

# Creating Critical Connections through the Arts: The Y Connect Key Findings and Significance Report

Examining the impact of  
arts-based pedagogies and artist/teacher partnerships  
on learning and teaching in one Australian Secondary School

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Megavartini Sivakumar, a Yeronga SHS student, created this image to support celebrations associated with Multicultural Day.

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**For a copy of the full Y Connect Report please visit:** [yconnectproject.com](http://yconnectproject.com)

# Introduction

It is twenty years since the landmark *Champions of Change: The Impact of the Arts on Learning* (1999) report was released. This report drew together the findings of seven US-based research teams to examine the impact of arts experiences on children and young people. The authors (Fiske et.al, 1999, p. ix) proposed that, “When well taught, the arts provide young people with authentic learning experiences that engage their minds, hearts, and bodies”, and outlined key findings (pp. 12-13) including that: the arts reach students who are not otherwise being reached and in ways that they are not otherwise being reached; the arts connect students to themselves and each other; the arts transform the environment for learning; the arts provide learning opportunities for the adults in the lives of young people; the arts provide new challenges for those students already considered successful; and the arts connect learning experiences to the world of real work.

Eleven years later, Robyn Ewing (2010) created *The Arts and Australian Education: Realising Potential* for the Australian Council for Educational Research. This report mapped the significant contributions and potential of arts education in Australia, identifying social, emotional, aesthetic and educational benefits. The Ewing report also argued that the potential of the Arts in Australia has not been realised.

Meanwhile, further studies such as *Are the kids alright? Young Australians in their middle years* (Redmond et al., 2016, pp. xi-xii) have argued that given the current complexity of young people’s lives, wellbeing needs to be at the heart of policy.

It is against this backdrop that the Y Connect Project was designed and implemented, a project that may be the largest project of its kind ever conducted in a single school anywhere in the world.

The Y Connect Project was a partnership between Yeronga State High School and researchers from Griffith University. Funded by the Queensland Department of Education through its *Collaboration and Innovation Fund (CIF)*, the Y Connect Project brought students, teachers, school leaders, artists, arts organisations, and researchers together in an attempt to enhance young people’s sense of belonging and connectedness, and to generate improvements in several aspects of learning. To address these goals, arts-based pedagogies were employed across the curriculum, teachers partnered

with artists and arts organisations, and focused arts projects became part of the natural landscape of the school.

Implemented over an extended period of 2.5 years from 2016 to 2018, the Y Connect Project generated more than 900 hours of activity, including 784 individual events. These events included: artist/teacher partnerships in classroom-based lessons involving dance, drama, media arts, music, visual arts, mathematics, and English students from Years 7-11; professional development sessions for teachers; formal and informal performances and displays; visits to theatres and galleries; and support for students to engage directly with arts organisations. In total, this activity created 15,342 points of interaction between Yeronga SHS students and Y Connect artists and involved 48 teachers and 36 artists and arts organisations.

We hope that the outcomes outlined in this *Key Findings and Significance Report* will be useful to educators, artists and policy makers, offering research-informed perspectives on the potential of the Arts within schools and insights into how the Arts, artists and arts-based pedagogies can support young people reach their full potential.



Students working with an artist.

## Research: Context and design

Situated within an inner suburb of Brisbane, Australia, Yeronga State High School is an independent public school under the auspices of the Queensland Department of Education (DoE). It caters to students from Years 7-12 and has a student population of just over 750 students. The students attending the school are from local, refugee, asylum-seeking and immigrant backgrounds. During the timeframe of this Project, they came from more than 70 different countries, with 76% having a language background other than English. 51% had refugee backgrounds or were people seeking asylum. Many young people arrive at Yeronga with limited experience of schooling, limited English and low confidence. As such, targeted programs are employed to help these students to connect with learning and to achieve learning success. In the past, the school has been successful in winning several important educational awards based on these programs.

In order to understand the impact of the Y Connect Project, four research questions were developed:

- How has participation in the Y Connect Project impacted on the **students** involved?
- How has involvement in the Y Connect Project impacted on the **participating teachers and school culture**?
- How has involvement in the Y Connect Project impacted on the **artists** and what have they learnt about teacher/artist partnerships through participation?
- What **factors enabled and constrained** the success of the Y Connect Project?

To address these questions, six case studies were developed in response to the interests and needs of the school community:

Case Study One: Focused Arts Projects

Case Study Two: Artists in Arts Classrooms

Case Study Three: Artists and Arts-based Pedagogies in the English Classroom

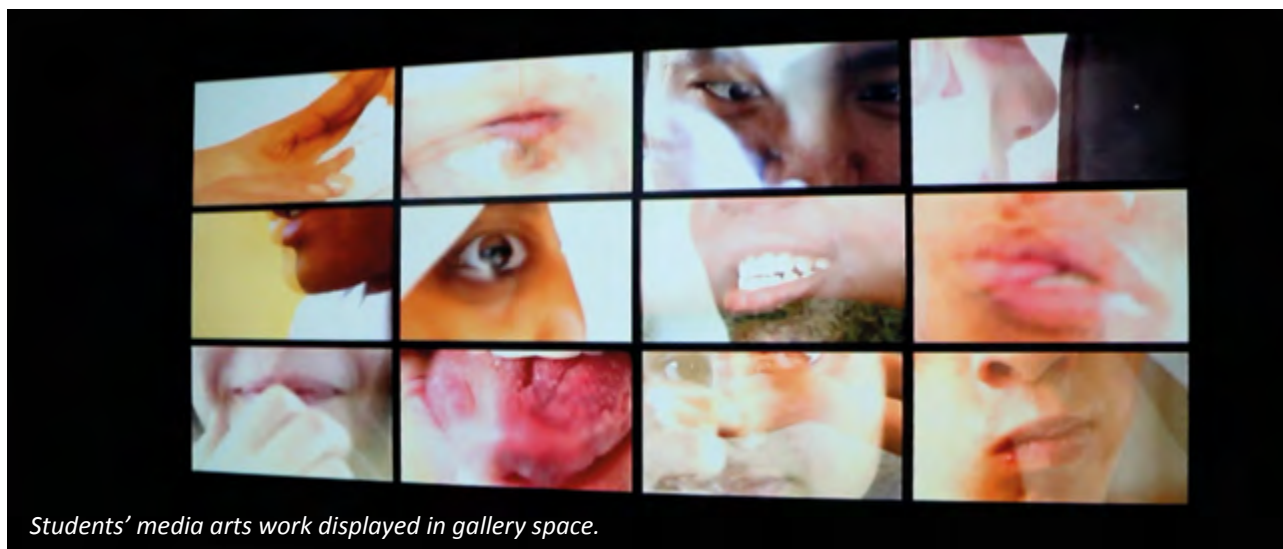
Case Study Four: Drama in the Essential English Classroom

Case Study Five: Mathematics and Movement

Case Study Six: Forum Program – Drama for Hope and Belonging

Qualitative and quantitative data were collected, with an emphasis on qualitative sources. This emphasis was determined by the desire to understand the student, teacher, leader, and artist experiences from their perspective and to give voice to their experiences. The data sources included: an activity log that tracked participation; pre-and post-project student surveys; a post-project teacher survey; National Benchmark testing data; over 200 student, teacher, school leadership and artist interviews; observations; photographs; video recordings; artefact collection – including teacher planning documents.

Analysis of the qualitative data was completed using NVivo, where an inductive process of analysis identified key ideas emerging from the data. The quantitative survey data were analysed using SPSS.



*Students' media arts work displayed in gallery space.*

# Key Findings: Question One

How has participation in the Y Connect Project impacted on the students involved?



The image above provides a representation of the Project's key findings in relation to research question one – impact on students. It reveals that six critical connections were enhanced for the young people who participated in the Y Connect Project: connection to self; connection to each other; connection to learning; connection to and belonging within the school community (abbreviated to connection to the school community); connection to the Arts, artists and arts organisations (abbreviated at times to connection to the Arts); and connection to the future through the creation of alternate possible selves (abbreviated to connection to possible selves).

*Connection to self* refers to the way the Project served to build self-confidence, self-efficacy, creativity, imagination, identity as a learner, and more. *Connection to each other* refers to the outcomes generated through the requirement for collaboration within classes and projects, and to the sense of teamwork that was generated as students engaged with each other within and across year levels, cultural and religious groups, and genders. *Connection to learning* is used here to describe the impact of the Project on the students' attitudes towards learning, as well as the academic outcomes achieved including understanding of concepts and specific skill development. *Connection to the school community* relates to a sense of belonging within the school, while *Connection to the Arts, artists and arts organisations* is included to capture the findings associated with the relationships that were built with artists and Arts organisations, together

with the flow on effect to student understanding of, interest in and appreciation of the Arts more broadly. The remaining connection, *Connection to possible selves*, is included in response to the outcomes articulated by students about how the Project impacted on those aspects of themselves that are futures oriented.

Within the Y Connect image above, these connections are depicted as individual pieces of a puzzle which come together to form a Y. This Y is designed to represent each participating Yeronga SHS student. It positions *connection to self* at the base of the Y, with this placement being intentionally designed to indicate that across all of the cases and indeed the broader data set, *connection to self* appears to form the foundation for all of the other connections.

Of course, not all of the participating students experienced growth across all of these connections and not all of them experienced this growth to the same degree. However, there is convincing evidence across the data set to support the view that, for the majority of participating Y Connect students, there were improvements in some of these connections, while a smaller number of students experienced improvements in many or all of them. In addition, while the pieces of the puzzle are shown in the diagram as discrete, in reality they overlap.

In the sections below, the findings of the six Y Connect case studies are summarised, including a statement about how the approaches used within these cases supported growth in these connections.

## Case Study 1 – Focused Arts Projects



This case examined student involvement in extra-curricular arts projects. Fourteen long and short-term projects were delivered as part of this case, involving students in Music, Drama, Circus and Dance. These projects included: Performing Arts Club; the Circus Program, delivered by Circa Contemporary Circus; On the Green, where student musicians performed during break time; Guitar Club; and Physical Theatre Group. The case involved 285 hours of activity, 188 events and 4110 opportunities for individual students to engage with Y Connect artists and teachers. Participating students came from all year levels.

Data analysis revealed a positive impact on all six connections, as detailed in the following summary of the case specific findings:

1. Extra-curricular arts projects, supported by partnerships between teachers and artists, offered holistic benefits for students, with key aspects of self being enhanced.
2. The public performance and display outcomes associated with these projects were particularly critical in nurturing improvements across the six areas of connectedness.
3. Extra-curricular activities gave students opportunities to build self-confidence in a learning environment where the pressure and constraints of assessment were absent.
4. These activities provided opportunities for all participating students, irrespective of their academic levels, to experience success and be recognised for their achievements.
5. Students benefitted from interacting with individuals and groups within their school community beyond those they would normally engage with within timetabled school activities.
6. Mixed year groups created bonds between students of different ages.



A Focused Arts Projects Performance – Dust.

*She's kind of gone from being a bit reluctant to do anything, and then they had a [circus] performance and she did really awesome... there was a massive difference in her. (Artist)*

*He was one of those kids that was quite known for being disruptive or was very disengaged... then the next time I came into the school, he ... was like, "I need to show you this song that I've written" .... and I think a lot of people were quite shocked that he had invested himself into what we were doing. (Artist)*



Circus students in action.

7. Participation in the arts projects created positive emotions such as pleasure, happiness and hope. Even difficult tasks were associated with pride and achievement.
8. Vulnerable students, especially some involved in the circus group, were supported to challenge themselves, persist, take risks and trust each other.
9. The professional expectations of artists relating to public outcomes, supported students to work harder to extend their own artistry and to create quality outcomes.
10. Opportunities to work closely with artists on long term projects, broadened students' appreciation of the work of artists and expanded their pathway perceptions.

An artist working with students in their Drama class.



## Case Study 2 – Artists in Arts Classrooms



This case focused on partnerships between artists and arts teachers and examined the impact of these on the Arts learning and engagement of students. Throughout the case study, 18 artists worked in partnership with 17 arts teachers and their students to address a range of curricular topics and processes including: choreography and structuring of new works in Dance; monologues, devising, clowning and physical theatre in Drama; video creation, soundscapes and editing in Media Arts; ensemble building, drumming and composing in Music; and sculpture and installation development in Visual Arts. The case involved 289 hours of activity, 259 events and 4845 points of contact between artists and students. The young people studying these subjects also had the opportunity to participate in excursions to arts industry contexts.

Improvements across all six connections were also noted within this case, with the following key findings identified:

1. Students reported positive personal growth as a result of engagement in the learning opportunities related to this case. They specifically noted enhanced pride, confidence and the capacity to “*be myself*”. Many recognised they had developed important personal but transferable skills.
2. Better relationships emerged between teachers and some students as teachers were able to see students “*in a new light*” as they responded differently to the content and pedagogical relationship with the artist.
3. Non-subject specific learning, such as collaboration, and the willingness to engage with others, were also enhanced in this case. Through communal experiences that created shared memories, students increasingly valued teamwork, including across diverse cultural groups, and came to understand that different people learn differently.
4. Students and teachers reported that higher levels of subject-specific learning and achievement in the Arts were produced through learning guided by high quality teachers/artist partnerships.

In particular they noted an improvement in the students' arts-related written work as a result of transference from practical skills.

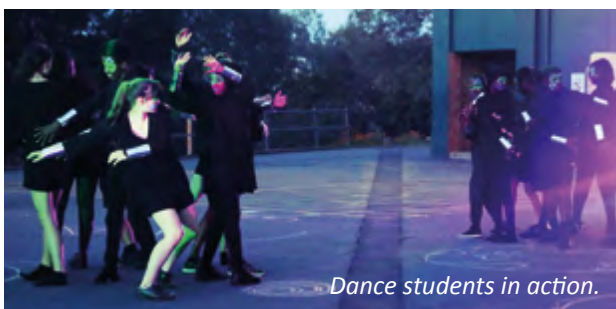
5. Stronger connections to the school community were evident through students reporting an increased desire to attend, and to be more involved in school activities. Some also reported an enhanced sense of responsibility and improved relationships across cultural groups.
6. Throughout the timeframe of this study, enrolments in arts curriculum subjects grew. Students and teachers recognised the value of knowing individuals and organisations in the arts community and were conscious of the professional standards and professionalism involved in arts careers.
7. Artists, in many instances, became additional role models for students. Students valued opportunities to see their own arts work in a professional context, and to access the works of a range of professional artists. They were able to imagine a larger range of career possibilities, in both arts and non-arts fields of endeavour.

*I can be myself because.... in this work, I know how it feels, like you know what to do, you know how to act. It just so much fun. But you still learn at the same time.* (Student)

*... when we had [artist] this year, we did see a big increase in kind of the academic achievement.... I think it's just the access to the materials and ... that more professional approach.* (Teacher)

*It feels like I belong here, miss, 'cause, the teachers already know me, that I can do this and stuff.* (Student)

*To dream big and not settle for, "I'll just work in a low-paying job because that's what society expects for migrants to do."... Just the little trickle effect of opening their window for now of what's possible.... There's a lot more that's possible than to be, have a big life. Have a big life.* (Artist)



### Case Study 3 – Artists and arts-based pedagogies in the English Classroom



This case examined the impact of artists and arts-based approaches on the teaching and learning of English for students in the middle years of schooling (Years 7-10). The case involved EALD (English as an Additional Language or Dialect) and non-EALD English classes from Years 7-10, with involvement being dependent upon teacher interest. Fourteen teachers and seven artists were involved. The case involved 216 hours of activity, with 213 events (including 200 classroom-based lessons) and 4254 points of contact between English students and Y Connect. Within this case there was an emphasis on drama-based approaches, but music and dance artists were also involved. Excursions to professional arts contexts were also included.

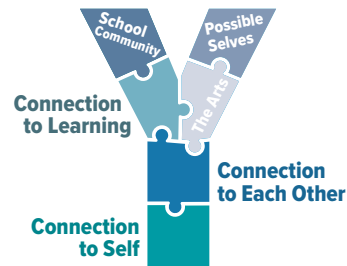
Four connections were enhanced for students who participated in this case study: self, each other, learning and Arts, artists and arts organisations. The following is a summary of the key findings:

1. Artists and arts pedagogies in the English classroom made learning more active and engaging for students, reducing boredom and helping students learn with “fresh brains”.
2. Academic achievement improved for some students, particularly in writing and speaking, with a more embodied and artistic understanding of literature being further benefits.
3. The involvement of highly skilled actors and their use of aesthetic approaches supported the development of vocabulary acquisition, understanding of texts, empathy towards characters and the confident expression of ideas.
4. The presence and support of professional artists not involved in the assessment process, put the students at ease and reduced their anxiety. They felt particularly supported when preparing oral presentations, with this being a strongly expressed view of EALD students.



5. Many students felt more confident in approaching written tasks when arts-based pedagogies were employed **prior** to engagement in writing as they supported idea and language development.
6. Students benefitted from higher levels of collaboration as these created an environment of peer-based support and widened their circle of engagement.
7. Excursions to cultural venues built cultural capital and normalised arts experiences which in turn enhanced connection to learning in English. These opportunities were particularly important for those students who might not normally access such events.

## Case Study 4 – Essential English



This case examined the impact of drama pedagogies within the Essential English classroom. The Essential English program is an additional subject that students take alongside their other (mainstream) classes to support their English language development. In total it involved 38.5 hours of delivery and 37 events resulting in 666 points of contact between Y Connect and Essential English students. Process Drama was the predominant art form used.

Three connections were enhanced through participation in this case study: self, each other, and learning. Below is a summary of the key findings:

1. Students and teachers reported growth in self-confidence, and the capacity to take risks (“with permission”) in learning. Students suggested that it was important to feel safe, to relax and have fun as they were learning. For some, this process of learning through drama contributed to the capacity to “know yourself”.
2. The strong emphasis on working in groups improved students’ capacity for collaboration and cooperation. Students valued opportunities for “working with friends” and “helping one another”. They noted that group work gave them chances to take on responsibility and work with different people, thus making new friends.
3. Oral communication and presentation skills were enhanced. One student considered that drama pedagogy lowered barriers (“the fence”) to learning. Deeper understanding of language was evident through classroom interactions and through the more complex writing produced as a result of the drama classes.

*If you learn a normal way, you usually sit down and write, or read, or watch a couple videos, but doing it with drama, you get to actually do what you are learning about, and you get to be active about it. It just becomes more interesting.* (Student)

*... when I was in class, and I was too shy and not talking to anyone, because of my language. But yesterday I feel like “you can speak, so you can try it”.* (Student)

*... this process has allowed them to engage without a fear of being wrong or a fear of their ideas being rubbish ... they’ve been able to access the curriculum like they probably haven’t accessed it before.* (School Leader)

Students participating in an English Case Study workshop.



*Drama’s like acting, and then you know yourself, and then you get to know a lot of things. But in them, if you don’t have drama, then you won’t even learn yourself.* (Student)

## Case Study 5 – Mathematics and Movement



Here the focus was on partnerships between dance artists and Mathematics teachers, with collaborative planning sessions being essential to identify suitable approaches to the teaching of various topics including: fractions and decimals; ratios; area, volume and perimeters; geometry; algebra; and probability and statistics. The case study involved 66.5 hours of duration and 53 events. Overall there were 981 points of contact between Mathematics students in Years 8-10 and Y Connect artists.

The image above demonstrates that three of the six connections were enhanced through this case study: self, each other, and learning. Below is a summary of the key findings:

1. Movement pedagogies supported learning through the physical representation of Mathematics concepts. This embodied engagement gave students a “lived” experience which many students reported as being helpful in assisting their understanding, recall and retention, and academic achievement.
2. Students and teachers alike reported improvements in students being able to think “outside of the box” which created “lightbulb moments” for some students.

3. Movement pedagogies made Mathematics more enjoyable, particularly for disengaged and struggling students. These students also benefitted most in terms of lifts in achievement.
4. The shift in pedagogies reduced some students’ stress, heightened their engagement and focus, and increased their confidence, motivation and pleasure.
5. The participatory approaches meant that students couldn’t be passive, but instead, were required to engage directly with mathematical concepts and their peers.
6. The collaborative nature of movement pedagogies also encouraged students to work together, improving students’ confidence and in one class, mitigating gender divides.
7. Comparisons between pre- and post-test results showed that student outcomes improved following participation in Mathematics and Movement lessons. However, the greatest improvements were generated when teachers applied these approaches following a period of extended engagement with artists.

*What I really loved was the teacher also actually enjoyed and wanted to do it.... It made us more like engaged.* (Student)

*Getting them up and moving and away from their books, they can’t hide.* (Teacher)

*It perhaps used a different part of our sort of brain? We haven’t done anything like this throughout my last high school and I think it’s just a different way to come about learning ... different concepts like, definitely we learnt differently, and it helped ...* (Student)

### SHIFTS IN MATHEMATICS ACHIEVEMENT

	No Y Connect approaches employed	Y Connect approaches delivered by Mathematics teacher but informed by professional learning delivered by Dance artists + collaborative planning sessions	Y Connect approaches delivered by Mathematics teachers but informed by experience with dance artists + collaborative planning sessions
Teachers involvement with Y Connect Program	Nil Y Connect involvement	5 to 2 years + Y Connect involvement	2 years + Y Connect Involvement
Relative student gain based on pre- and post-test of concepts taught using Y Connect approaches	4-8%	5-12%	5-14%

## Case Study 6 – Forum Program

*We were in shapes and stuff and remembering formulas then in the test, you can remember back to that ... cause you can see it instead of hearing it and you lived it. Yeah, you lived it!*  
(Student)



Students engaged in a Mathematics lesson.

*... I did not trust myself in doing everything but now I trust myself, because when I bring up something, like how I was bringing up something that we can do in the drama, and it's come up a good thing, and I feel like the leader of the group, the little group and ... I find it works.* (Student)

*English is not our first language, and some people don't feel comfortable about talking among public, and some people feel shy to speak out their mind. These sessions are really good because they help people to share their ideas...improve their communication skills. It helps them also to build up their confidence... to learn from each other which is really good.*  
(Student)

*I see a degree of self-expression that normally I don't see ... and I think it's because they feel... "there's no risk here for me."* (Teacher)

*So, it was very hard for me but the day I came here, it was, it felt like I'm home. Tell anyone that I trust my things you know.* (Student)



Using drama approaches, the Forum Program focused on connectedness and belonging with selected Year 11 and 12 students from refugee and asylum-seeking backgrounds. It consisted of 27 workshops, 27 hours of delivery and 486 points of contact between these students and Y Connect. By the time this case concluded in 2016, 32 young people had participated.

Growth in three connections were identified within this case: self, each other, and school community. The following is a summary of the key findings:

1. Participation increased some students' confidence, self-worth and self-efficacy. Students reported that they trusted themselves more and found greater value in their contributions.
2. EALD students reported improved oracy, with this being connected to their enhanced confidence and self-efficacy. They were more willing to talk in class and share ideas and opinions.
3. The collaborative nature of the drama pedagogies encouraged oral language development through the normalisation of participation, interaction and communication.
4. Vulnerable refugee and asylum seeker students benefitted from participation in a program without assessment. Without this pressure, students took risks in their use of language and in their presentation of self.
5. The specific environment developed within the Forum Program contributed to higher levels of student enjoyment and improved teacher-student relationships.
6. This Program created a space where students felt welcome and experienced a sense of "home", which in turn appeared to result in positive feelings of belonging and connection within the school community.

## Key Findings: Question Two

### How has involvement in the Y Connect Project impacted on the participating teachers and school culture?

The impact of the Y Connect Project on teachers fell into eight main categories. These were:

1. New ways of understanding and enacting curriculum.
2. Expansion of pedagogical repertoire and confidence in the application of these expanded practices.
3. A revitalisation of practice leading to enhanced enjoyment and engagement in the teaching process.
4. The development of a range of artistic skills and understandings.
5. A greater sense of freedom to explore and a renewed awareness of the importance of playfulness and creativity.
6. Shifts in individual teacher's professional identity, including: how other teachers perceived the value of their work; their sense of belonging within a team and the school community; and their interest in and willingness to both attend and deliver professional learning experiences.
7. Shifts in teacher/student relationships and teacher perceptions of students.
8. New or renewed awareness of the value of the Arts for young people.

*I think it helped me to see which students are wanting to engage but maybe don't have the capacity to understand how best to engage, so especially in group work.... There were certainly some students who behaviourally were very challenging, but when it came to the core of it, they had amazing ideas.* (Teacher)

*What kids used to excel at in this school was sport. So, it was always sport that would be the kids who were kind of seen as the popular cool kids, but now the kids who are doing circus, and the Musical, and seeing, and performing, and all that kind of stuff, they're now seen as the cool kids, like it has cultural capital, being involved in those programs, whereas it didn't before.* (School Leader)

In relation to school culture, one school leader expressed surprise that the Y Connect Project had “*touched the hearts of people*”, conceding that they had been cynical at first and were even “*prepared to shut the whole thing down*” if it wasn't working for the teachers and students. However, they have been stunned by how readily Y Connect became “*embedded*” in the school and “*loved by the school community*”.

*Y Connect ... it perhaps gives me another window to look out of ... So, for me it's learning to look out that window, but if you're not trained to look out of that window, you don't tend to open it, you know?* (Teacher)

*[Partnering with artists] refines and extends your skills.... watching someone like [artist] in a classroom ... is terribly professionally developing no matter how long you've been teaching. And it's revitalising.* (School Leader)

*Especially with Media, it's really hard to keep current on all the programs and the functionality and how it's used in industry .... So, having someone who's current from industry come in...* (Teacher)



An artist, a teacher and students working together.



## Key Findings: Question Three

### How has involvement in the Project impacted on the artists and what have they learnt about teacher/artist partnerships through participation?

Artists identified a number of benefits that accrued for them through involvement in Y Connect. These were:

- Enjoyment and satisfaction derived from developing young people's artistry, confidence and self-efficacy
- Opportunities for community engagement and making a difference
- Opportunities for learning including – reciprocal learning; cultural learning; and developing their own artistic practices
- Recognition and awareness of their capabilities; and,
- Employment.

*I think the sense of gratitude that you get when it clicks with the students and they get it.... it's nice to see those moments of the shifts. (Artist)*

Artists also described the conditions needed for successful partnerships with teachers, and the features of effective practice. These practice features were those where: active, energetic and collaborative engagement was encouraged; students were offered aesthetically charged experiences with opportunities to exercise agency in a safe, supportive and judgement free environment; challenging, scaffolded work, that built upon students' own stories and experiences; deep professional expertise and the use of professional language; and where professional practices, processes and expectations drove the work.

Conditions for success fell into two categories: organisational and partnership. Organisational conditions were:

- Project management and organisation
- Provision of planning and reflection time
- Clear processes of communication

- Extended engagement and sufficient duration per visit
- Budget
- Adequate spaces and resources
- Minimisation of interruptions
- Flexibility of engagement
- Careful matching of artist, teacher and class.

Partnership conditions were:

- Shared and agreed understanding of purpose
- Mutual respect
- Teacher as active co-participant
- Clear delineation of roles including teacher responsibility for overall behaviour management.

Finally, artists also identified a set of responsibilities to guide their work:

- Preparation, punctuality and planning
- Sensitivity to school protocols
- Respect for the curricular demands on teachers including assessment
- Willingness to work with students of diverse ability levels
- Sensitivity and respect for individual student backgrounds and circumstances
- Responsive to teacher and student needs
- Cultural awareness, and,
- Commitment (in spite of competing projects).

Overall, the data reveals that the Y Connect processes were most successful when both artists and teachers saw themselves as partners and as reciprocal learners. This reciprocity meant that while many of the Yeronga SHS teachers developed their own artistic practice through working with artists, artists also learnt numerous skills from the teachers, including how to facilitate large groups and behaviour management techniques for young people with diverse needs.

Significantly, this reciprocal learning nourished mutual respect. Both teachers and artists experienced growth and success, finding a positive sense of their own capabilities and a respect for each other's individual professional expertise.

*I think that sometimes I go through periods of not believing in myself, and so I think that [being employed as an artist in Y Connect] was really helpful. I do know lots of stuff. I am a good person. I know things, and things that will benefit other people, and things that are of value, will help in terms of some sort of humanity in some way. (Artist)*

*A student works with an artist.*



## Key Findings: Question Four

### What factors enabled and constrained the success of the Y Connect Project?

Four key enablers were identified: leadership and the existing school culture; the professionalism of the teachers and artists; the extended duration of the Project and extended participation of the artists; and the program of teacher professional learning which was delivered in parallel with the Project. Meanwhile, challenges and constraints were: locating suitable artists and making effective matches with teachers; partnership processes – including responsibilities and shared understanding of goals; artist expectations and understanding of the students' complex lives; spaces for teaching; and time – including time to plan, document and share and time with students.

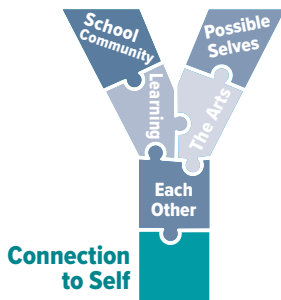
The majority of the challenges listed here were mostly able to be overcome through two of the key enablers – leadership and the professionalism of the teachers and artists, while space and time remained as challenges across the Project.

# SIGNIFICANCE

## Significance for Students

To describe the overall significance of the Y Connect Project for students, the six connections are applied as a framework.

### Connection to Self



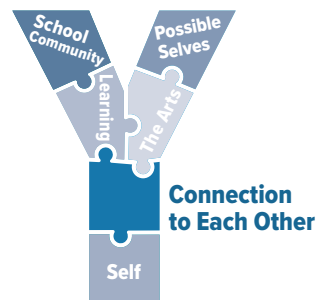
Throughout the research literature there is agreement that a positive sense of self is a prerequisite for wellbeing and learning. The Y Connect Project findings reveal strong impacts in terms of many aspects of self, including confidence, motivation, trust, pride and self-esteem. Students reported pleasure, challenge, and opportunities to take risks. They worked towards outcomes in which they felt pride, and where their artistic and creative capabilities were celebrated. Self-expression, self-esteem and self-confidence improved for many students, alongside imagination, creativity and artistry. Students' ideas were seen as important, with adults and other students listening to them and incorporating these ideas. It seems therefore that the involvement of artists, together with an expansion of arts-based pedagogies and projects served to awaken student agency and voice across the school community.

In the 21st Century context where, too often, young people have experiences that can diminish their sense of self, including through bullying or cyberbullying, a project like this one, that enhanced so many aspects of self, is clearly important.



A performance as part of the Focus Arts Projects.

### Connection to Each Other



Improved connections between students were produced across all six case studies, with this having a flow-on impact for wellbeing, learning and achievement. This is especially significant given the diverse student population, with increased collaboration helping to construct bridges between cultures, genders and ways of being.

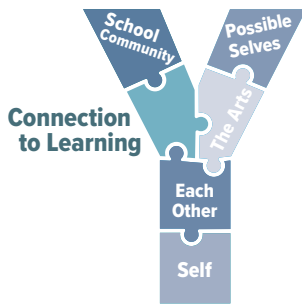
The expansion of existing student networks contributed to bridge building by creating vertical relationships across year levels, thus shifting school culture and breaking down barriers. Given that secondary school students may often feel marginalised, opportunities to locate friends throughout the school community are critical.

Given recent studies suggesting that loneliness and isolation are growing issues for young people (e.g. Weinberg & Tomin, 2015), the findings of the Y Connect Project relating to collaboration and connectedness are clearly significant.



Circus students performing.

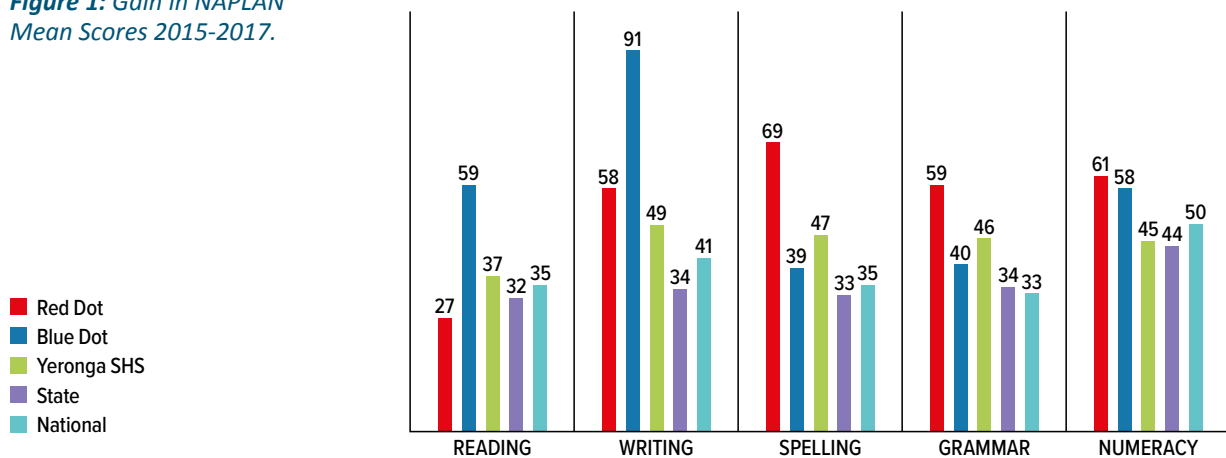
## Connection to Learning



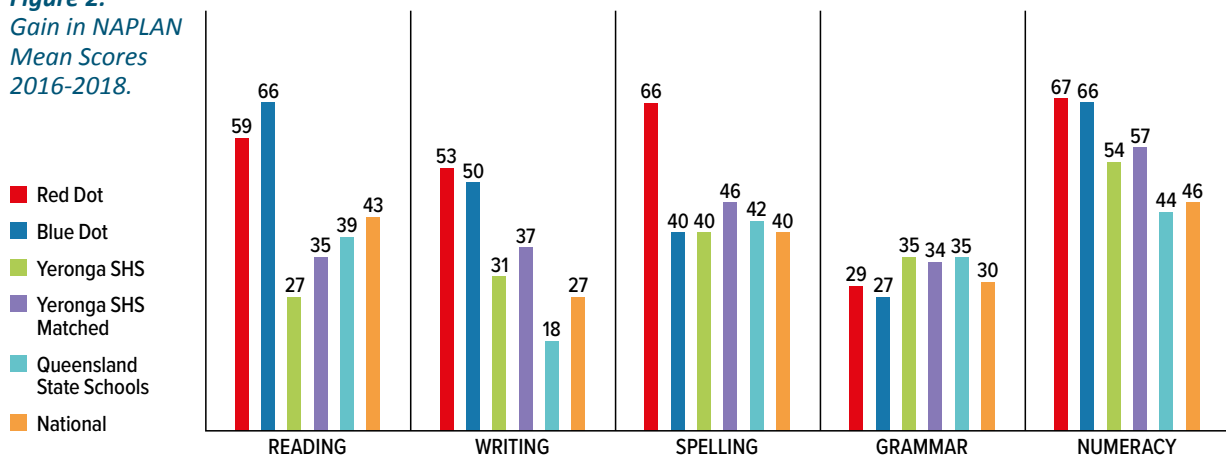
This report highlights improvements in engagement, skills, understanding and achievement, with the most significant improvements being for those students who struggle academically or for whom engagement is a challenge. Clear benefits were also identified for EALD students. Several skills essential for learning, including oral language and writing were enhanced. In addition, critical and creative thinking skills and creative, artistic and performance skills were improved. While these skills may be developed through other means, they are developed quite differently through the Arts and for some students to an extent that might not otherwise be possible.

Given the statistics outlined in the recent Grattan Institute Report (Goss et al., 2017) which suggest that the passive disengagement of students is a growing problem in Australian schools, coupled with concerns about falling literacy and numeracy standards, as measured through national and international benchmark testing, these findings are highly significant. They suggest that student disengagement might, at least in part, be overcome through opportunities for students to engage with artists and/or by teachers expanding their approaches to include arts-based pedagogies. Improved engagement will undoubtedly impact positively on learning outcomes. For example, it appears that the students who engaged more frequently and regularly within Y Connect (referred to in the Project as Red Dot students), and a sub-group of these who seemed to be particularly “switched on” by the Y Connect approaches (referred to in the Project as Blue Dot students) made the most significant improvements on aspects of the Australian National Assessment Program – Literacy and Numeracy (NAPLAN) benchmark testing (see figures below).

**Figure 1:** Gain in NAPLAN Mean Scores 2015-2017.

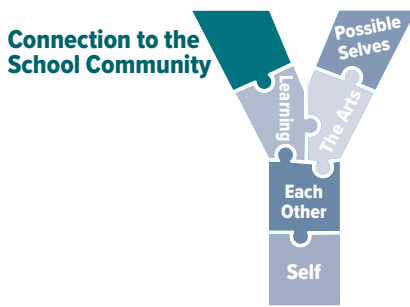


**Figure 2:** Gain in NAPLAN Mean Scores 2016-2018.





## Connection to the School Community

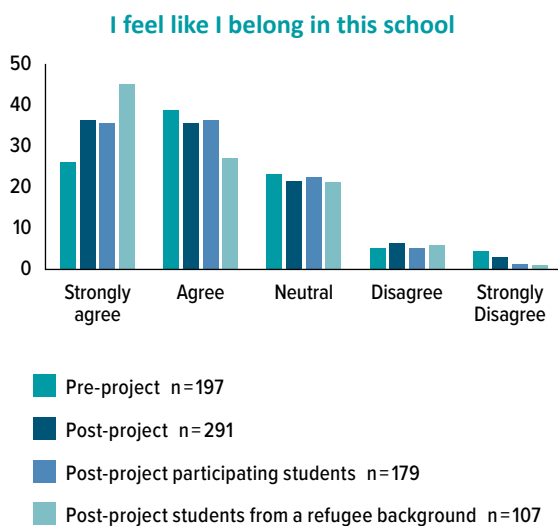


*Performing [in Focused Arts Project] ...it makes me happy, it makes me feel like I belong here, like I am like other humans ... you know what I mean.* (Student)

Wehlage and colleagues (1989) argue that a student’s sense of belonging within their school community is developed through attachment, commitment, involvement and belief in their school, with belonging to a community being critical for emotional wellbeing and learning. The findings outlined across this report indicate that the Y Connect approaches supported these dimensions, with improvements in Term 3 attendance and highly positive improvements in responses to the pre- and post-student survey in relation to questions associated with belonging (see figures below).

Within any secondary school, programs and approaches that support a strong connection to the school community are clearly significant. However, this connectedness is particularly important for students with refugee backgrounds, especially those who have suffered trauma. For some of these young people, a sense of belonging can be difficult to develop, but it seems that the aesthetic, collaborative, agentic and dialogic nature of the Y Connect work, provided opportunities for these young people to speak up, be heard and feel more closely connected.

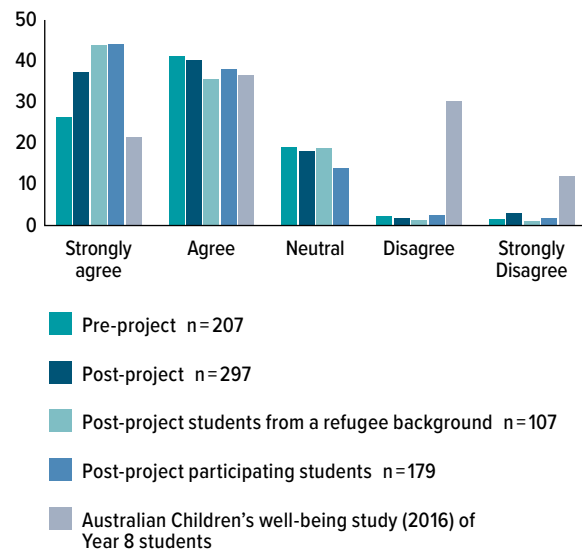
**Figure 3:** Pre- and Post-Project Student Survey Responses to the statement: “I feel like I belong in this school”.



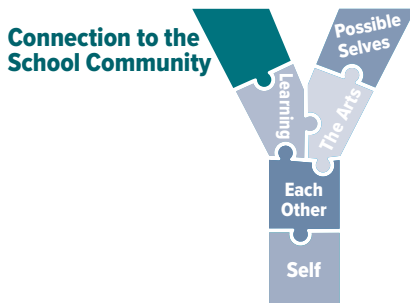
**Figure 4:** Pre- and Post-Project Student Survey Responses – Connection to Teachers and Staff: A comparison between overall, participating, students with a refugee background and Australian Children’s Wellbeing survey (2016) responses (\*)

Note: \* Strongly agree = Very much true;  
 Agree = Pretty much true;  
 Disagree = A little true;  
 Strongly Disagree = Not at all true

### There is at least one teacher or another adult at school who really cares about me



## Connection to Arts, Artists and Arts Organisations



For some students, the new connections formed with the Arts, artists and arts organisations were the most critical of all, with the artists becoming role models and mentors. Young people need positive role models beyond celebrities, sports stars or social media influencers. The Y Connect Project brought new and exciting people into the lives of the students, with some of these being from similar cultural or socio-economic backgrounds. As such, new heroes emerged, and relationships of a different order were formed. These relationships helped build aspirations and encouraged students to do better.

In addition, interactions with dynamic and creative artists supported some young people to take greater risks and to try out new ideas. For a small number of students who have experienced repeated failure or for whom life has presented multiple challenges, successful participation within Y Connect classes and projects not only enhanced their connection to the Arts, but to other areas of life and learning as well.

In this Project, opportunities for young people from low socio-economic or refugee backgrounds to engage with arts organisations and to access cultural venues were especially important, serving to break-down perceived barriers or perspectives that these cultural sites weren't for them. By engaging directly with, and within, these organisations, all students built upon their existing social and cultural capital.



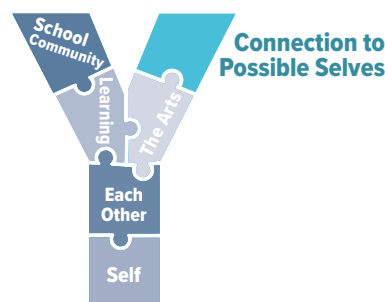
*Students perform during a community event.*



*Detail of a student created visual arts installation.*

*I think the level of connection that [artist with refugee background] has added for some of the kids ... is just indescribable. And I think getting more people in... people that they can relate to that are similar to them, that they can say, "This is me." Because so many of their role models that we show them, seeing the people who come visit, are not necessarily like them. And, while that's great, it doesn't have anywhere near the impact that [artist] had on them. (Teacher)*

## Connection to Possible Selves



Through deep engagement with artists, arts organisations and arts projects, Y Connect supported students to broaden their pathway aspirations, whilst also helping them to develop the confidence and drive to pursue these re-imagined futures. Possible selves emerge through awareness and direct lived engagement, and so the Y Connect Project was critical as a vehicle for identifying and exploring options that might otherwise have been outside their realm of experience. As academic attainment, self-regulation and persistence are all enhanced when young people broaden their range of positive possible selves, the outcomes associated with this connection have the potential for on-going and long-term impact.

## Significance for Teachers

The high attrition rate for early career teachers, which according to the Queensland College of Teachers (2013) may be up to 50%, and looming teacher shortages, mean that engaging and enjoyable approaches to teaching, are essential. In addition, for experienced teachers, revitalising practice through professional learning partnerships in the classroom, is also significant, especially given the cost of professional development activities that are delivered off-site or fail to provide teachers with the kind of learning they are looking for.

According to Matherson and Windle (2017, pp. 30-31), the professional learning teachers seek can be understood according to four themes: learning opportunities that are interactive, engaging, and relevant for their students; opportunities that show them more practical ways to deliver content; opportunities to have a voice in what they are offered in terms of professional learning; and opportunities for learning that are sustained over time. They go on to suggest that teachers need close to 50 hours of professional learning to improve practice and student learning. Given that the Y Connect model matched all of these criteria, there is an imperative

for educational leaders at all levels of policy and governance to consider the potential return on investment of employing high quality artists to work alongside their teachers.

Finally, while it is impossible to evaluate the benefits from the growth in teacher professional identity, the fact that some teachers sought to share their learning across the broader educational community should not be overlooked or undervalued.

*It gives me more confidence to use it [arts-based approaches] because I've seen the artists and how they deliver something. I can read about it but if you see it...and you're part of it, it has a great deal more impact. (Teacher)*

*I think you kind of get set in your ways...you just do the same as you did the year before...I think that it's good to shake things up a bit and think differently about how we teach. (Teacher)*

## Significance for Artists

The contributions artists can make within a range of community contexts are not always well understood or appreciated, however, within some fields this recognition is growing. By contrast, the education sector has been slower to capitalise on the possibilities that relationships with artists provide.

The Arts and artists have a long history as being fundamental to the process of educating communities and cultures through the communication of ideas and meanings. Within contemporary educational contexts however, the Arts have become increasingly marginalised. This Project has shown that artists have a key role to play in enhancing educational outcomes and as such, their involvement in education must be expanded. The Y Connect model demonstrates that effective arts-learning partnerships, embedded within curriculum contexts, can generate highly positive and important impacts for all stakeholders.



*Dance artist working with a student.*

## Significance for Policy

Within the original funding application, seven Queensland Department of Education priorities were identified as informing the Y Connect goals. They are used here as a framework for discussing the Project's potential significance in relation to education policies.

### Expanded opportunities for all students to reach their potential.

There are many social, financial and emotional barriers that can limit a young person's potential, with these sometimes being especially high for students with a refugee background. The Y Connect Project offered alternate ways of enacting curriculum and expanded opportunities for young people to engage with learning, each other, and adults, including artists. By offering these alternate approaches, a clearer sense of the real potential of some young people was revealed, while others were supported to connect more effectively to learning, developed new friendships or gained a stronger sense of belonging. These outcomes suggest that the Y Connect model allows for and assists access to expanded opportunities for young people to reach their potential.



### Creating a culture of engaging learning that improves achievement for all students.

Secondary school classrooms can too often be places where young people feel disconnected and disengaged. However, across the Y Connect Project, teachers have keenly engaged in professional learning opportunities and have worked with artists to re-plan units and re-invigorate established practices. These efforts have strengthened the already strong desire held by many teachers to modify their practices and have created a school culture where active and engaged learning is emphasised.

### Catering for students' academic, social and emotional needs.

Y Connect has been influential in supporting the academic, social and emotional needs of many Yeronga SHS students. Students' emotional needs were addressed through enhanced connection to self, while the improved connection to each other and connection to the school community nurtured the students' social and emotional needs. These connections are foundational for learning. While these connections were not apparent for every participating student, or to the same extent for every student, nevertheless through its creative approaches, the Y Connect model has shown itself to be an effective and alternate way of catering for the varied needs of students.

### Opportunities for students to make successful transitions to further education, training and employment.

Through engagement with artists and arts organisations, together with horizon-breaking excursions, internships, public performances and exhibitions, barriers that might otherwise have restricted or constrained effective transitions to further education, training and employment in the Arts have been broken down. More broadly, through participation in projects of extended duration, students have come to understand that commitment, time management, team work, creativity and focus are all required to achieve a successful outcome. These insights and the associated skills that emerge from a commitment to them, have also supported students to imagine new and richer possible selves.

### Improved learning outcomes for all students, with an emphasis on reading and writing.

The NAPLAN data outlined within this report, reinforced by the qualitative findings offered across the relevant case studies, indicate that the Y Connect Project was successful in developing

improved learning outcomes for students in several curriculum and literacy areas, particularly writing. Through arts-based pedagogies and effective teacher/artist partnerships, students at all writing standards were helped to overcome the hurdle of the blank page. At a time when Australia-wide the writing skills of secondary students, as measured by NAPLAN, are stagnant or declining, the Yeronga SHS students, especially those who have the most to gain, made solid progress in countering that trend.

### **Breaking down boundaries between disciplines and finding new ways to develop curriculum structures that are student needs focused.**

The Y Connect Project applied a transdisciplinary approach to learning and teaching, providing an effective example of how the boundaries between subjects can be broken down. For example, within the Mathematics and Movement case, dancers worked alongside mathematics teachers to promote the learning and engagement of students. Similarly, strong outcomes were achieved in the English classroom through the involvement of dance, drama and music artists. These findings indicate that arts-based transdisciplinary approaches can be effective in addressing the diverse needs of a wide range of secondary students, especially those who struggle with achievement or engagement issues.

### **Developing models of curriculum delivery that would be available to be used in other low SES contexts or with students who are disengaged or disconnected.**

Since Yeronga SHS has an ICSEA rating well below the Australian average, the findings outlined here are of key significance for similar low SES schools looking to identify curriculum delivery models suited to these contexts. By taking an alternate approach to the issue of disengaged or disconnected students, the Y Connect team has created an innovative and successful model which other schools can replicate. As one teacher noted so eloquently, Y Connect has given teachers the opportunity to look at the learning and teaching process through “*new windows*”. However, transdisciplinary models of curriculum delivery, such as the one employed across Y Connect, have not always been well understood and have too often been overlooked. This report reveals that the Y Connect model, where the arts and artists are embedded within and across the curriculum, is a delivery model that more educators should consider.



*A community performance.*

## Conclusion

In the current educational context of secondary schooling, where young people often feel disconnected from each other, from learning, from their school community and from their futures, these findings remind us that there **are** other ways of enacting secondary education. This report demonstrates that the Y Connect way is capable of adding real value for learners and learning by employing the expertise of artists in partnership with teachers and the curriculum and making use of the power of arts-based pedagogies.

Through its long-term presence within the school community and its responsive approach to the interests and capabilities of those who participated, Y Connect has served, as one student said, “*to lower fences*”, fences that too often separate students from learning, from each other, and from both their current and future selves. In the process, it has helped to re-shape the Yeronga SHS culture, transforming it to one with the Arts as “*the soul of the school*”.

When taken together, these outcomes are clearly significant and echo the findings of many national and international studies which have also examined the impact of artist/teacher partnerships and arts-based pedagogies. The repeated emergence of highly positive outcomes such as these give rise to two key questions: why have artists and arts-based pedagogies failed to gain greater acceptance and application within the schooling sector and, how might educators and the broader community gain a better understanding of the possibilities for young people which this “*other way*” of enacting curriculum offers? We hope that the Y Connect report will make a contribution to discussions of these two questions and a further one which asks, given these highly positive findings, **Y not Connect?**

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