



ART AND ABOUT : COMMUNITY ARTS Research Document 8

Research Document 8: *Art and About* profiles the Catholic Education Office Melbourne (CEOM) Community Arts initiative located within the work of the Wellbeing & Community Partnerships Unit. It is part of an ongoing series of documents which have covered themes such as Social and Emotional Learning, Transition and Engagement, Restorative Practices, Social Inclusion, School Community and Clusters.

This document has been designed to assist Student Wellbeing Leaders, teachers and the broader education community to come to deeper understandings of the range of evidence connecting participation in artistic pursuits with improved mental health and wellbeing.

This is coupled with examples of school-based projects and an evidence base linking the role of the arts to increased social cohesion and social capital. All this contributes to a strong case for the role of community arts initiatives in schools. Traditional notions of parent participation and involvement are challenged by more contemporary research and evidence related to the genuine and authentic engagement of families and communities. The need for process versus the desire for product is also discussed in this context. These are all concepts within which the framework of a community arts initiative continue to be debated and discussed.

Art and About: A Community Arts approach to building school community, enhancing wellbeing and improving learning

In developing a broad community-based school arts project, success, not only in the art produced but also in the way it has touched the community, will be dependent upon the opportunities recognised and the exchanges that occur between the school and the community (White 2009, p.59).

In 2008 the Catholic Education Office Melbourne (CEOM) established a Community Arts initiative within the Wellbeing & Community Partnerships Unit. The initiative is designed to create opportunities for schools to use the arts to engage and connect students and their families with learning, and through this to improve mental health and wellbeing. By encouraging the participation of the school and the broader community in arts-based learning, social cohesion and social capital are enhanced and the positive impact on student learning outcomes is now well documented.

This research document builds on a significant body of research in education, the arts and community capacity building, which links the participation of the community in arts-based initiatives and activities, with improved health and wellbeing. The work of the Victorian Health Promotion Foundation (VicHealth) in exploring the links between the arts and mental health and wellbeing has been seminal in contributing to understandings in this field.

The Arts for Health edition of the *VicHealth Letter* (VicHealth 2004) cites key research indicating that student participation in the arts often results in increased connectedness and engagement with school. In this context, improved attendance and school retention rates may contribute significantly to positive learning outcomes and improved academic achievement. Further data reveals strong links between decreased levels of alcohol and drug use resulting from such participation and corresponding increases in young people's levels of self-esteem. Statistics on reduced juvenile offending through connection to arts-related activities is also evidenced (VicHealth 2004, p.5). Through the CEOM Community Arts initiative schools design community arts and learning initiatives that encourage social inclusion, while valuing diversity and celebrating the participation of all members of the school and broader community, in particular those who may be marginalised and disadvantaged. While acknowledging the key role an end product or event may play in school community arts initiatives, the emphasis of this initiative is on the processes employed to engage the school, parents and the broader community.

This document explores and highlights key research in the area, draws learnings from school-based initiatives and identifies future directions for the work in 2013 and beyond. A planning tool has been provided for schools to assess if, when and how they might participate in a community arts initiative and clearly outlines for them what a community arts approach looks like.

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Community Arts : Exploring the evidence

There are many approaches that schools can use to engage parents with the school and learning, and using the arts is one which has the potential for making meaningful connections between the home and the school. The links between participating in the arts, student wellbeing and family engagement have been recognised for some time. The Victorian Health Promotion Authority (VicHealth) has recognised the links between the arts and community engagement in their publications over a number of years. Community arts projects are fundamentally grounded in working with community – whether that be the broad community or a specific target group. Community arts projects aim to give voice to community participants and ensure that community talents, views and issues are respectfully and authentically represented. The ‘community’ therefore becomes a partner to the project (VicHealth 2006, p. 6). Within this approach, the artist is working in collaboration with the community and the arts becomes the mechanism for greater social participation.

The benefit of participating in the arts, transforming all communities regardless of their socioeconomic status, cannot be underestimated. As Clift (2012) writes ‘...the arts can and do have a role to play in enhancing wellbeing and quality of life, even in the most disadvantaged of communities’ (p.121). Matarasso (1997) expands on this and suggests that the arts have a unique ability to allow participants to draw on unique experiences through engagement with the arts to connect with other people. The greatest social impacts of participation in the arts – and the ones which other programs cannot achieve – arise from their ability to help people think critically about and question their experiences and those of others, not in a discussion group but with all the excitement, danger, magic, colour, symbolism, feeling, metaphor and creativity that the arts offer. It is in the act of creativity that empowerment lies, and through sharing creativity that understanding and social inclusiveness are promoted (Matarasso 1997, p.90).

Ewing (2010) writes that an increase in organisational capacity is also a benefit of community participation in the arts (p.15) and can provide a different perspective on connections that may not have been previously recognised, ‘...communities and the way in which educational institutions and government agencies operate can be transformed through community engagement in arts experiences’ (p. 47). Ewing also makes the point that

regardless of the scope of the project, the effect in rejuvenating communities can outweigh the input, and that ‘while many of these programs and projects are small scale, in many cases the social impact has been profound’ (p.48).

In a recent report for Arts Victoria, Imms et al write of the sense of pride that can exist for students when their immediate and extended families participate with them in the artistic experience. School leaders indicated that they had observed a greater awareness of the role of community in the school environment ‘...that sense of pride was there. They’d bring a parent or grandparent in and you’d see them proudly showing them the (artworks) (Imms, W et al 2011 p. 20). Imms et al also suggest that a community arts approach can increase

parent participation, raise the profile of individual students and allow teachers to make meaningful links between the project and other aspects of the curriculum (p. 20).

Partnerships between students, parents, carers and families, the broader community, business, schools and other education and training providers bring mutual benefits and maximise student engagement and achievement. Partnerships engender support

for the development and wellbeing of young people and their families and can provide opportunities for young Australians to connect with their communities, participate in civic life and develop a sense of responsible citizenship (MCEETYA 2008, p. 10). The *Melbourne Declaration on the Education Goals of Young Australians* recognises the value of the relationship between students, schools and parents in maximising achievement. Beyond merely involving parents and families in a one-way dialogue with schools, engaging families with the life of the school has multiple benefits. West-Burnham (2007) further expands on this notion of partnership and parent engagement with the need for schools to ‘...build learning communities that integrate and distribute educational provision among all stakeholders, because everyone has a stake in creating and implementing educational experiences that meet the interests and needs first of children and young people and then for all citizens (p.73). Rowling (2009) asserts that ‘while caring relationships and classroom teaching contribute to the development of resilience so does the wider school environment and the climate of the school’ (p. 360), and White (2009) writes more explicitly of the intersection between the arts, health and education sectors to develop community health (p.54).

‘Our evidence suggests that arts projects and initiatives make a unique contribution to building social capital and enhancing wellbeing and self esteem...’

(HEA 1999, p.4)

Community Arts : Making strategic connections

The Melbourne Declaration on the Educational Goals of Young Australians (2008) acknowledges the shifting contours of the Australian education landscape and the new demands on Australian schools. Goal 2 states ‘All young Australians become successful learners, confident and creative individuals, active and informed citizens’.

Similarly the CEOM *Learning Centred Schools - A Sacred Landscape : A Learning and Teaching Strategy for the Archdiocese of Melbourne* (2009) describes a contemporary learning and teaching environment that acknowledges the distinctive nature of Catholic schools that enable students to enact their religious and cultural identities. ‘Within secular educational and social contexts the Catholic school seeks to bring into harmony faith, culture and life’ (p.2). The CEOM seeks to support learning centred schools in their exploration of innovations and contemporary challenges that promote curriculum design that is rigorous and relevant for the twenty-first century.

The Mission to provide an outstanding Catholic education that integrates faith, life and culture is expressed through the *2011–2015 Directions for Catholic Education in the Archdiocese of Melbourne* (CEOM 2011a) and *Strategy Plan for the Catholic Education Office Melbourne 2011–2015* (CEOM 2011b). These documents cite three key action areas relevant to the development and implementation of the CEOM Community Arts initiative.

Action Area	Strategic Objectives
Learning and Teaching	Enables every young person to be a successful, engaged and purposeful learner
Leadership	Promote a culture of creativity and innovative practice
Partnerships	Increase the active engagement of parents in their child’s learning
	Develop Catholic schools as core community centres

In this context the *CEOM Student Wellbeing Strategy 2011–2015* (the Strategy) builds on these objectives and provides the context for the Community Arts initiative through the strategic themes of Lead, Learn, Partner. A foundation principle of the the Strategy is that schools are key sites for the promotion

of mental health and wellbeing. Therefore participation in the Community Arts initiative promotes a culture of wellbeing through fostering student engagement and connectedness with family and the broader community. It also empowers schools to maximise student outcomes, and promotes teaching and learning that provides rich and meaningful educational experiences.

Families are valued as integral partners in children and young people’s learning and are encouraged to become equal and active partners in the range of community arts projects undertaken by Catholic schools across the Archdiocese of Melbourne.

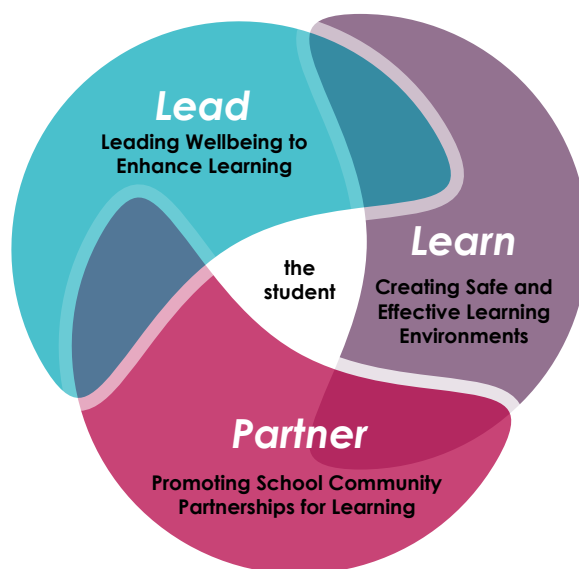


Figure 1. CEOM strategic themes of Student Wellbeing

Community Arts : planning tool

Successful projects involve two key elements:

- thorough and realistic planning; and
- good communication between everyone involved.

This planning tool is designed to assist schools reflect on the process of the project through identifying key steps along the way. Each of the six points contain some examples of specific approaches and activities that schools can undertake in their preparation for a community arts project.

1. A Common Vision: where principal and staff commit to shared goals for the Community Arts initiative

	Do the principal and staff have a shared understanding of the CEOM's Community Arts initiative and the objectives, goals and aims?
	Has the School Community Sphere of the CEOM School Improvement Framework been used to inform the preliminary work of the project?
	Has the project outline and/or the project theme/idea been communicated to the school community?
	Has a school-based Community Arts Project Coordinator been appointed and has a core team to support this role been identified?

2. The project goals, aims and objectives

	Does the project align with the SIF Annual Action Plan goals?
	Is the project using the arts to engage with the school community?
	Does the project promote cultural inclusivity and celebrate cultural diversity?
	Has the principal and Community Arts Project Coordinator shared information about the initiative with key school and community groups?
	Are parents and school community members included in the planning and implementation of the project?
	Has the school investigated potential partnership opportunities with agencies, community organisations and other stakeholders?
	Is the focus of the project addressing an identified school need?
	Are students playing an active role in the design and implementation of the project?
	Does the project promote and enable creative and innovative pedagogy and learning environments?

3. School / community needs assessment

	Has the school's Insight SRC data informed the direction of the project?
	Has school data profiles of families and data from parent/ family and community functions informed the project development?
	Have focus groups been used as a mechanism for eliciting further information from parents and families?
	Has the Community Arts Project Coordinator conducted a local community field trip and/or community research circle to ascertain what local community organisations may be possible partners to the project?
	Have staff / parents / families been surveyed for information regarding their potential contributions to the project through relevant skills, qualifications, occupations and / or hobbies?

4. Timelines and organisation

	Has the Community Arts Project Coordinator and relevant staff developed a project outline and approach for consultation with the school and parent community?
	Has a timeline been set for progressing through the key steps involved in the project?
	Have potential professional learning opportunities been identified for staff?
	Has the project been linked in to the appropriate teaching and learning opportunities?
	Has a plan/event been developed for celebrations of the project?
	Has evaluation and reflection been built in to the timeline for the project?

5. Publicity and documentation

	Has a plan been developed to ensure publicity for the project?
	Has a plan been developed for documenting the project along the way?

6. Sustainability

	Have plans been developed to promote and enable students, teachers and the community to continue to build on the project and take the project in new and different directions?
	Have plans been developed for continuing to build on partnerships that have been developed during the project and for the continued nurturing of these relationships through new initiatives?

A creative and collaborative approach

This diagram in Figure 2 provides a visual representation of key components that may contribute to a community arts initiative. This list is not exhaustive but is illustrative of the multiple entry points for engagement with families through the arts.

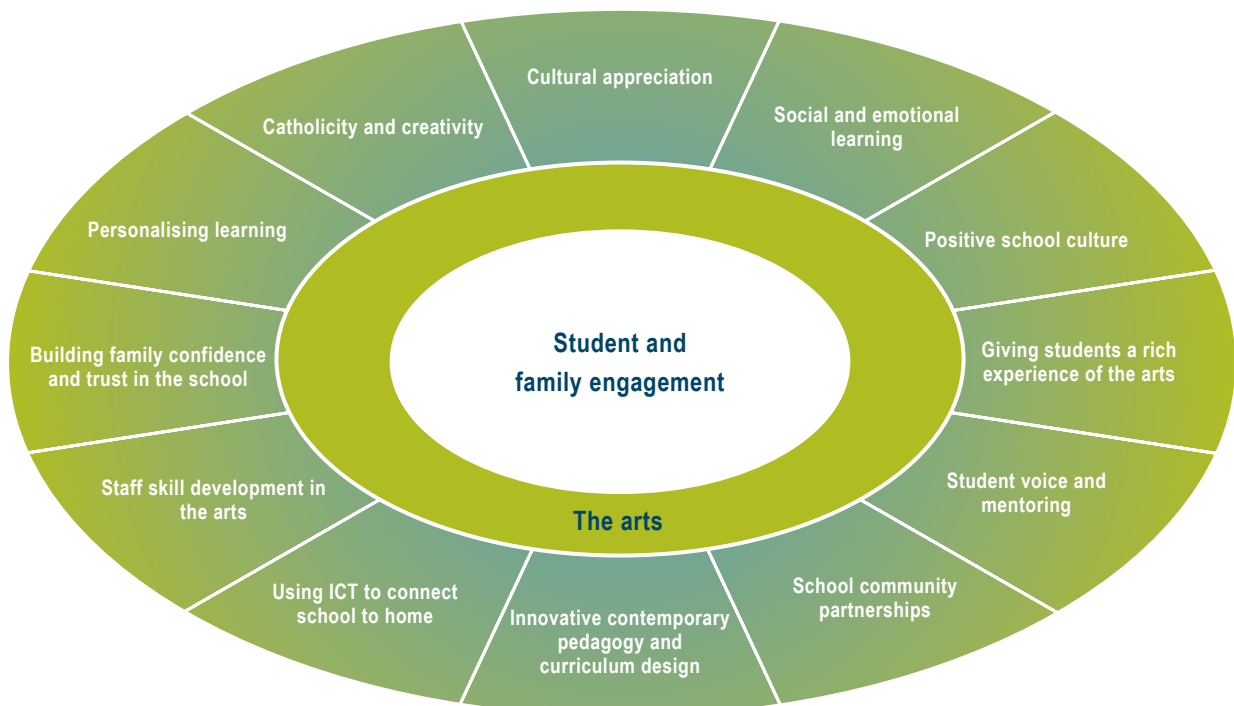


Figure 2. Key components of a community arts project

What does a Community Arts approach look like?

A successful community arts project that germinates from within a school community is driven through the arts with family engagement as the key platform. Supported by the leadership team and whole school staff, the project has been carefully and strategically designed to achieve optimum outcomes for the school community.

As each school community is different, one size does not fit all. However, asking fundamental questions can assist in guiding the school's thinking, project goals and directions. The planning tool provided on pages 4–5 is specifically designed for this purpose.

Process not product

The planning for a Community Arts project may include at its completion or end point, an artwork or celebration, performance or exhibition. It may coincide with a special school event such as Harmony Day, Christmas, the opening of a new building or school date of significance. The artwork may be a visual reminder of the community learning and journey of the art-making process. It may also serve as an expression of what the school and community stands for within its Catholic identity.



However, it is important not to rush the project, leaping towards the end point. This is sometimes seen in garden projects where project coordinators have reported the community pressure to get the garden done. The community needs to be engaged with the creative elements of the project, and seeing the empty plot of land ask 'how' the work will start rather than 'why' the work hasn't started. It is critical to the outcomes of the project that schools do not succumb to pressure to focus on the product. Indulge in the process, and make it known to the community that this is the work. Schools should resist the offer of well-meaning parents to complete the garden and artwork within it, over a couple of working

bees. Although an enjoyable activity, this wouldn't make the most of an opportunity to be creative, forge new community connections and learning opportunities for families with their children.



Selecting the art form

Different art forms, in essence, generate varying degrees of interaction and opportunities for collaboration and engagement. This can be measured by the steps and components involved in its creation and hence opportunities for engagement within them. If the school is aiming for optimum and varied involvement, it might consider a performing arts production. If the artwork is aimed at beautifying an area of the school and exists as a permanent piece to be enjoyed and appreciated by the school community in representing a school community story, perhaps a visual art, such as mosaic, sculpture, installation or story quilt may be appropriate. These visual art forms however, require a little more thought in fleshing out the engagement, both in its composition and the connection to learning. Here, the process will focus on discovering with the students, families and community, what learning will be represented and expressed in the artwork more so than the actual construction of it, which has limited steps for involvement.

Using a professional artist

A professional artist brings a new and exciting dimension to a community arts project. Students are excited by working with a new person who contributes fresh ideas and skills to the learning process. They step up to such an opportunity, feeling that in bringing in an expert, it must be an important project. Schools using a professional artist have made this a budgeting priority or have sought funding through, for example, Arts Victoria or their local city council.

To ensure the success of using a professional artist in a community arts project, the goals and school expectations should be clearly communicated to the artist. For some artists, working with families in the process of art making may

be a new and challenging experience. It is important to remember that the addition of a professional artist to the project can be a wonderful experience but is not essential to the success of a project.

The same, different or greater outcomes and success can often be achieved by drawing upon the talents of the school community. A school-driven project without the contribution of a professional artist is grounded in the community and saves the school money.

What does family and community engagement look like in an arts project?

There is no set formula for how to engage families in community arts projects. The approach taken may be determined by the nature of the school community and what the school is doing already to engage families and the community in the learning and the life of the school. For some schools the community arts project is a first step, for others an opportunity to take community engagement to new heights.

Factors that determine the type and level of family and community engagement:

- the support of the leadership team, particularly the principal
- clear goals for the project linked to learning, teaching and student wellbeing
- the enthusiasm, openness and creativity of staff, (teaching and ancillary) and their willingness to embrace the contributions of parents and families.

In acknowledging that families have an integral role to play in their child's learning, wellbeing and connectedness to school, the aim is to have them play a meaningful role in partnership with the school.

The aim is for the arts to nurture and enable the community voice and as the vehicle for expressing the uniqueness of the school community, its cultures, values and traditions. Asking the question: how can we engage families in the process of the art making? How can we provide opportunities for families to engage with their child in learning? How might community partnerships enhance the learning? These questions may encourage schools to move from traditional notions of participation and involvement to more contemporary notions of engagement, authentic contribution and connectedness.

Community support

It is crucial in undertaking a community arts project that the community is kept informed about the developments and progress of the project as it evolves. This enables staff, student and community ownership in the hope that opportunities for involvement, input and support are

communicated along the way. Many schools place project updates in newsletters, on their website and/or on a permanent noticeboard that sits in a prominent place for the community to read, such as the office foyer or a communal gathering place.



The organic nature of the arts

An arts project that has as its focus the art making, student voice and family collaboration, emphasises the process rather than the product. It develops and evolves from the ideas and choices made by those involved. This authentic community art making can result in unexpected outcomes that may inform future planning. One such unexpected outcome resulted from a project using photography. Older students mentored younger students, sharing photographic skills and making artistic choices. This was refined the following year and utilised in student leadership and within curriculum areas. Having a balance between careful project planning and structure, and room for flexibility to allow the project to evolve is the secret to reflecting the community voice.

Beyond the project

As in any project the school undertakes, it is advised that a midpoint and end of project evaluations take place. The evaluation/reflection allows the school to revisit the goals of the project as a way of assessing if they are on track, particularly around family engagement outcomes and in addressing Annual Action Plan goals. When schools do this they sometimes realise that in the haste for moving the project along, parent engagement and learning opportunities have been put to the side. This is most likely to happen when schools have planned for a project outcome deadline. An evaluation and reflection of the processes of the project can expose learnings, family engagement strategies, curriculum plans or simply the talents in the community that can be used in future projects and school improvement.



Creative Connections (DVD)

Community Arts is an exciting way to engage families and the school community in the life of the school. ***Creative Connections : Building learning communities through the arts*** tells the story of how three schools used the arts for engagement and social inclusion within contemporary learning environments. The Community Arts initiative is supported by the CEOM Wellbeing & Community Partnerships Unit as a strategy for building collaborative engagement with families, teachers, students and the community.

Creative Connections is available to view online at the CEOM website <www.ceomelb.catholic.edu.au> and the Student Wellbeing Action Partnership (SWAP) website <www.education.unimelb.edu.au/swap>.

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