

# City Beats: A creative community partnership initiative at ArtPlay

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## Abstract

The City of Melbourne's ArtPlay is open to children and young people aged 3–13 years, and provides a wide range of artist-led programs that serve a broad community within and outside the municipality. Its sister facility, Signal, caters for young people 13–22 years. An Australia Council of the Arts funded Creative Community Partnership Initiative, the *ACCESS Program*, implemented at ArtPlay and Signal, involved diverse groups of children, families and young people in four artist-led projects. The projects were assessed using a researcher developed creative and community development evaluation framework. This article reports on one of these projects, City Beats, which involved a partnership between the Melbourne Symphony Orchestra and ArtPlay.

**Key words:** arts, artists, children, community, research

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## Introduction

ArtPlay is a unique public arts space managed by the City of Melbourne.<sup>1</sup> It caters for children aged from three to thirteen and provides dynamic and diverse opportunities for social engagement and cultural expression. A key feature is the emphasis given to artist-led practical programs. Located in the heart of the city alongside the main river precinct, ArtPlay has consolidated its position through the development of a number of key partnerships, including one with the Melbourne Symphony Orchestra. Informed by on-going reflection and research, ArtPlay has continued to revise and refine its practices, balancing established popular programs with new and innovative workshop concepts. The attendances at ArtPlay have been high, and the quality of workshops has been shown to be engaging, but

research has identified an opportunity to extend the program, and the need to involve more children from marginalised and disadvantaged backgrounds.

An aspiration to broaden and deepen the offer of ArtPlay led to the development of a Creative and Community Partnership Initiative, entitled the *ACCESS Program*<sup>2</sup>, funded by the Australia Council for the Arts. This initiative provided a unique opportunity to initiate, implement and research the development of innovative community engagement practices and strategies that would strengthen and embed values of inclusion, excellence and evaluation into the vision and organisational structure of ArtPlay. As part of the *ACCESS Program*, four projects were established to address the above goals; two based at ArtPlay and two at Signal, the

1. For more information go to <http://www.melbourne.vic.gov.au/artplay/Pages/ArtPlayHome.aspx>

2. For more information go to [http://education.unimelb.edu.au/news\\_and\\_activities/projects/artplay](http://education.unimelb.edu.au/news_and_activities/projects/artplay)

sister facility to ArtPlay that caters for young people aged from 13 to 22 years. The four projects included, The ArtPlay Backyard, ArtPlay Melbourne Symphony Orchestra City Beats, Evolution, and Signal 37.

## Evaluation Framework

Guided by the goals of the Australia Council for the Arts<sup>3</sup> researchers also examined to map how the projects realised the principles of creative community development. This was a complex task given the broadly encompassing goals of the initiative covered aspirations to 'excellent artistic practice', 'community engagement' and 'well-being'. To do so, the researchers developed the ACCESS evaluation framework which enabled a multi-dimensional representation of project outcomes (Figure 1).

Participation is commonly noted in evaluations of community-based programs that do not involve mandatory attendance. In this respect attention is given to the backgrounds of participants, cultural, socio-economic and educational, taking into account what promotes or restricts 'participation-building' practices (McCarthy & Jinnett, 2001). To account for participation the Framework gives attention to access: *who participates in arts and cultural experience and what restricts and supports such participation?*

Figure 1: ACCESS Framework.

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|---|--|
| <b>Access</b>                           | What groups of children, youth and families access ArtPlay? What attracts and enables participation in the ArtPlay programs?   |
| <b>Creative &amp; artistic practice</b> | Is creative process promoted in ArtPlay programs? If so, how? Do the ArtPlay programs promote artistic achievement? If so, how?  |
| <b>Cultural citizenship</b>             | Are children, youth and families included and engaged as cultural citizens both in the ArtPlay programs and organisational management? If so, how?   |
| <b>Engagement</b>                       | Are children and youth engaged in the experiences offered in the ArtPlay programs? If so, how?   |
| <b>Social connectedness</b>             | Are children, families and youth involved in ArtPlay programs connected with others? If so, how?   |
| <b>Sustainability</b>                   | Are the practices developed as part of the ACCESS Program sustainable? What changes, if any, have occurred within the organisation that will sustain the learning gained from this initiative? |

3. See <http://www.australiacouncil.gov.au/grants/2013/community-partnerships-creative-communities-partnerships-initiative>

Engagement is often cited in community arts program evaluations, (Burnaford, 2007; Murray, 2007/2008) and Larson (2000), one of the few in the psychology discipline to make a connection between the arts and engagement in recreational settings, argues that engagement is linked to learning experience and initiative. He believes the contexts best suited for the development of this initiative are those of "structured voluntary activities such as sports, arts and participation in organisations in which youth experience the rare combination of intrinsic motivation and deep attention" (p. 170). Chapman (2003) rightly notes that that 'engagement' is a readily used word that can have multiple meanings depending on the context in which the term is used. The term 'engagement' can also be closely associated with, and at times referred to interchangeably, with involvement and participation. We view engagement as more specifically associated with participant commitment, vigour and absorption in an experience rather than simply compliant and or 'obliged' involvement (Schaufeli, Pinto, Salanova & Bakker, 2002). As part of the Framework, engagement is explored by the question: are the participants invested in and committed to the experience offered, and if so what conditions support or restrict such engagement?

Creative experiences are linked with wellbeing (McLellan, Galton, Steward & Page, 2012). For children, artistic experiences are those that extend the participant's aesthetic awareness and communicative capacities through processes that go beyond exploration to more intentional expression and making. Any attempt to define 'excellence' is problematic and raises questions about what is and isn't valued as authentic artistry.<sup>4</sup> The orientations of an arts experience to process and outcomes are encompassed within the *creative and artistic experience* construct in the

4. An example of this tension is inherent in the comment made by Dame Lis Forgan, Chair, Arts Council England - [http://www.artscouncil.org.uk/publication\\_archive/strategic-framework-arts](http://www.artscouncil.org.uk/publication_archive/strategic-framework-arts)

Framework which prompted the question: does the experience give emphasis to both creative processing and the development of artistic outcomes? This combined construct highlights the preconditions for innovation and 'excellence', namely creativity stimulated by an artistic challenge and the ambition to extend oneself.

The social capital and learning children gain from the arts is linked to social connectedness which refers to the opportunities for social exchange offered as part of an arts experience. Engagement in community arts activities is reported to have a positive effect on social connectedness by facilitating interactions between people with shared interests (Mulligan et al., 2006; Newman, Curtis, & Stephens, 2003; O'Brien, 2004). Both social connectedness and cultural citizenship are connected with relationship building, a cornerstone of community development and well being. Cultural citizenship highlights the rights of young people to engage in forms of cultural production and reception equivalent to what is accessible to adults, and in doing so be exposed to personal and collaborative experiences that promote child efficacy and agency, as current rather than future creators and citizens (Stevenson, 2003; Delanty, 2002). In combination, the Framework constructs of *social connectedness and cultural citizenship* draw attention to broad social and cultural values associated with art making. The question raised here are: does the experience support social connectedness amongst the participants and are they engaged as cultural citizens?

The impact, or positive outcome, of any innovative change in arts and cultural practice is ultimately enhanced or dissipated by its ongoing sustainability. This construct encompasses demonstrable outcomes and developments to programs, organizational structures, partnerships, professional learning and policies. It also points to transferable learning arising from the initiative; relevant to other groups engaged in creative community development. Central to sustainability is the effectiveness of partnerships.

The research involved multiple methods including pre and post participant surveys, observations, photographs and interviews. The analysis of the data sought to explicate themes relevant and useful both to ArtPlay and also transferable to other contexts that involve artists and arts educators who work with children, families and youth. Conceptualized as participatory action research (Whyte, 1991), the goals extended to building the capacity of ArtPlay to reflect systematically and critically on its practice.

### **ArtPlay MSO City Beats**

ArtPlay and the Melbourne Symphony Orchestra (MSO) have had a long partnership involving MSO musicians contributing to ongoing ArtPlay ensembles since 2004. The ArtPlay MSO City Beats project was implemented in 2009 as a free school holiday program that targeted disadvantaged children from a public-housing estate in Collingwood. The attendance was limited, largely because it relied on the participants travelling to ArtPlay independently. In 2010, as part of the ACCESS Program<sup>5</sup>, the City Beats project was reconceptualised as a free school program targeting schools seen to be disadvantaged or marginalised and with limited access to instrumental music.

Over 2011 and 2012 the MSO Education unit, in consultation with ArtPlay management, developed the City Beats project which involved One Year 5/6 class from eight metropolitan schools. In total 160 students, eight teachers and eight professional musicians (seven from the MSO) participated in the two year project. One group of 20 to 25 students from each school participated in four, two hour workshops scheduled throughout the year. Schools were targeted for various reasons including; cultural

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5. For more information re the ACCESS Program go to [http://education.unimelb.edu.au/news\\_and\\_activities/projects](http://education.unimelb.edu.au/news_and_activities/projects)

diversity, economic disadvantage, limited access to music and/or other social and well-being needs. The workshops were free of charge with transport provided, and students did not have to have prior music education. An important aspect of this project was the involvement of teachers who described City Beats as a rare opportunity for their students to gain authentic cultural exchanges with the musicians.

The City Beats workshops were designed and run by Gillian Howell, a musician educator who acted as facilitator and conductor and worked with up to four MSO musicians. Teachers supported the program for many reasons; they noted particularly that the opportunity it provided to challenge narrow views about art and others. As one teacher commented, coming to ArtPlay encouraged children to “venture outside their community group, their cultural group”.

For each school group Gillian seeks out significant themes suggested by the children and co-develops these into a musical narrative over the four workshops, a final performance of which takes place at ArtPlay and in the school. Gillian described the aims of the project as,

*to give the students a rich, intensive music-making experience. They will play percussion instruments, invent their own music, and develop performance and ensemble skills in an inclusive, encouraging, collaborative environment. The program acts as a pathway to bring new young people from diverse backgrounds toward other programs for young musicians at ArtPlay and with the MSO.*

The composition is developed into a multi-sectioned and multi-layered piece throughout the workshops and involves a variety of activities. The children often work in small groups to develop musical interpretations of personal experiences and imagery, they share newly created sections with the whole group and peer teach as they move towards the final performances. Three or four MSO musicians, who play a variety of instruments, assist Gillian, but they are not the same at each workshop depending on who is available. They facilitate the small group creations

and provide individual advice. During whole group work, they co-create and play alongside the children, under Gillian’s direction. One MSO musician described her role as “unleashing the students’ creativity”, and another “helping the kids to fine-tune their ideas.” A number of teachers accompany the students to each workshop, where they participate as co-learners and provide encouragement as needed.

Two schools, Ardeer South Primary and Kinglake Primary were examined in some detail. The primary foci of the research was to examine what invites and enables children to participate in the City Beats project, how they respond to the workshop activities, what they gain from such activities, and conditions that support engagement. Interwoven with these foci was an investigation of artist learning and the ArtPlay organisational environment.

## Kinglake Primary School

Kinglake Primary is located in an area severely affected by the 2009 Black Saturday bushfires, which resulted in Australia’s highest ever loss of life from a bushfire. As part of a program of support for the Kinglake community, a Catholic Care counsellor was employed. In this capacity the counsellor saw the opportunity to engage in the ArtPlay MSO City Beats project as a means for promoting the well being of the students. As she noted,

*Knowing that the community of Kinglake is still finding ‘recovery’ difficult, and that the children from the school, living in a ‘peri-urban’ community, had less opportunities in terms of cultural development, was an incentive to find a program such as City Beats to fit with them.*

## Ardeer South Primary School

Ardeer South Primary School, is a culturally and socio economically diverse school in Melbourne’s western suburbs. An Ardeer South Primary School teacher noted that,

*Money, parental availability, parental interest, knowledge of facilities, value of artistic activities, viewing parental role as participator in educating the child beyond the classroom, are all factors which would prohibit these children from ever participating in a City Beats program without the on-going commitment of ArtPlay to continually make a difference in the lives of our students.*

## Outcomes

Gillian and the MSO musicians were careful not to use too many technical terms and instead of using words like crescendo, Gillian would simply explain that they needed to get louder. One teacher described how “the children were immersed in an environment which facilitated children with very little formal musical experience, in using their raw and innate musicality.” Many of the students from both the case study schools indicated that playing the different instruments was the most memorable part of City Beats program. Teachers from both Kinglake and Ardeer South reflected positively on the opportunity their students had to play instruments many had never used before.

## Engagement

All children and teacher surveys were overwhelmingly positive about the project indicating they would like to participate again in the ArtPlay MSO City Beats project, as well as other ArtPlay projects. Most of the time in each workshop involved playing an instrument. When the students played together there were intense looks of concentration between them, the MSO musicians and Gillian. The students were, at times, very obviously engaged. For example, a group of boys from Ardeer South played the drums loudly and moved to the music with their whole bodies. There was little disruptive behaviour during the workshops. The students remained on task and were attentive even when they were waiting for their turn to play. Gillian introduced a game called ‘Parking’ with the students from Kinglake, where

the students could play their instrument as long as nobody else played theirs at the same time. This game stimulated high levels of engagement as the children were constantly looking around the circle to see who was playing, or about to play, and used only eye contact. There were no disputes about going out or disengagement once a student was out of the game, they were so intent on the process. This use of games helped to alleviate initial hesitations amongst the children. Playful and social, the introductory games effectively promoted concentration and listening, established teamwork and introduced the young people to rhythm ideas and the creative process. Gillian made the games progressively more complex and concluded with a quiet listening activity.

The students valued meeting and working with the musicians who provided one-to-one and small group guidance. When asked what was most memorable about City Beats, students responded positively about the musicians with comments such as,

*When I played the xylophone with Sarah and she helped me when I needed it. I love playing the xylophone.*

*With Jen playing the drums. Jen is very helpful and very nice.*

*Sophie helped me a lot, because it was the first time I have ever played the xylophone.*

The MSO musicians felt that the students responded differently to the activities, with some more physically active and excited and others more subdued but still focussed. The MSO musicians thought that the children coped well and stayed on task. The feeling that Gillian sensed from the groups was that they did not want to leave at the end of each session, something she believed was a strong sign of engagement. She also noted that the students worked hard during the two hour workshops, which demanded high levels of concentration and teamwork. She described a particular case of one student who was initially disinterested but became

very engaged once he understood what was expected. Gillian explained:

*From then on, he was the first to respond when I raised my hand for quiet. He gestured sternly to people in his section when they started playing their part at the wrong time. He kept his eyes glued to me – absolutely glued. A transformation of understanding and meaning had taken place for him in the two hours we worked together.*

Teachers, acting as co-learners, modelled their engagement, and when necessary, acted as 'translators' between the musicians and students, explaining and at times prompting further clarifications from the artists.

The student survey items relating to engagement were very positive (Figure 2) overall. It is interesting that the majority of students either did not find the workshop challenging or were unsure about their opinion yet the majority "learned something new" and felt that what they learned would be "useful".

*The students were engaged from the time Gillian started, until the time we left. All the activities were fun and the students relaxed and committed themselves to whatever was asked of them. They were involved from the time they suggested their 'story', chose their music and rhythms until they produced their final piece. Whenever we left the sessions the excited discussions that followed were, 'Did you see it when I...?' or 'Did you hear it when I was playing ...?' Teacher, Kinglake*

*The City Beats program was totally committed to involving every child in the development of a child-owned and child-directed piece of music. The theme of the composition directly related to the journey which allowed all children access to the 'story' of the piece and kept all children motivated and feeling completely able to contribute and relate to the composition. Teacher, Ardeer South.*

## Creative and Artistic Practice

The focus on improvisation and the collaborative development of an emergent composition gave emphasis to creative process and promoted open exploration. This was particularly the case in the

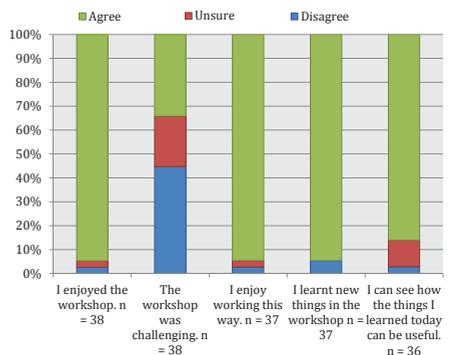
early workshops when student input was sought in relation to their interpretations of how to play an instrument and to the development of the 'story' for the musical piece. When interviewed teachers noted that the students had many opportunities to explore their creativity through developing their stories, music and rhythms. One student explained how she learnt to "compose music from words and that ANYTHING can be music. When different pieces of music are put together it can make a totally different piece of music."

Gillian reflected that generating compositions with the students,

*sounded confusing to them when I first explained it, I suspect. They needed to experience just how we would put the pieces together in order to understand the process. And the process works. By the end of each session, we had completed a five-minute arrangement of one of their compositions, some with quite complex structures and section transitions, in which everyone had an instrument and a part to play.*

The latter part of the workshops shifted from creative development to team work and individual instrument playing so as to achieve an accomplished final performance. Whilst the short amount of time given to this project, combined with the limited prior orchestral musical experience of students, restricted the technical

Figure 2: Survey items – engagement.



ambition of the final composition, a skilful musical narrative was produced.

The City Beats workshops focussed on improvisation, playing by ear and contributing ideas to the composition, all of which are associated with highly creative processes such as originality, re-structuring and elaboration. Artistic experience was encouraged through working with musicians as co-creators and co-players. The creation of the composition was strongly led by Gillian who drew from the children’s responses and a systematic approach to reflection supported by video-recordings of each workshop. An emphasis on exploration rather than technical accomplishment stimulated confidence amongst the children to invent and experiment. The conventions of whole-group music at times limited individual input, though the high ratio of professional musicians to children allowed regular opportunities for one-to-one and small group musical creative inquiry.

The time constraints of the workshops limited creative opportunities for participants. Each workshop was two hours long and since the MSO and Gillian were driven towards producing an accomplished final performance there was a limited time for the participants to play and experiment freely with the instruments.

## Social Connectedness and Cultural Citizenship

There were numerous indicators of social connectedness throughout the ArtPlay MSO City Beats workshops. The warm up activities and whole-group compositions encouraged playful social connections amongst participants. While students already had established relationships with each other, the workshops required them to work with others in a different way. A number of students indicated that they enjoyed playing music together with their school friends, something they had never done before. The final performance at each group’s school provided an

opportunity for the children to present to others in their school environments. Further opportunity to perform publicly, including to the other schools involved in the City Beats project, would extend the possible social and cultural connections realizable by this initiative.

The vast majority of the students enjoyed working in groups (Figure 3) and enjoyed working with the other students. All of the students enjoyed working with the MSO musicians and all but one (who wasn’t sure) enjoyed working with Gillian who they found helpful.

It was evident from the students’ reactions that they enjoyed direct personal connections with the musicians. As Gillian noted, “Several [children] came up and hugged me to say hello. In fact, I got hugs from people in each group across the two days, which was nice!” During the breaks, the MSO musicians actively engaged with the students, talking with them and showing them their instruments and at times playing for them. When MSO musician, Tony, began playing his saxophone, a number of students watched and listened quite enthralled. Another of the MSO musicians, Sophie, told the small group she was working with that she had recently played with Jessie J at the Logies, something that greatly impressed the young students.

Figure 3: Survey items – social connectedness.



The opportunity to engage with professional musicians over several workshops enabled a close relationship between children and the artist, one that engendered positive social relations. One of the MSO musicians, Jen, described:

*I think, probably, to begin with, they probably just see us as scary MSO musicians, and then as we progress through it, not so much. I think they're quite comfortable with engaging with us by creating a piece of music together. I think it also helps that I've been with the project for three out of the four sessions during the year.*

Strong connections between the MSO musicians was, however, limited by the fact that the same musicians were not available for each workshop because they were restricted by other work priorities with the MSO. ArtPlay had no input into the selection of MSO musicians for the City Beats project. When interviewed, the musicians noted the pros and cons of retaining the same professionals throughout each City Beats workshop. While the continued involvement by a few musicians supported closer relations between the children and the artists, opportunities to work alongside a diverse range of musicians, with expertise in different instruments, broadened the learning experience offered to the group.

To some extent the students recognised that the MSO musicians were professional which made this experience very special. A 10-year old girl from Kinglake Primary described how she "liked how the people from Melbourne Symphony Orchestra find time to come and visit us to teach us." The potential of this relationship, though, could have been further realized. A recommendation put forth by some teachers and students was further opportunities to learn about and experience the MSO players as professional musicians. Ruth from Ardeer South explained:

*Even though the children still don't really have any idea of who they were playing alongside they are immeasurable richer for the experience. The only change I would make to the City Beats program would be to factor in a session where*

*the children get to see the MSO perform, and to actually walk through the orchestra, meeting the musicians they already know, and being introduced to others. Otherwise individual musicians met at ArtPlay remain out of context and the children are still disconnected. These children are unlikely to access the MSO on their own terms, and will almost never feel that they know people in that Orchestra whom they can recognize and with whom they have formed a connection.*

The City Beats program engaged young people as cultural citizens through practices that emphasised child-led musical composition, collaboration and consultation. Throughout all of the activities students contributed their ideas; from suggestions of rhythms in the warm up games, choice of which instrument they would like to play and the opportunity to take leading roles in small groups by helping the other students learn their parts. When the participants embarked on the collaborative composition, it was the students who came up with the story. Breaking up into smaller groups so that each group developed a section of the story allowed contributions from all of the students. A key focus of ArtPlay MSO City Beats project was the co-creation of a musical performance that necessarily required children to connect with each other's musical input. The musical 'stories' drawn out in the workshops directed the children to reflect on shared experiences. In the case of bushfire-affected Kinglake Primary school children this led to the development of deeply felt song lines including.

*We're feeling lost and nervous.  
Everything is confusing  
Tell us the way to go home*

By enabling the children to reflect on their uncertainties and insecurities, Gillian acknowledged their capacity to express deep-felt personal views. During whole class work, Gillian consulted the participants about how they wanted to put their ideas together. They would try different suggestions and then decided as a

group what sounded best. One teacher noted that, "Gillian and the other musicians consulted with the students throughout and interpreted their ideas beautifully." Whilst the workshops were explicitly structured to incorporate the ideas of students into the composition, such input was circumscribed by the creative direction of the artists and by the shared ambition of all participants who were motivated to produce a challenging and proficient final performance.

## **Sustainability and Future Directions**

In summary the outcomes of the ACCESS Programs have been significant in terms of delivering innovative projects, engaging new and diverse members of the community and supporting major organizational review and change informed by a theory-grounded evaluation framework. As part of this initiative City Beats has been established at ArtPlay as a continuing annual program, further strengthening the partnership between the MSO and ArtPlay.

Evident within each of the four ACCESS projects were the value and importance of a key advocate who represented a particular partnership. These individuals made a clear time investment in a project and were prepared to promote the project within their own organization. Challenges arose when these advocates discontinued their role in a project, particularly when the history of the partnership has not been clearly passed on to other representatives within the organization. In the case of City Beats the ongoing involvement of Gillian Howell – the creative director of the program – was crucial. Her continuing role has provided continuity and a clear line of communication between MSO and the school groups. Individual teachers and student counsellors were also vital to promoting participation and engagement in the project.

Further school groups will be invited to participate in this program in 2013. Whilst this allocation of resources will broaden the offer of the City Beats project, it is unclear what, if any, follow-up connections will be made by MSO or ArtPlay with the schools so far involved. Without such follow up the depth of community engagement is limited.

## **Conclusion**

The development of the ACCESS Framework has enabled a multi-dimensional evaluation of the City Beats project that was highly engaging for students, providing a unique experience working as part of an orchestra with professional musicians. Structured to promote student composition, creative experimentation, collaboration, and performance skills, the project provided an opportunity for the young people to see themselves as co-creators. For the professional musicians, City Beats provided an opportunity for direct community engagement, one that extended awareness and confidence amongst students and teachers to the potential of creating music. The project has extended the offer of ArtPlay and MSO programs to marginalised and disadvantaged school communities. It has stimulated ArtPlay and the MSO to engage in a deep and ongoing dialogue that will drive the future directions of this partnership, particularly in relation to promoting musical excellence with diverse communities.

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