The KITE program

The KITE Arts Education Program at QPAC is an early childhood arts education initiative of the Queensland Department of Education and Training (DET) in partnership with the Queensland Performing Arts Centre (QPAC) and is funded with the assistance of (DET). KITE delivers relevant contemporary arts education experiences for Prep to Year 3 students and their teachers across Queensland. To achieve the vision, KITE creates and facilitates performances, participative arts projects, professional development services and partnerships.

The KITE program is based on the following principles:

- children thrive when given access to a creative life
- schools succeed in multiple ways when teachers, students and families participate in arts and cultural events
- quality arts education experiences in early childhood are of particular significance as they have the power to impact positively on brain development
- arts education programs in schools are of particular benefit to communities with limited access to cultural and economic resources
- on-going conversations with communities, households, teachers and students provoke new thinking and practices in early phase arts delivery.
The Yonder project

In 2009, KITE secured $462,000 from the Australia Council’s Creative Community Partnerships Initiative to deliver a long-term, large-scale participative arts program called Yonder. Designed for those communities with least access to the arts, Yonder is a learning project which engages young children and their school communities in deep, rich and meaningful arts participation through a process that includes:

- community consultation to build capacities for ongoing arts engagement
- professional development to advocate and profile arts based learning
- artist residencies to enable children to collaborate as co-artists
- action research to promote literacy and develop motivation and wellbeing for students, and
- students’ performances at a significant cultural organisation in and for their community so as to link schools, communities and families to local arts and cultural organisations.

Over the term of the project (July 2009 – June 2012) KITE is working with twenty schools in two education regions: South East and North Coast.

The program works in and through the arts linking schools, students and their families to the cultural infrastructure of their communities. The model demonstrates a commitment to community and cultural engagement through the education system by creating opportunities for deep interaction and collaboration in communities experiencing limited access to cultural and economic resources.


It was amazing seeing our kids performing – how smart they are...

They made me feel like I haven’t felt before and amazed
(Student, Yonder written reflections regional Queensland 2011)
How was the *Yonder* project developed?

The project was developed after research and consultation in 2007-2008 identified that children in communities with limited access to cultural and economic resources were less likely to be able to realise their own capacity to create a future beyond their immediate frames of reference. The KITE program had been trialing a process for arts immersion experiences in three different Queensland schools and found that:

- many children had not travelled beyond their own suburb or city
- none of the participating children had visited a cultural institution such as those at Brisbane’s South Bank precinct or centres within their own neighborhoods
- the children’s parents and teachers valued their young people’s creativity but did not know how to grow and support their talents, and
- arts immersion, particularly in the area of drama was of benefit to children’s learning in other areas e.g. growing conversation skills beyond instructional language.

The *Yonder* model involves several phases for the twenty schools participating in the project. In each year of the cycle all schools engage in:

- professional development conferences
- live performances generated from within the school’s community
- access to professional performances presented at QPAC or the Moncrieff theatre
- developing practice based resources
- performance artefacts and documentation, and
- on-going arts based learning (e.g. *Beyond Yonder* club and holiday programs) provided by partnership organisations.

Once within the three-year cycle each school community takes part in the more intensive Artist in Residency program (AIR). The AIR process is initially driven by teacher artists working in schools over an extended period of time to create a performance piece that culminates in a presentation at a peak cultural institution (QPAC or Moncrieff Theatre) or a similar site-specific venue selected by the school. The performance is for the community of the participants and includes exhibitions of student work and a celebration post-performance.
The children and teachers are positioned as co-creators as the performance evolves and their ideas are placed at the centre of the action. Artists work with the students to gather material, generate ideas and investigate various art forms to create the performance. Their story telling is gathered to give meaning and voice to local concerns and preoccupations.

The creative process and the quality of the performance are both critical to ensure optimal outcomes for all participants. The creative workshops support children to be active in the construction of the meta-narrative of the performance – the big story to be told by the group. These workshops include selected professional artists who can support the development of the children’s performance skills so that they can tell their group story creatively with confidence. The creative process may involve choreographers, physical theatre/circus artists, designers, digital visual artists or musicians. The teacher artists look after the process, the group culture, the quality of arts learning and community coordination. Finally, the teacher artists take on the role of producer and director.

Circling around this key-learning journey and performance are planned interactions and connection points by teacher artists with the parents and carers of the students involved, the artists in the community, the teachers of the school and local arts organisations and councils. These events are strategically planned to foster the capacity building foundations for future implementation of similar projects in the community. These entry points may include breakfasts, family arts workshops, morning and afternoon teas, parental observation of classes and the start-up party for each AIR, which includes a live performance.

A lot of these kids, they don’t get that exposure at all. So I think that’s really important and it helps them develop a confidence to experience a bigger world and you hope that it will continue.

Teacher, cited in QUT research

It helped a lot of students realize they could really write a story, for example John (year three student Yonder state school) doesn’t want to write... Drama is a way for him to develop ideas, a different hook that really hooks him in.

Teacher, Yonder participating schools Year 3 teacher: 2008

After I did the performance I thought I was sort of invincible.

Student, participating Yonder school

I want to be an actor one day and do it again.

Student, participating Yonder school

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What did we learn in the pilot that informed the Yonder project?

Following the pilot programs in 2007-2008 in which children in South East Queensland schools worked with KITE’s teacher artists and other artists who brought different skills to the project e.g. film making, KITE learned the following important lessons:

1. Working with children’s cultural ecologies including parents

The inclusion of parents from the beginning of projects ensures greater community engagement with children’s creative learning and outputs. As many parents are resistant to engage with the school, community arts workshops provide a hook to involve parents in their child’s learning and creativity.

2. Working with children’s cultural ecologies including teachers

Teachers in early childhood education settings need professional support to grow their repertoire of arts learning tools and styles.

3. The school is an important social hub

Engaging with or contributing to the social life of the school community is key to deepening engagement with children’s families. For many teachers Yonder activities provided a successful context to meet parents who had resisted other invitations to the school.

4. Emphasise the instrumental value of arts learning

Drama workshops motivated and engaged resistant readers and writers. The teachers claimed that the stimulus provided by the drama practice in their classes acted as a catalyst to extend student writing. The opportunity to perform at QPAC and to participate regularly in arts workshops allowed the students in these schools of lower socioeconomic status to ‘legitimise’ art practice and to bring to their attention the arts as another experience in life.

“It legitimises it... especially for kids who do not have art in their normal day to day life... The exposure due to finances is so limited that that they may never experience art, it is like they think I've done it my audience understands it – it's ok to do. But it needs follow up.”

Principal, participating Yonder school)

“The Ripple” Yonder performance 2010 Cremorne Theatre QPAC.

* artsQueensland
Why is the *Yonder* project important for children, their families and communities?

Children from the most disadvantaged families are already well behind their peers by age four on a range of measures that include vocabulary, early literacy and health. Deprived of early success at school many children tend to fall behind further over time. Professor Barry McGaw - a Professorial Fellow at the University of Melbourne and Chair of the Board of the Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority - refers in many speeches and articles to the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development’s (OECD) classification of Australia as a high quality/low equity education system, especially in international comparisons of reading. Also of concern, is new research by Ilan Katz of the Social Policy research Centre at the University of New South Wales (using data from the Longitudinal Study of Australian Children) which shows that even those children from disadvantaged homes who seemed bright and performed well on ability tests at the age four, went backwards by the age of nine.

Thus, the *Yonder* project is an intervention designed to provide resources for the most disadvantaged children and their families, in an attempt to reconnect them to school and community through arts participation. At the July winter holiday program a social worker attending with students observed:

*I sat with a Mum, Grandma and older sister during the final performance, the mother had tears in her eyes and said to me she was so proud of her children dancing on stage and she can't stop crying tears of joy. She said this program is so awesome and feels so fortunate her children have participated. She told me her children have been so excited to go every day, practiced the song and were dancing every night. They have also made up another song at home since learning the process. I know this family comes from very difficult background...Another young girl also comes from an extremely low social economic background and less than ideal family environment. She smiled every day of the program, she beamed with excitement and recalled all the words to the song on the second day and she sang all the way home on the bus every day.*

Social Worker, Every Child Counts, Department of Education and Training, Queensland

The OECD describes early childhood learning as 'public good' (OECD, Starting Strong 11: Early childhood education and care, Paris: Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development, 2006). *Yonder* directs resources to communities with the greatest needs so they can at least have the same level of provision as more highly resourced communities.
What are the Yonder learnings?

In 2009, QPAC and DET partnered with Creative Industries, Queensland University of Technology who provided the services of Dr Sandra Gattenhof as lead researcher, to conduct a formal evaluation of the project. In addition, KITE has its own ongoing internal evaluative processes. Both processes are concurring on several issues. The program is not without challenges:

- The changing nature of staff in schools, especially the key teachers for the project, can impede the traction of the program in schools
- Due to changing priorities and principals, two schools were not aligned with the philosophy of the program, were unable to meet the intensity of the workshop program and had to withdraw after the first year, and
- Five years for research/evaluation purposes would allow and confirm further longitudinal evidence, particularly in the area of community capacity building.

Important and successful patterns emerged in the outcomes for students, schools and communities. There are visible and explicit outcomes for students in improved social competency and the development of literacy, particularly oracy.

The class are just more energised – they feel they can do things and all their other teachers are commenting on it. It has left them with a strong sense of self and power, for our kids, that is very important.

Teacher, participating Yonder school

I’m finding they’re eager to write about what they’re doing because they’re so interested and enjoying it so much that they’ve got something immediate and they want to get it down and share it.

Teacher, cited in QUT Research

The types of things it was providing is the stuff that schools are fairly ordinary at doing is around performance, is around oral language. ... It was giving us opportunities to extend the essential learnings in the arts area. We don’t normally do it to that degree and then to try and boost the oral language and obviously the written language that goes with it because of the fabulous experiences that they’ve had... is a huge motivator.

Principal, cited in QUT research
The *Beyond Yonder* community building strategy continues to grow, developing cultural capital for community members and developing capacity for ongoing arts engagement. Key successes include:

- There has been a 75% increase in the number of families attending community workshops at Bundaberg Regional Gallery (BRAG). Bundaberg Regional Council is recording increased visits to cultural institutions such as BRAG and the library.
- All reports indicate that 90% of families at the commencement of the project have not visited a local arts and cultural institution. Post program, many who have been introduced to a local gallery, library or theatre, visit on a more regular basis.
- Logan City Council and Bundaberg Regional Council have key representatives urging ongoing arts programming and new initiatives from the KITE Program. The productive relationships established with these local councils to achieve the implementation of a variety of programs, events and workshops has provided a catalyst for further planning and ideas.
- Ongoing relationships and mentoring of community members. For example, a community arts worker from Creative Regions has worked with KITE in several capacities in the last year. In 2010 she conducted a research project to assess the feasibility of a dance residency program for the area using a $2400 grant secured from RADF through KITE advice and mentoring. This will lead to a possible residency program in Yonder schools to further build on KITE’s *Yonder* modelling.
- Key teachers are becoming arts advocates and successfully lobbying their school administration to provide artist in residence schemes.

**Beyond Yonder**

*Yonder* is an outreach program designed to privilege active participation over passive reception and to include children and families with little prior engagement in the arts. 450 students will have engaged in the intensive artist in residency program, 400 parents and carers will have engaged in the community or holiday workshop programs and 3850 children and their families will have attended a performance provided as part of the *Yonder* Program by mid 2012. (Figures are based on approximate figures from 2009-2011).

One of the key challenges for the program is to ensure a productive exit strategy is developed. To allow the work to become self generating, strategies and tools need to be set in place to leave a legacy of arts practice for the community. Future programming could research strategies to further support this – for example, how do the communities sustain popular arts events and projects?

“Stretch” *Yonder* Performance 2011 Moncrieff Theatre.
To sustain engagement after the program, the *Beyond Yonder* community building strategy has been devised in conjunction with partners. It includes a range of activities including community workshops that occur at the Bundaberg Regional Art Gallery (BRAG) throughout the year for *Yonder* families and holiday workshop programs. These programs have been implemented in the Logan areas for students with guest artists. KITE has entered a partnership with the Every Child Counts (ECC) initiative to improve outcomes for students in low SES communities by providing a whole child, whole school and whole family approach to service delivery. The partnership has enabled KITE to employ a Community Liaisons Officer for one day a week to facilitate holiday programs which continue to grow in numbers. These programs not only extend the *Yonder* project modelling, they provide local employment and training opportunities to encourage and sustain community driven arts and cultural practice.

The argument for further funding in projects such as *Yonder* has to be linked to evidence and research. Overseas research in both Chicago1 and the UK2 (Department of Culture, Media and Sports review of learning outcomes for young people participating in the arts through Creative Partnerships Program) points increasingly to the power of community and participative arts projects. John Knell reminds us In *Remaking the Case for the Arts* of the positive economic and social outcomes flowing from such strategies and the role the arts can play in helping us imagine and create more fulfilling lives in a better society. Further Australian research in this arena could support the case for the arts and analyse the best tools and methods to use in this context to improve similar type models.

*Yonder* is a community outreach program from a key cultural institution QPAC, that investigates and explores strategies to enable participation in the arts. Dr David Sudmalis, Manager of Strategic Development and Evaluation (Community Partnerships) for the Australia Council for the Arts, refers to the habituation of culture that occurs through the inclusive work of community arts in projects like *Yonder*:

> Using schools as a starting point allows communities previously isolated from the arts to have a reason to re engage, as they join with their child to enjoy and access new art activities.

Or in the words of a parent;

> Just having this time with my children has allowed me to do things I love again and to feel confident and proud of our achievements together.

Parent at BRAG Family Art workshop March 2011

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1 The Development of Early Literacies Through the Arts project is a three-year collaboration between Chicago Public Schools and Chicago Arts Partnerships in Education, 2007, [http://www.capeweb.org/](http://www.capeweb.org/)