in play and recreational activities appropriate to the age of the child and to participate freely in cultural life **and the arts**.

Article 31.1, United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child

2.2 Case Study 1: Youth Orchestras

Youth orchestras have experienced similar outcomes to youth theatre organisations. The following are notes from engagement with long-time colleague, Ben Burgess who was generous sharing his professional experience and the impact of decisions with me in March 2023. Ben has been the Executive Director of WA Youth Orchestra (WAYO) since 2005.

WAYO was established in 1974, and has six ensembles made up of 400+ members. Performances reach 27,000 live patrons across 160 suburbs. This is achieved with a staff of three FTE. The annual turnover is \$850,000 and government funding makes up 14% of turnover.

- Combined government funding in 2005 was \$173,175
- DLGSC funding in 2022 was \$120,000²

From the early 2000s, all the State youth orchestras plus the Australian Youth Orchestra (AYO), via an informal youth orchestras network, did a joint application to the Australia Council to receive around \$20,000 – \$30,000 each.

In 2011, youth orchestras were told to no longer submit a joint application, but to apply individually, to have the opportunity to substantially increase funding. Then in 2012, only two states were partially successful, receiving a reduced amount, and the following year all state youth orchestras received nothing, and it has remained that way. WAYO hasn't received a grant from the Australia Council since 2011.

In the following decade, WAYO and the other state youth orchestras were informed by the Australia Council that its funding priorities are in the 'professional sector'. The other issue stated is that there isn't enough Australia Council funding to go around, so the youth sector, despite the strength of applications and our programs, is the first to go in the 'No pile'.

The professional orchestra sector receives over \$100 million annually from the Australia Council, while the state youth orchestras receive no funding. And yet, 99% of all Australian employed orchestral musicians have come from the state youth orchestra sector.

Young Australian musicians may spend more than 10+ years in the state youth orchestra organisations, but only one year or less with the Australian Youth Orchestra (AYO). In 2021 AYO was operationally funded to the tune of \$2,613,890 annually, by the Department of Infrastructure,

² In May 2023, it was announced that WAYO will receive \$200,000 p.a. under AOIP program

Transport, Regional Development and Communications (not the Australia Council). AYO's annual turnover in 2021 was \$4,045,000.

Ben argues that there is substantially greater social impact of the youth sector, compared to their professional counterparts. "Despite youth arts delivering enormous impacts in what are key funding areas, we are overlooked". WAYO delivers impact in several areas over and above the state's flagship orchestra, yet the funding disparity is historically ingrained.

Despite receiving 100 times less funding, WAYO's accomplishments in recent years have exceeded WASO's in terms of:

- number of works commissioned by female composers,
- number of female conductors engaged,
- number of collaborations with Indigenous artists,
- number of Australian works performed on the Concert Hall stage.

WAYO's funding position means it only employs three administrative staff to manage an enormous program. There is no possibility of employing accounting, bookkeeping or development staff, so it falls to the Executive Director to deliver these functions. He physically attends 30+ concerts annually. The tiny team manages large-scale projects that deliver substantial box office, and services corporate sponsorships (which combine for four times WAYO's government funding). If income targets are not met, other administrative cuts are made.

By comparison, large arts institutions and organisations employ specialist development teams and execute well-crafted strategic fundraising campaigns. Also, as major arts companies, they are generally preferred by foundations and corporate sponsors looking for high levels of brand recognition and 'premium' brand alignment.

An emerging issue is WAYO's corporate sponsorships are worth significantly more than government funding, placing absolute reliance on corporate sponsors such as Woodside Energy. Additionally, WAYO has had to increase its security costs both within its administration and at public events, due to protests against its vital corporate sponsors.

Every year WAYO raises seven times its government funding in earned income – this is unheard of for an entity that does not produce commercial-style concerts such as INXS or ABBA tributes with orchestra.

Ben notes "Like many, we just get on with it and find a way to do great things no matter what funding we get, no matter what the personal cost to us is."

Youth arts organisations, such as WAYO and WAYTCO are very small companies with turnovers ranging from \$400K to under \$3 million. They are vulnerable as they are subject to issues around long-term planning and capacity building, and are therefore potentially not future-proof. They simply cannot afford to employ sufficient staff, which also affects adequate leadership-succession planning.

In WA in particular, there is also the issue of extremely poor physical infrastructure for arts organisations that prioritise working with children and young people. For example, organisations that have scant funding and neglected homes are Barking Gecko Theatre, Circus WA, WAYO, WAYTCO, The Children's Literature Centre, Spare Parts Puppet Theatre and Propel Youth Arts.

There is opportunity in going forward, to demonstrate that with comparatively small investment, these agile, connected, effective and thrifty organisations would be able to scale their impact and increase authentic access for children and young people over time.

2.3 Case Study 2: Succession and Legacy

This month, the resignation of Artistic Director, James Berlyn, of WA Youth Theatre Company (WAYTCO) was announced. Just prior to his appointment in 2019 WAYTCO was about to be defunded by the state government, however with James' appointment this decision was not taken, and funding was not withdrawn.

His leadership achieved significant success over his tenure, winning several awards and acknowledged by the prestigious Sidney Myer Award with an individual award for Cultural Achievement. Along with WAYTCO's artistic renaissance, it has achieved modest increases in DLGSC operational funding to \$154,000 p.a. in 2022 and \$201,600 p.a. from 2024.

WAYTCO's produced some of the most original new theatre around Perth in recent times. This was achieved in no small part because WAYTCO's Artistic Director worked full time for six years while only receiving remuneration for 3.5 days per week. While James is clear he does not regret his choices or contribution, he reflects "I thought I'd stay two more years but actually, I need a rest... Last year took more than it gave".

The success of WAYO points to the long-term dedication of Ben Burgess, who is also not remunerated for over-time work.

These are just two examples of over-employment, and burnout within the youth arts sector is common. It is challenging to think that children's cultural engagement is heavily reliant on the good will, passion, and dedication of those who work and have remained in the sector.

Many in the arts sector itself view children and young people as a stepping-stone in their career of working in 'adult' companies, and for many artists and leaders it has been.

What is often misjudged is there are sophisticated, talented, and adept artists and leaders for whom working with children and young people is the primary focus of their career and artistic practice. They are not simply passing through to build their CV as independent artists or company leaders. Youth arts is their career aspiration and *destination*.

Erosion of youth arts has created a significant issue in current capacity and future leadership for this part of the sector. A recruitment consultant confidentially shared two experiences in recruiting suitably experienced artistic directors and skilled producers that had the required specialist expertise and experience to lead arts organisations that have children and young people at their core.

Alongside youth arts no longer being a viable career for artistic directors and producers, there is also a critical shortage of skilled artists and teaching artists, and provision for high quality teaching artist training programs. Delivery of meaningful programs either in a schools' or non-schools' setting as part of arts education or creative learning programs requires explicit skills of the facilitator. AGWA also confirmed the lack of well trained and experienced teaching artists was also an ongoing issue in the visual arts sector.

The lack of well-trained, suitable teaching artists is a consistent challenge in rolling out creative learning programs across outer metropolitan and regional areas. The work is highly casualised, and teaching artist are not often afforded the opportunity to refine their skills or receive ongoing professional development.

2.4 Case Study 3: Windmill Theatre and Barking Gecko Theatre

Based in Perth, Barking Gecko was founded in 1990. Based in Adelaide, Windmill Theatre was founded in 2002.

“One of the key parts of the South Australian Governments Arts+ 2000-2005 strategy, released in 2000, was the establishment of a performing arts company for children that would be resourced at a similar level to other Major Performing Arts companies” (Champion, 2002).

From the beginning, Windmill was funded to thrive, not survive. From its secure funding base, the company has been able to take artistic risks, develop its own ‘style’, engage in long-term development and employment of key artists. Notably, the funding allowed the company to produce its own work, as opposed to seeking co-productions with others and/or relying on project funding to deliver its core business – theatre shows. Windmill signalled a clear intent to create work for children and families, as opposed to work for schools, and focus on building a market with the quality of shows to be such that “the parent or the adult can take as much pleasure from the show as the children accompanying them” (Champion, 2002).

In 2016, the company further leveraged its creative capacity and released a feature film of one of its lauded theatre shows for teenagers. The success of this led the company, the following year, to establish Windmill Pictures under the auspices of the theatre company, to develop screen projects from their live productions.

With ongoing stable funding over 20 years, Windmill Theatre generated a global reputation as a leading producer of theatre for children, teenagers, and families. It has realised 63 productions, including 36 brand new Australian works and performed in 247 cities across 30 countries.

In 2022, the company was successful in entering the National Performing Arts Framework with secure federal funding, and continues to flourish on the stage and screen, commercially and artistically.

In contrast, Barking Gecko’s state operational funding has not kept up with inflation or rising production costs for over a decade; its Australia Council funding has been unpredictable. Therefore, significant human resources are channelled to generating project grant applications and fundraising initiatives to continue to exist. It could be argued these resources are at the expense of investing in artist development, leveraging productions and engagement programs.

The SA state government’s 20 year stable and reasonable investment in Windmill is a demonstration of what can be achieved. It has led to a financially secure company, free to creatively conquer the world artistically, and then diversify its offerings commercially across live performance, film and television.

Barking Gecko’s diversity of annual income sources may initially appear as a strength, however reliance on major sponsorship for annual operational survival is not a stable base to from which to operate. Sponsorships disappear with a stroke of a pen as corporate executives and programs come and go. Having corporate sponsorship underpin a company’s survival is a short-term, high-risk proposition.

Windmill was born out of a clear policy commitment to children and young people, and is a wonderful success story of the benefits of adequate funding over the long term.

2.5 Analysis of Australia Council Four-Year Funded Organisations, 2016-2020

- 95 organisations 2021-2024
- 147 organisations 2014-2016

The following information was drawn from the Australia Council [website](#), and shows the results of 2016 round compared with 2020 Round for operational funding of small-to-medium companies.

The table shows my assessment of the continued decline in operational funding for arts organisations which focus on children and young people, with a decrease of \$3,320,000 between 2016 and 2020.

In June 2021, Terrapin (TAS) and Windmill Theatre (SA) transitioned into the NPAPF, which has 'replaced' the Major Performing Arts Companies as a framework for long-term secure funding. This was an excellent outcome for these companies.

Table 2: Comparison of Australia Council's 2016 and 2020 Multi-year youth arts organisational funding recipients

	2016 Round	% Total (123)	2020 Round	% Total	Post NPAPF: June 2021	
Total Companies	123		95			
Total Investment	\$116,516,663		\$120,061,980			
Number of children and YA companies funded	12	10%	8	8%	6	6%
<i>Via Community Arts & Cultural Development</i>	2		3		3	
<i>Via Theatre</i>	9		5		3	
<i>Via other artform boards (eg dance, literature)</i>	1		0		0	0
% investment in children and YA	\$ 13,043,936	11%	\$ 9,723,844	8%	\$ 6,543,844	6%
% children under 12 (3 companies)	\$ 4,620,129	4%	\$ 4,567,572	4%	\$ 1,387,572	1%
% youth	\$ 8,423,808	7%	\$ 5,156,272	4%	\$ 5,156,272	
% all companies offering education programs	27	22%	12	13%		
% all companies offering some kind of youth engagement, or children's offering,	25	20%	31	33%		

Source: <https://australiacouncil.gov.au/investment-and-development/awarded-grants/>

There is an opportunity to further investigate Individuals and Organisations Project Funding to see the extent to which children and/or young people-focused applications were successful in receiving project grants. Anecdotally, the youth arts sector believes they have not had high rates of success. Even if successful, it is important to note that project funding doesn't extend to operational costs of running a small organisation.

Another key source of support for major works for children and families is through the Confederation of Australian International Arts Festivals (CAIAF). Funding is available as Seed (\$10K), Creative Development (\$40K) and Pre-Production (up to 50% of total expenditure). The amounts are not published, however there have been several successful, large-scale productions for children and families commissioned and presented as part of Australia's major festivals via this collective and collaborative investment mechanism.

2.6 List of Youth Arts Organisations whose Australia Council Funding was withdrawn (since 2014)

As previously discussed, all state-based Youth Arts Orchestras were defunded by 2012. Anecdotally, it was observed youth dance companies were defunded prior to the youth orchestras.

Defunded 2014-2016

Arena Theatre (Vic)
Backbone Youth Arts (Qld)
Canberra Youth Theatre (ACT)
Cikidz (SA)
Lowdown (national)
Monkey Baa Theatre (NSW)
Outback Theatre for Young People (NSW)
PACT (NSW)
Riverland Youth Theatre (SA)
Tantrum Youth Theatre (NSW)
Urban Myth Theatre of Youth (SA)
Young People and the Arts Australia (National)
Southern Edge Youth Theatre (WA)

Defunded 2017-2020

Slingsby (SA)*
Jigsaw Theatre Company (ACT)
Platform Youth Arts (Vic)

Defunded in 2020-2023

Australian Theatre for Young People (National)
Barking Gecko Theatre (WA)*
Beyond Empathy (NSW)
St Martins Youth Arts Centre (Vic)
Shop Front Arts Co-Op (NSW)
Tracks (NT)
Polyglot Theatre (Vic)
La Mama Theatre (Vic) (emerging artists)
The Blue Room Theatre (WA) (emerging artists)

*Slingsby was 'saved' by the state government of South Australia which made up the shortfall after losing its federal funding. Similarly, DLGSCI supported Barking Gecko after its Australia Council defunding through a 'top up lifeline' for 2020- 2023.

It is to be noted that *Revive* funding is being returned to the Australia Council, however as this policy does not specifically highlight children and young people (other than in Arts Education terms) it remains to be seen which companies are successful in receiving operational funding, 2025-2028. There is some hope and expectation youth arts and children's theatre companies may come back into the Australia Council fold at appropriate levels.

2.7 Case Study: Disadvantage, Imagination & Hope

A recent study in New York (Schmidt Chapman, Halpern, 2019), conducted over 5 years, compared a group of primary-aged children who regularly attended the theatre (multiple art forms presented), with a control group from the same school who saw no productions at all. It is worth noting that these children were not strangers to hardship - they came from disadvantaged backgrounds, with housing instability and food insecurity a part of their experience of childhood.

The study measured four criteria:

- *Aesthetic Growth*: an appreciation for things the children had never seen or felt before;
- *Motivation to Action*: the impulse to want to go and do new things;
- *Social Bridging*: appreciation of someone's life who was different from their own;
- *Personal Relevance*: meaning the capacity for self-reflection.

The data demonstrated a distinct spike across all four measurements for the children who attended the theatre. But there was another, unexpected outcome which took even the researchers by surprise.

Hope.

The children who *regularly attended* the theatre had *more hope* about their future than those who did not. When asked questions like whether they thought they would graduate from high school, get a job, or live a happy life, they were far more optimistic about what their future held.

The research doesn't go into exactly why this might be, but I have a theory. Imagination is the precursor to hope. The two go hand in hand. And if there is one thing that theatre is exceptionally good at, it is imagination.

Writer and activist Rebecca Solnit says in her book, *Hope in the Dark*, "Hope is not like a lottery ticket you can sit on the sofa and clutch, feeling lucky. Hope is an axe you break down doors with during an emergency... Hope calls for *action*, but action is *impossible* without hope."

Luke Kerridge, Artistic Director of Barking Gecko Theatre, states "Quality children's theatre has an *unseen* legacy – arming young children with hope, with little metaphorical axes, ready to bust down any door that blocks them from reaching their full potential, giving them the essential resource they need to take action in the world, even when things look bleak."

4.0 Proposed Problem Statements

Nobody thinks the arts for children are a bad thing. The problem is getting the people who make decisions to change their policies and their practices to include the arts.

Ken Robinson

Provision for high quality youth arts for children and young people seems to have been forgotten along the way, considered another's responsibility, rendered invisible. There are emerging themes and opportunities around Policy and Erosion, Visibility, Advocacy and Creative Leadership.

Statement 1:

Over time, overall funding, recognition and focus on youth arts has quietly diminished, causing an erosion of human capacity and infrastructure across the youth arts sector. This negatively impacts children and young people's access to quality arts opportunities now and into the future.

Statement 2:

An absence of a cogent youth arts policy across all levels of government has impacted decision making, data collection, accountability, critical debate, and measurement of investment and participation in quality arts experiences for young people, despite the growing evidence of positive impact.

Statement 3:

The breadth and complexity of the youth arts landscape, differing philosophical viewpoints around what youth arts encompasses, and its historical links to education, has resulted in fragmentation and tiny organisations with limited organising power to influence policy, or create platforms from which to advocate.

Statement 4:

Alongside the de-valuing of youth arts in the arts sector, has been the de-valuing of arts in the education sector. There is a significant and widening gap in capacity for youth arts practitioners to lead companies and a lack of trained teaching artists to deliver associated programs either alongside or out of school settings (even if funded through philanthropy or government programs) and school teachers are lacking skills and confidence to teach arts to children and young people.

Statement 5:

There is astute, experienced, and excellent creative leadership within youth arts, yet opportunities and invitations for these leaders to participate in broader arts debate on policy and structures that impact the arts broadly are rare. In institutions or large companies, it is also extremely rare for arts education practitioners to be in executive leadership positions, they are more likely to be entry-level positions.

Statement 6:

Children and those that dedicate their lives and artistry to explore, create, listen and collaborate with them have become largely invisible in Australia's cultural landscape. There is an urgent need to shine a light on this challenge, activate champions and engage in vigorous advocacy.

5.0 Global Case Study, Norway: The Cultural Rucksack

(2015, Christophersen, Breivik, Homme and Rykkja)

The Cultural Rucksack is an arts and culture program for all primary and secondary students (6-19 years old) across Norway, ensuring students have an opportunity to experience professional artistic and cultural productions during school hours several times a year.

The Cultural Rucksack does not substitute for arts subjects taught in schools, but rather is a supplement for them. Productions must be high quality and represent a wide range of artforms including drama, visual arts, music, film, literature and cultural heritage. It is a collaboration between the education and cultural sectors; with the education sector responsible for preparation and follow-up activities and the cultural sector responsible for the artistic content.

Administration is carried out by all three levels of government: national, regional and local. The national government defines the program objectives and is responsible for funding. The regional and local governments plan and implement the program, with regional governments developing the program and administering the resources. They also are responsible for coordinating productions working with the local governments to provide a cohesive program for all schools. There can also be independence, with some local governments organizing their own programs. Each school has a cultural coordinator responsible for the program, and students act as event organisers.

Teachers are very enthusiastic about the program as it transforms the normal school day into something out of the ordinary, and events can be integrated into the school's curriculum to enhance learning objectives. The direct collaboration with the artists also ascribed a two-fold benefit to the artist and the teacher: with teachers gaining insight into the highly specialized fields of expertise, and learning new techniques and methods with students, and the artists learning from the broad competencies of the teachers.

Approximately 840,000 students are involved in the program, with nearly 100% coverage in primary and lower schools. It is the largest employment opportunity for freelance artists and cultural workers in Norway. Each school has on average 11 artistic engagements annually. It ensures that children and young people are given equal access to professional, high-quality art, regardless of where they live, and it understands the importance of the arts in the education and formation of children and young people.

Fun Fact

Denmark, with a population of 5.8 million people has 200 professional theatre companies for children. That's a culture that really values its young people!

Australia is a country of 4.9 million children and young people. Let's be ambitious about what re-envisioning is possible.

Appendix 1: Evidence Base: Benefits of Arts Participation

Assessing the quality of research is complex and includes determining the use of qualitative/quantitative research methods, sample size, presence/absence of controls, who undertook it, who funded it, where it was published, and whether it has been academically peer-reviewed.

Not all arts experiences are created equal, and it's important that young people are exposed to arts opportunities that are thoughtfully designed, adequately resourced and ultimately high-quality.

Benefits identified Through Research (Pattern Makers [Research Guide](#) released 2022)

1. Youth arts provides a platform for young people to explore important ideas – and boosts civic engagement.
2. Arts participation provides socio-emotional benefits for young people that can act as protective factors against mental illness.
3. Arts can be used therapeutically or 'on prescription' to fight depression, anxiety, and PTSD in young people.
4. Arts participation is associated with better educational outcomes for students, including stronger academic performance.
5. Arts-rich education improves students' motivation, engagement, attendance, and school enjoyment.

Summary of academic research around the correlation between arts participation and children's wellbeing

(references below)

An established body of research indicates that involvement in the arts plays a significant role in supporting wellbeing and resilience among children and young people.

Wellbeing is a multi-faceted construct and refers to intrapersonal outcomes, such as creativity, empathy, happiness, and optimism, as well as interpersonal outcomes such as social connectedness and community engagement (Cummins, Eckersley, Pallant, van Vugt, & Misajon, 2003; Park, Tsukayama, Goodwin, Patrick, & Duckworth, 2017; Toner, Haslam, Robinson, & Williams, 2012).

Resilience is a component of mental wellbeing that enables young people to positively adapt and recover from adverse life events (DiClemente, Santelli & Crosby, 2009). Community-based programs that engage children and young people and build their wellbeing and resilience are particularly valuable as a means of preventing later mental health difficulties (Macpherson, Hart & Heaver, 2015). This is especially important given that adolescence and early adulthood is a peak age of onset for mental ill-health (Kessler et al., 2005).

What does the evidence tell us?

Zarobe and Bungay (2017) conducted a review of studies investigating the impact of arts activities on mental wellbeing and resilience among children and young people (11-18 years). Six of the studies they reviewed found that participating in performing arts and drama promoted positive outcomes

for children and young people from a diverse range of backgrounds. Positive outcomes documented in the studies included:

- having a purpose, feeling valued, and developing a sense of confidence, achievement, and responsibility (Ennis & Tonkins, 2015; Kemp, 2006; Salmon, Orme, Kimberlee, Jones, & Murphy, 2005; Wright, John, Alaggia, & Sheel, 2006);
- providing opportunities to develop creativity and self-expression (Kemp, 2006; Wright et al., 2006);
- improving emotional awareness and skills in self-regulation; increasing experience of positive emotions and life satisfaction (Ennis & Tonkins, 2015; Martin et al., 2013);
- enhancing social skills, prosociality, friendships, and capacity for team work and conflict resolution (Salmon et al., 2005; Wright et al., 2006);
- developing a sense of identity, inclusion and belonging (Ennis & Tonkins, 2015);
- increasing problem solving skills and autonomy (Grunstein & Nutbeam, 2007);
- promoting academic engagement (Martin et al., 2013).

Preliminary evidence also supports the value of performing arts and theatrical play with “at-risk” children (Folostina et al., 2015; Goldstein & Lerner, 2018; Wright et al., 2006). For example, Folostina et al. (2015) found that children with challenging behaviour and low school engagement who participated in play and drama sessions became more self-confident and less likely to display disruptive behaviours. In a trial of dramatic play games with young children of low socio-economic status, Goldstein and Lerner (2018) found that engagement in dramatic play uniquely improved children’s emotional control.

There is also evidence to support the use of theatre programs to promote wellbeing and socio-emotional functioning among children with neurodevelopmental concerns such as autism spectrum disorder (ASD). In a series of studies, children with ASD who participated in the Social Emotional Neuroscience Endocrinology (SENSE) theatre intervention demonstrated reductions in social anxiety, as well as improved social skills, including social awareness, theory of mind, and memory for faces (Corbett, Blain, Ioannou, & Balsler, 2017; Corbett et al., 2011; Corbett et al., 2016; Corbett, Qualls, Valencia, Fecteau, & Swain, 2014).

Given that at-risk children and youth are vulnerable to compounding mental health difficulties and barriers to participation in education, employment, and community activities across their lifespan, these studies provide important evidence of the potential for theatre-based interventions to prevent adverse trajectories in at-risk youth.

Theatre-based interventions can also be used to target specific health and wellbeing outcomes among children and young people. For example, there is evidence to support the effectiveness of community-based theatre programs for suicide prevention (Keller, Austin & McNeill, 2017; Keller & Wilkinson, 2017), supporting self-management of chronic conditions (Kupper, Peters, Stuijzand, den Besten, & van Kesteren, 2018), and improving knowledge and attitudes about healthy eating (Bush et al., 2018; Keller et al., 2017) and sexual health (Lightfoot, Taboada, Taggart, Tran, & Burtaine, 2015; Taggart et al., 2016).

How does participation in performing arts promote positive outcomes for children and young people?

It has been proposed that participation in performing arts leads to robust improvements in social skills, wellbeing, and mental health by altering neural mechanisms that underlie social functioning (Corbett et al., 2016). Involvement in performing arts allows children to develop skills such as role-playing and improvisation in a safe environment where they can connect with peers and feel a sense of empowerment and achievement (Bungay & Vella Burrows, 2013). Through interacting

with others, children and young people develop self-awareness, and social cognitive capacities such as empathy and reciprocal responding (Corbett et al., 2016).

In turn, these capacities promote social competence and connections with others, as well as giving young people the opportunity to learn about themselves, be exposed to positive role models and develop a positive self-identity (Zarobe & Bungay, 2017). Additionally, engagement, learning and challenges that emerge through performing arts participation can promote openness to new experience, support young people to experience a sense of meaning, and encourage problem solving, initiative, and self-efficacy (Grunstein & Nutbeam, 2007; Schmidt, Shernoff & Csikszentmihalyi, 2014). Together, these experiences can promote core components of resilience and wellbeing across the life course.

From individual wellbeing to community wellbeing

In addition to optimizing positive outcomes for children and youth, performing arts programs can have broader benefits for communities by building economic, cultural, and social capital (Guetzkow, 2002; Kay, 2000).

One of the advantages of community-based arts programs is that they are engaging for vulnerable and hard-to-reach groups, thereby making them an important strategy for promoting health equity (Wright et al., 2006). International research with low-socioeconomic youth suggests that strategies such as active recruitment to theatre programs, increasing parental involvement and removing barriers to participation (e.g., making programs free, frequent communication with parents, and providing transportation options) can optimize engagement of vulnerable youth (Wright et al., 2006).

The Arts and Mental Health

Internationally, research is beginning to explore links between engaging in the arts, and improved mental health.

The Art of Being Mentally Healthy – the first study to quantify the arts-mental health relationship and provides evidence of an association between mental wellbeing and two hours per week of arts engagement in the general population.

Recovering Creativity – a UWS study investigating the role of art in mental health recovery. The project, which is a partnership with RichmondPRA, is exploring how art making within a supportive context influences the recovery, identity and social inclusion of people living with a major mental health issue.

Researchers at the University of Otago have identified a link between everyday creative activity and an “upward spiral” of increased wellbeing and creativity in young adults.

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Young People and the Arts Landscape

Helen Hristofski, June 2023

