

Dance for Life

Expressive Arts for Cultural Wellbeing
with Young People

Research and Evaluation Report

Commissioned by Kulture Break
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ISBN: 978-1-74108-529-7
DOI: 10.26183/mn6p-t215

Disclaimer

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Karin L. Mackay and Rachael Jacobs (2021).
Dance for Life. Western Sydney University.

This research was commissioned and funded by Kulture Break and through Western Sydney University Partnerships Program. In supporting the researchers, Kulture Break provided Western Sydney University access to dance classes held in Wanniassa ACT. Kulture Break has worked collaboratively with researchers on this written report and accompanying video report.

**KULTURE
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Acknowledgements

The authors of this report would like to acknowledge that this research was conducted on Ngunawal Aboriginal lands and to pay their respects to elders past and present.

The authors would also like to thank the following:

- Young people and staff who participated in the research from Kulture Break classes
- Staff at Kulture Break for their extraordinary assistance and welcoming demeanour while we conducted the research
- Research Engagement, Development and Innovation at Western Sydney University (REDI WSU) for funding support and advice
- School of Education and The Centre for Educational Research, Western Sydney University



Foreword

It has long been suggested that children and adolescents experience a high rate of mental health challenges. Until now, there has been anecdotal evidence around the positive impact of movement, music and dance in relation to mental health and well-being.

I am delighted to promote this report, which provides valuable information about the mental health and wellbeing, and hope to all Australians.

Described in this report are the findings of the dance and inclusion programs for Kulture Break between February 2020 and February 2021.

The authors of this study surveyed 45 children and adolescents from schools across the ACT, Australia, in a face to face capacity to better evaluate the benefits of these Kulture Break programs.

The findings and the recommendations detailed herein will contribute enormously to the conversation around our youth, their futures, and the impact on mental health and well-being.

I commend the team at Kulture Break and the authors of this report for their contributions to this important issue. I appreciate that such reports represent the hard work of many and take the opportunity here to acknowledge staff of the School of Education at Western Sydney University. Their commitment is incredible.

Ms Carrie-Ann Leeson

CEO Lifeline Canberra

CEO Beacon Group Australia

Kulture Break CEO: Francis Owusu



I founded Kulture Break in Canberra (ACT) in 2002 as a not-for-profit social enterprise. My vision was that Kulture Break should be an organisation that would transform young people's lives through exposure to the creative arts. Over the succeeding years, Kulture Break has been committed to the wellbeing, social inclusion, resilience and empowerment of young people to reduce their risk for developing mental health issues. My approach has been to use an early intervention approach to support young people's wellbeing, by which I mean their social connectedness, identity, self-esteem and capabilities.

My interest in dance began by teaching breakdance and hip-hop to students in local schools, and this is where the idea for 'Kulture Break' was born. The name relates back to my own experiences of growing up in regional Australia and learning for myself how difficult circumstances can be transformed through the creative arts. I firmly believe that the creative arts can be a valuable outlet for young people to express themselves and discover their inner potential. The name Kulture Break encapsulates for me how powerful creative expression can be in breaking down the negative cultural barriers, stereotypes, and self-limiting beliefs that can so often harm young people.

The Kulture Break program includes dance and music classes, mentoring programs, events, workshops and performances for schools, government agencies and community organisations across Australia and internationally. We also offer school programs to encourage young people from all backgrounds not only to develop dance skills but also to grow in confidence, improve physical health, create friendships and provide a safe space for cultural expression.

While Kulture Break began with a community service delivery model, this has now expanded to include a creative pathways to employment plan, providing creative minded young people with a portfolio of transferable skills and positive ethics that makes them job ready for future employment opportunities.

I am proud that over the years Kulture Break has become a well-recognised name and a respected organisation in our community. To date, over 400,000 young people have been impacted by its foundational message,

“You don't become somebody, you are somebody!”

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Francis Owusu'.

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Executive Summary

Background

Developing strong mental health and wellbeing of young people is one of the most pressing issues Australian society is currently facing. Anxiety and depressive disorders are increasing worldwide in adolescents, due to the convergence of rapid changes in social, political, and environmental issues. In Australia, a post-pandemic report on youth mental health and wellbeing found that 51% had difficulty completing daily tasks, with 34% experiencing high or very high levels of distress (Headspace, 2021).

Worldwide public health policy has gradually shifted from a deterministic set of individualised ill-health factors to include a more holistic view of health and wellbeing (Mackay, 2016). The World Health Organisation's definition of health has come to include social determinants, such as education, income and social protection, food and job security, housing, social inclusion, structural conflict and affordable and accessible health services. Current research indicates that social determinants '...can be more important than health care or lifestyle choices in influencing health' (WHO, 2021). What is still missing from this definition of wellbeing is the role of creative expression, arts and cultural values, which are vital to cultural wellbeing (Mackay, 2016).

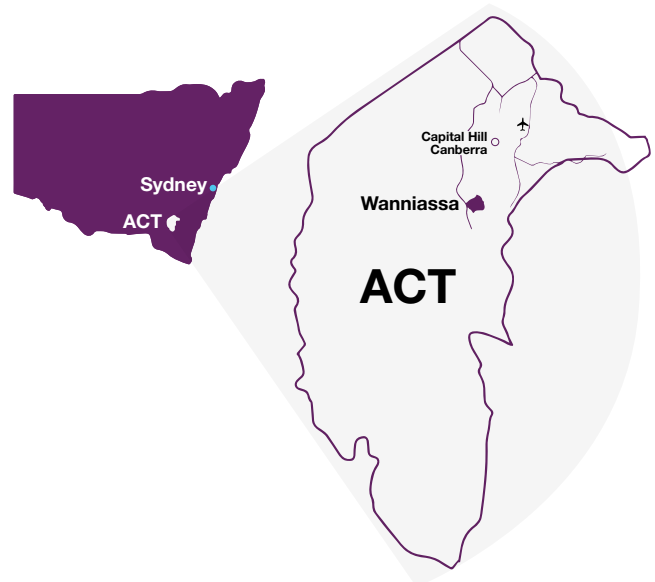
This research evaluation was commissioned by Kulture Break, a dance company with a focus on inclusion and wellbeing for young people. The aim of the research was to identify how their creative arts programs were able to influence young people's wellbeing; specifically, in terms of social inclusion, confidence, sense of belonging and life aspirations. Further to this, the research aimed to find out how dance as an expressive art can improve wellbeing and social cohesion within communities and improve understandings of how wellbeing is experienced in order to inform national arts and health policy. This evaluative research project reviewed how dance programs at Kulture Break are invested in the cultural wellbeing of the young people who attend their classes.

About Kulture Break

Kulture Break's vision is to empower and validate diverse young people with a message of hope and purpose to help them face the normal challenges of growing up, as well as deal with more serious wellbeing issues such as depression, anxiety, bullying, self-harm, social isolation and childhood obesity. Established in 2002, Kulture Break is a not-for-profit social enterprise, committed to empowering the wellbeing and inclusion of children and youth, with a focus on building self-esteem and confidence as well as reducing the risks associated with poor mental health outcomes through dance, mentoring, singing and music.



Kulture Break studios are located on Ngunawal Aboriginal lands in the ACT, Australia in an outer suburb of Canberra known as Wanniasa. The exterior of the dance studio is covered in graffiti, vibrant street art with more than a hint of subversion. Without that decoration, the studio would be just another one of a collection of low-rise recreational amenities edging the extensive carpark that surrounds the Erindale shopping centre.



Some classes are also conducted at Tuggeranong and Gungahlin. Wanniasa is approximately 25 minutes' drive on the outskirts of Canberra, Australia's capital city. Canberra is considered to be part of regional Australia and is a three-hour drive from Sydney in New South Wales, the nearest major centre. The distance is significant in terms of future aspirations and opportunities for young people residing in Canberra who may wish to pursue further study in dance at appropriate Higher Education institutions.

Demographically, Wanniasa is a predominantly middle-class suburb with most people having attained a higher than average standard of education. Most people are employed in professional occupations, with 19% listed as being employed by the Central Government Administration (ABS 2016). English is the predominant language spoken at home and ethnic background highly Eurocentric, with 26% of English heritage and 25% claiming Australian ethnicity.

Project Intentions and Purpose

Kulture Break commissioned Western Sydney University researchers to conduct evidence-based research to investigate the impact of its dance programs on student wellbeing. The organisation wanted researchers to investigate

- The impact of creative arts engagement on student mental health and wellbeing
- The empowering impact of learning in creative environments
- How creative cultural dance programs can assist students overcome challenging circumstances
- How the creative arts can impact on student's future aspirations.

Scope of this evaluation

This evaluation report has been commissioned by Kulture Break to independently evaluate their dance and inclusion programs using a Cultural Wellbeing approach (Mackay 2014). Researchers from The School of Education at Western Sydney University were commissioned by Kulture Break in December 2019, with research activities conducted between February 2020 and February 2021. Specifically, the evaluation investigated how Kulture Break programs contributed to participants' sense of belonging

and social connectedness through creative dance expression. The evaluation canvassed a total of 53 people including 6 classes (45 students), ranging in age from 9 to 35 years and a further 8 administration and coaching staff. While it was noted that Kulture Break worked with schools in the ACT, the evaluation and research predominantly focused on Kulture Break's studio classes which were evaluated through face-to-face interviews and performance-based focus groups.

The purpose of the evaluation is to inform Kulture Break staff on best practice for wellbeing programs and to improve the student experience for those who attend Kulture Break. Another important purpose of the evaluation was to provide quality evidence regarding achievements and areas of development so that the desired expansion of Kulture Break programs beyond the ACT could be systematically enacted. For example, recommendations from this evaluation will be used to assist Kulture Break to partner with leading mental health stakeholders and educational bodies to address national issues of mental health and wellbeing for young people. While Kulture Break compiles annual reports, conducted to communicate the impact of their programs on young people, no other external reviews or evaluations have previously taken place.



Summary of Findings

Kulture Break is a leader in the field of Dance for Wellbeing in the ACT. The results of this small-scale but rigorous study demonstrate that Kulture Break makes a valuable contribution to the Canberra community and to individual students' lives by providing welcoming and inclusive spaces for young people to explore who they are and to develop their future aspirations. While dance and musical skills were often the initial impetus for young people to want to join Kulture Break, it was the wellbeing component of the classes that drew out their inner strengths and promoted a personal growth mindset that has been identified as the most significant and potentially life-altering feature of youth programs. In this sense, dance was the doorway to wellbeing rather than the destination.

The work of developing a personal growth mindset and combining wellbeing messaging with creative arts should be continued, expanded and celebrated. Participants in this study not only attested to the improved wellbeing of students who engage with Kulture Break, but also mentioned benefits for their families and communities. Strong relationships between Kulture Break dance programs and schools were noted but researchers did not observe school dance classes due to the COVID-19 restrictions on travel, and these were thus beyond the scope of this evaluation. Participants provided valuable insights, which will serve to further improve the processes and outcomes of Kulture Break in the future. Ten key findings are briefly documented in this executive summary, and elaborated upon in the full report.

1/ Wellbeing leadership in a regional area

The organisational culture of confidence building and individual wellbeing extends to the purposeful development of students to progress towards teaching at Kulture Break. Kulture Break's leadership, using a life experience approach, offers a significant difference from other dance organisations in the ACT. Kulture Break's approach addresses wellbeing through creative expression, especially for young people in regional areas, showing in practice how such an approach can have a significant and positive impact on young people's lives.

2/ Dance as the doorway to wellbeing

Kulture Break is, at its heart, a social wellbeing organisation. Dance is the doorway through which participants walk to achieve personal transformations. Kulture Break's mission is to **'provide early intervention programs that enhance youth empowerment, belonging, inclusion, identity, confidence and self-expression'** and dance is the vehicle through which this is achieved (Kulture Break website 2021). The values of inclusion, transformation and empowerment are highlighted in Kulture Break's website and other communications, where dance is allowed to speak for itself through videos and performance. While the culture, vision, and mission are all articulated on the website, these elements could be better aligned. A central vision statement that outlines how it will be achieved would benefit the organisation.

3/ Strong links with schools

The school programs in dance education have a strong focus on personal development and confidence. Social skills and dance skills are interwoven as participants collaborate and often work towards a culminating performance. Kulture Break has also developed a unique online movement education resource, 'Every Chance to Dance' (EC2D), supporting primary teachers to deliver sections of the Dance and Physical Education components of the Australian Curriculum. This resource fills a gap in dance education and demonstrates Kulture Break's deep investment in the flourishing of dance beyond their own classes. While the resource is useful for the performative aspect of dance, there is scope for Kulture Break to extend its support in the areas of 'Creative making of dance' and 'Responding to dance', both elements that feature strongly in the Australian Curriculum.

- 4, Belonging and community connectedness**

Friendship, family and a sense of belonging are integral to the Kulture Break experience. A sense of appreciation for the individual and their differences emerged as a strong theme in student interviews. This awareness of inclusivity leads to a sense of belonging in which wellbeing is fostered. The intersection between feeling part of a community and a reduction of stress was apparent in many student interviews. Recognition of this is vital for the protection of young people's mental health and wellbeing and it must be commended, continued and expanded in creative ways.
- 5, Confidence building through self-expression**

Kulture Break's inclusive community of acceptance and belonging results in increased confidence for students. Physical self-expression, developing new skills and having a creative outlet also led to improved confidence, with many students commenting that they flourished through positive body awareness. Dance allows connections with others, and is a vehicle through which students can encourage each other and grow together. Students are additionally enabled to build their confidence by taking part in performances and events.
- 6, Diversity and inclusion**

One of Kulture Break's strength lies in its diversity of staff, which includes students, ambassadors, interns and community members. The diversity provides a rich mix of ethnicity, cultural background, neurodiversity and disability and allows targeted programs. This supports a strong sense of acceptance, which was evident in students' comments. Students with disabilities and neurodivergence are particularly encouraged to access Kulture Break targeted dance programs and can experience an inclusive culture in all classes. Once again, dance is a doorway into a space that is welcoming and healthy in the hope of building confidence and positive sense of self.
- 7, Student voice**

Researchers noted that the environment at Kulture Break was warm and welcoming, which encouraged open dialogue for students to express their wellbeing needs. They noted some limitations on the resourcing of Kulture Break programs, but also saw the opportunity to include more student voice through development of more consultative and co-designed programs in keeping with the organisation's wellbeing mission.
- 8, Skill building and personal growth mindset**

Kulture Break offers numerous avenues for personal growth in dance and movement, particularly in its focus on hip-hop and urban dance styles. Students are also able to become teachers themselves through Kulture Break's mentoring program, providing them with both pedagogical skills and potential for future employment. While Kulture Break appears to currently have limited avenues for further training in dance or creative expression outside of the organisation, researchers noted that the organisation has begun to reach out to leading educational bodies to investigate opportunities for its students.
- 9, Risk and responsibility**

When dealing with vulnerable and or impressionable young people there is a considerable duty of care that needs to be exercised. While the wellbeing messaging and intentions were strong, there were some significant gaps in risk assessment. In this area, policies, procedures and training need to be addressed to ensure the ongoing safety of staff and students. This deficiency poses significant potential future risk to the organisation and addressing it should be made a priority.
- 10, Current vision, limitations and future growth**

The forward thinking trajectory for the organisation includes a strong sense of its unique program offerings for young people in terms of mental health, social connectedness and wellbeing. Kulture Break has sought connections with ACT Health, Lifeline, and Headspace, The Department of Education and the ACT Minister for Mental Health to further develop its dance and wellbeing programs. While there is strong potential for growth and development with Kulture Break's current vision, for it to continue to flourish there needs to be succession planning and increased staff resourcing to make the most of future opportunities.

Top 6 Recommendations

The Top 6 recommendations are summarised here, with more detail provided in the full report.

This report recommends that Kulture Break:

- 1, Create a clear strategic vision statement for the next six years (2022–2027), including specific strategies on how Kulture Break will achieve its goals. This will involve consultations with key stakeholders, such as staff and students, as well as with experts in wellbeing and dance, to ensure achievable and measurable outcomes.
- 2, Collaborate with expert partners, including mental health professionals, wellbeing, educational and dance organisations to discuss specific needs-based targeted goals identified in the strategic vision.
- 3, Engage staff and students in specific wellbeing training. It is recommended that targeted wellbeing and mental health tools are developed. Provide appropriate training for those working with young vulnerable students and identify referral pathways to appropriate support and counselling services.
- 4, Mentor and expose advanced students, interns and teachers to a range of pathways for careers in dance and the arts. It is strongly advised that expert dance and arts teachers be invited as guest presenters.
- 5, Align social programs to Kulture Break's strategic vision. Prioritise and diversify social programs so that these can cater to a broader range of young people, including those who are gender or ethnically diverse. One way to identify this need may be to regularly consult with students and teachers about the current needs of classes.
- 6, Broaden the organisation's leadership for succession and growth. One way to achieve this is to share the load for program development with those who have expertise in key areas of dance, wellbeing, mentoring and leadership. Kulture Break could consider new roles in these areas to grow the organisation.



Global and national youth mental health and wellbeing

How a nation nurtures mental capital, mental health and wellbeing, through adequate education, economic security, housing, healthcare, psychological and cultural safety, and through equal access to opportunity, will have a significant effect on its economic competitiveness and prosperity, and the collective wellbeing and resilience of communities. (Atkinson, 2020)

According to the United Nations report *Youth Mental Health* (2014), 20% of young people worldwide will experience a mental health condition, with the greatest risk being in the transition period of adolescence. Mental health-related behavioural conditions are the leading cause of ill health in young people in both low- and high-income nations (UN, 2014).

Tragically, suicide is the fifth highest cause of death for youth globally, and the second highest in high-income countries. Apart from the lost potential through suicide, there is a significant burden associated with mental health conditions for individuals and communities. For instance, mental health conditions can both cause and perpetuate poverty cycles and social exclusion. Other effects on young people are low engagement, poor academic performance, diminished workforce readiness, independence and social integration.

The COVID-19 pandemic of 2020 has disrupted familial and social communities through unemployment, unpredictable changes in accommodation, closure of entertainment venues and restricted access to education whenever technology is unavailable. The flow-on effects of isolation and delayed aspirations are yet to be fully felt. Recent indicators suggest that there is an avalanche of unmet need, seen in an exponential rise in demand for physiological and counselling help, resulting in enormous pressure on mental health services.

In response to COVID-19 The Australian Government changed its mental health policy on consultations from 6 to 20 visits for eligible clients. While well intentioned, this has led to more people than ever accessing mental health services, with many finding timely access to appointments becoming very difficult. This means that many people are not able to access help, despite consistent messaging telling them that help is just a phone call away, through Lifeline, Headspace, Beyond Blue, 1800RESPECT and so on. Services providers are currently overwhelmed and just as frustrated as their clients.

Even before this crisis in service delivery, it was recognised that interventions at a clinical level were not always youth-friendly and programs did not always match the needs and preferences of young people. It is known that educational and community settings can also be effective in reducing suicide-related behaviour in young people at risk (Oades, 2014).

Risk factors for young people developing a mental health condition have been identified as bullying, stress, trauma, peer rejection, exposure to conflict and poverty. However, the biggest factor is the accumulation of any or all of these stressors. To avert concomitant anxiety and depression, which are common mental health disorders in young people, Headspace (the National Youth Mental Health Foundation), offers tips for a healthy headspace:

Be active, do things you love, make connections and learn skills to support you in tough times.

In regional areas many of these pathways might be unavailable and accessing professional care face to face on a regular basis impossible.



Wellbeing in regional and rural Australia: opportunities and challenges for young people in the ACT

People living in regional, remote or very remote areas of Australia encounter barriers to accessing health care and mental health services that are not experienced by people living in major cities (ReachOut, 2020). People in remote or very remote areas are less likely to be seen within four hours in an emergency and more likely to delay seeing a GP because of cost. In this report, however, we are looking at a regional area that is well-endowed with services, where statistics in relation to employment and mental health services for young people go against national trends. Although youth unemployment in Canberra increased slightly in March 2021, to 10.3%, it is still lower than the national average of 11.5% recorded during the early phases of the COVID-19 crisis.

Nevertheless, this figure of 10.3% is still more than twice as high as the adult unemployment rate of 4.1%. It is also twice as high as the national unemployment rate of 5.8%. This reflects the greater impact of COVID-19 on young people and relates to the type of casual and service industries employment once but no longer available to young people leaving school.

This is also a recurring trend. In 2016 the Australian Youth Development Index (AYDI) revealed that the Australian Capital Territory (ACT) had the highest ratio of youth unemployment compared to adult unemployment. This index also revealed a high rate of illicit drug use among Canberra's young people. The territory's Health and Wellbeing score has seen the most significant deterioration in more than ten years. In fact, all states and territories saw a decline on their score in this domain (Tanton, 2016).

While the 2020 Australia Youth Development Index noted a reduction in youth unemployment in the ACT from 2019, the largest declines were also in the ACT, in the area of Health and Wellbeing (Wood, 2020). Self harm rose from 16.60 to 20.66 per 100,000 of youth in 2019, the highest of all eight states and territories. Psychological distress also rose from 19.95% to 27.22% in 2019, the second largest increase. There were also disturbing trends in the ACT for Participation in VET, Sexual Assault, Psychological Distress and Self-Harm.

Another factor that was captured by this evaluation research concerned mobility and impermanence and how these factors link to risks for mental health. One member of the administrative staff at Kulture Break stated that:

“Canberra has a very mobile population in the sense that we have a lot of people, families in the armed forces, who move into Canberra, stay in Canberra for anything between 6 months to 3 years, move out of Canberra — they move around a lot. So, a lot of those children have to learn how to quickly make friends, because you may not be there very long. On the other hand, you don't have to try as hard at school to do well in exams, because you probably won't still be there...So I think that could be one of the challenges for Canberra youth.”

Kulture Break Staff member

Dance for Life

The ACT Government has recently adopted the Productivity Commission's Issues paper *The Social and Economic Benefits of Improving Mental Health* recommendations (PCIPMH 2019). Specifically relevant to social and emotional wellbeing in schools and community education is Recommendation 4 which states:

Governments should update the National School Reform Agreement to include student wellbeing as an outcome for the education system. This would include clear, measurable wellbeing targets. All parts of the education system would be expected to work towards achieving these targets. (Action 5.3) – To implement this, Governments should develop guidelines for initial teacher education and professional development programs, to incorporate social and emotional development and mental health. State and Territory teacher regulatory authorities should use the guidelines to accredit providers. (Actions 5.3, 5.4) – All schools should be required to report on their progress against wellbeing outcomes, as set out in an updated National School Reform Agreement. Schools would be able to apply for special purpose grants to strengthen their wellbeing policies. (Action 5.6)

The raft of recommendations in the paper are based on social and economic determinants of health, such as housing, employment, transport, education, contact with the justice system, culture and family, recognising these are as influential as clinical interventions at a population level. While acute and crisis service are still seen as an integral part of a health system, these do not represent its entirety. Therefore, the response to mental health challenges must now be seen as multifaceted.



The ACT Wellbeing Framework

The ACT Wellbeing Framework is a broad set of domains that help the researcher to contextualise societal influences on wellbeing. The framework has been adopted by the ACT government in order to better understand and measure wellbeing outcomes for Canberrans. Its development has been informed by a community consultation process with nearly 3000 Canberrans during 2019 to 2020 to investigate issues that affect their quality of life. From these consultations twelve domains for wellbeing were identified. The domains are intentionally broad in order to capture a range of factors that influence people's wellbeing. The domains are interrelated and flexible. Central to the ACT Wellbeing Framework is the domain of Personal Wellbeing, as illustrated below.

This evaluation research report focuses on the specific domains of social connectedness, identity and belonging, education and lifelong learning, and safety, as these are the domains identified by Kulture Break as central to their vision and strategy. While the ACT wellbeing Framework was used to identify the broad domains that effect wellbeing, the evaluation was conducted within the Creative Cultural Wellbeing Framework (Mackay, 2014), as it more specifically considers how creative cultural practices, such as dance, are integral to individual and community wellbeing. The Creative Cultural Wellbeing Framework is described in more detail in the Methodology section of this report.



Social connectedness, cultural wellbeing and the arts

A report of the Mental Health Commission of New South Wales highlights that social connectedness has a strong protective effect for young people's mental health, in the context of positive and supportive relationships with parents or adults. The report advocates a strengths-based approach that focuses on developing tangible and intangible assets within the family, peer groups and the community (Oades, 2014). This report also claims that resilience-building strategies are vital and that school-based programs provide an opportunity to promote a nationwide approach to linking resilience and youth mental health.

Determinants of mental health are located within a range of social and economic domains, (Oades, 2014) including:

- Social inclusion and access to supportive social networks
- Stable and supportive family, social and community environments
- Access to a variety of leisure activities
- Having a social position that is valued
- Physical and psychological security
- Opportunity for self-determination and control of one's life
- Access to meaningful employment, education, income and housing

While there has been broad agreement worldwide that a social determinants approach to wellbeing is the way forward, the Australian Government has been slow to implement arts and wellbeing policy. For example, there has been no updated national framework for arts and health since 2013, with the current Mental Health and Wellbeing Framework lacking any mention of the arts in connection with wellbeing. In contrast, The New Zealand and the ACT governments have both begun to implement frameworks for cultural wellbeing, albeit these seem to be adopting a human capital and economic approach rather than an arts and heritage approach.

Cultural practices and participation are key factors for social and personal wellbeing and contribute to citizens' ability to deal with social and economic change. The UK Arts and Humanities Research Council report has highlighted the significance of the arts, deepening our understanding of how arts and culture are intrinsic to human wellbeing (Crossick & Kazynska, 2016). Similarly, the Australian National Arts and Health Framework (2013), has acknowledged the multiple benefits of the arts to health and wellbeing, including a specific reference to social connectedness and promoting mental health through dance.

Mackay's Creative Cultural Wellbeing Framework (2014)

Cultural wellbeing is broadly understood to be 'The vitality that communities and individuals enjoy through participation in recreation, creative and cultural activities [and] the freedom to retain, interpret and express their arts, history, heritage and traditions' (Creative NZ, 2017). Mackay's Creative Cultural Wellbeing Model (2014) emerged from a practice-based community arts approach. The model includes a nexus of five key elements that have been identified as influential in creative cultural wellbeing. These are:

1. Shared experience
2. Transformational processes
3. Creative cultural practices
4. Environment
5. Values and belonging



The Creative Cultural Wellbeing Framework (CCWF) used in this evaluative project was developed by Mackay (2014) over 15 years and 6 longitudinal research projects with diverse communities. The framework draws upon earlier definitions of cultural wellbeing that recognise the importance of freedom to express and participate in creative and cultural activities such as arts, history, heritage and traditions (Creative NZ, 2017).

The CCWF differs from other wellbeing frameworks in that it recognises the vital role played by creative, expressive and collectivist aspects of wellbeing and how these domains intersect. Five key elements that have been identified as influential in creating cultural wellbeing are accommodated in this framework:

1. Shared experience
2. Transformational processes
3. Creative cultural practices
4. Environment
5. Values and belonging.

Importantly, these elements are in constant motion rather than static, thus reflecting naturalistically how changing life experiences impact on wellbeing in unexpected ways.

The nexus of wellbeing factors is certainly not static in this model. The model recognises a host of external and internal factors that constantly come together and break apart to impact on a person's wellbeing. Mackay's transformational Creative Cultural Wellbeing Framework has formed the basis of the approach taken in this research which looks at wellbeing with a focus on the cultural and creative practice of dance.



The Dance For Life Project

Canberra is an arts-rich regional centre, with more people participating in dance than in any other state or territory in Australia. Dance is taught, with varying degrees of rigour, as part of the Creative Arts curriculum in primary and secondary schools and is often offered as an elective for Year 11 and 12 students. Community dance classes are available in over a hundred different dance styles, including western styles, such as ballet, tap and jazz, to culturally influenced styles and urban styles such as hip-hop and break dancing. Canberrans are actively encouraged to engage in dance, often through government-funded programs or advocacy from organisations such as AusDance, the peak body for dance.

Although the dance styles mentioned above reflect diverse but traditional western dance practices, there are other cultural forms of dance available to ACT residents. Koomurri Management is a self-funded, Aboriginal-owned cultural group that offers workshops in ceremony, story, performance and post-colonial history to school groups, sporting clubs and management teams. Other dance companies focus on African fusion, South Asian or Latin American dance styles, all with robust numbers of participants attending classes and events.

Research problem

Supporting mental health and developing wellbeing of young people is a pressing issue that Australian society is currently facing. Depression, anxiety, suicide, drug and alcohol abuse, social isolation and childhood obesity are all significant youth issues. Anxiety and depressive disorders are increasing in adolescents, with social, political, and environmental causes implicated. Significantly, racism, discrimination and othering are strongly linked to a sense of isolation and a feeling of not belonging for many young people and has been reported as particularly problematic for regional and rural Australia (Mackay, 2019; Al-Natour 2019). Despite the enormity of the problem, entrenched stigma and limited understanding prevent many of these young people from getting help. The risks of untreated mental health disorders are academic failure, substance abuse and sometimes a clash with the juvenile justice system, all bringing significant burdens to young people, their families and the community (Child Mind Institute 2021).

Kulture Break is an organisation that aims to promote inclusion and a sense of belonging for youth in regional Australia. The organisation was established in 2002 as a not-for-profit social enterprise addressing mental health and wellbeing through dance, music and mentoring. Since that time, Kulture Break has reached thousands of young people and expanded to include many varied community and schools programs of dance and performance. Reaching a turning point in its strategic direction, Kulture Break commissioned researchers from Western Sydney University to evaluate their youth programs to ensure that they align with the company's stated values to change lives in positive and inspiring ways.

This evaluation took place in the shadow of a global pandemic, COVID-19, which has profoundly affected the health and wellbeing of all citizens, including young people. This is a time when, more than ever, strong mental health and wellbeing of young people is paramount. It was therefore important to conduct investigative research to identify strategies for organisations such as Kulture Break to help them in their quest to improve cultural wellbeing and social cohesion. Such research will also help all stakeholders to better understand how those research outcomes can inform national wellbeing policy. This evaluative research project has sought to achieve this through reviewing how dance programs at Kulture Break are intrinsic to the developing wellbeing of young people who attend their classes.

Research Aims

The purpose of this research project was to examine the impact of creative arts engagement on Kulture Break students' mental health and wellbeing. Therefore, the project developed rigorous evaluation tools to determine whether creativity-based programs could make a difference to young people's sense of wellbeing. Specifically, the research analysed Kulture Break's programs and their impact, with particular emphasis on the ways that Kulture Break programs can help students overcome challenging circumstances as well as strive towards their future aspirations. The project also identified successful and less successful aspects of Kulture Break's practices.

This project used qualitative methods to:

- Assess the impact of current Kulture Break creative arts and mentoring programs in terms of their wellbeing intentions
- Examine the role of dance as a conduit for achieving wellness outcomes
- Match organisational goals with proposed changes to organisational structure
- Examine the role of dance as a conduit for improved cultural wellbeing.

Project Summary

The aim of the evaluation of Kulture Break programs is to determine the effectiveness of creativity-based programs and to further investigate how a cultural wellbeing approach can make a difference to young people's sense of wellbeing.

There is growing evidence that engaging with the arts improves the lives and wellbeing of communities, promoting better health and improved educational and employment outcomes. This research project and evaluation report aims to investigate how engagement in dance alongside cultural expression can create and foster a sense of belonging, confidence and connectedness for a diverse range of young people.

Research Questions

This evaluation was guided by the following three research questions:

1. How can Kulture Break maximise the effectiveness of their programs in delivering wellness, inclusion and empowerment outcomes to participating youth?
2. How can Kulture Break improve and scale these programs to be able to reach other communities and improve mental health outcomes for more young people?
3. In what particular ways might Kulture Break align themselves to the first goal of their Strategic Plan 2014–2020 and 'Break New Ground'?

Research Approach

The research and evaluation was underpinned by the Creative Cultural Wellbeing Framework (CCWF) with a focus on social connectedness and belonging in tandem with the creative and cultural practices of dance. A performance methodology specific to dance expression was also used.

A wellbeing approach acknowledges the complex nexus of cultural beliefs, values, lived experiences of place and how these influence both individual and community wellbeing (Mackay, 2014). The Creative Cultural Wellbeing model that is applied in this research demonstrates how creative cultural practices can mediate the trauma of disconnection from place, help to reimagine new ways of being and offer young people hope towards aspirational futures (Mackay, 2014, 2018, 2019). It uses a holistic approach that seeks to create meaning and purpose in young people's lives, so they can express their identity in relation to community.

This methodology is gaining acceptance worldwide. It is increasingly the subject of academic research and has been adopted by governments in New Zealand, the United Kingdom and Finland. Cultural wellbeing is a complex nexus of cultural beliefs, values and lived experiences of places, and these elements influence both individual and community wellbeing. This nexus of practices—referred to collectively as 'creative cultural practices'—are meaningful life-sustaining expressions of people's belief systems; they are expressed in art, stories, ritual celebrations, and, of course, in dance.

A Cultural Wellbeing approach offers a more holistic way to understand how risk factors can interact to influence health and wellbeing. Too often the symptoms of mental ill-health are treated in isolation from other intersecting factors that influence individual experience. For example, understanding what is meaningful, gives purpose and is culturally significant in a young person's life is critical to understanding their mental health and wellbeing needs. Apart from trying to see wellbeing in terms of a person's sense of identity, connectedness and belonging, Cultural Wellbeing recognises external societal factors that may impede a person's ability to flourish fully within the community. These include discrimination, marginalisation, devaluing of cultural practices that differ from those of the dominant culture, insecure and underpaid work, housing stress, underemployment, low income, disconnection from family and displacement from country of birth.

What sets the Creative Cultural Wellbeing model apart from more medicalised models of mental health wellbeing approaches is the vital addition of creative expression through arts and heritage that provides space for individuals and communities to be heard, seen, listened to, acknowledged and become self-determining. In this way Cultural Wellbeing moves beyond a model of treating symptoms to one of critical creative agency. This can remedy the effects of social isolation, displacement and disempowerment to ultimately bring about positive societal change.

Performance-based methodology

Dance and movement are primal modes of expression that allow representation of things that cannot be said in words. While engaging in dance, participants build self-confidence and also feel connected to those around them through what is a collective experience. This leads to improved happiness and sense of wellbeing. Investigating the experience of performance with research methods has featured in a range of studies (Boydell, 2020; Boydell, Hodgins, Gladstone & Stasiulis, 2017), as researchers have sought to capture authentic voices from dance participants. In the context of the present research, the participants all lead movement-filled lives and are able to communicate effectively using the body. The researchers used existing performance methodology in their field visits in the hope of harvesting rich, nuanced accounts of participants' experiences of dancing and Kulture Break programs.

Using interviews and focus groups the research project collected data and analysed it using the Cultural Wellbeing Framework (Mackay, 2014). This methodology incorporates the imagination, creativity, relationship to place and spiritual practice as key indicators of cultural wellbeing.

COVID-19 and the impact on research

In November 2019 the researchers visited Canberra to watch Kulture Break's end-of-year show. This allowed the researchers to gather contextual information about Kulture Break, its practices, community relations and ways of operating. Initial meetings were held with the Kulture Break CEO and members of staff; however, no formal data was gathered on this initial visit.

By March, 2020, COVID-19 and lockdowns threatened the continuation of the research study, creating a great deal of uncertainty around its schedule. Students were required to remain at home and no dance classes could continue until the ACT Government permitted reopening of community activities. Even then, as we know now, social distancing, registration, enforced hygiene rules and the wearing of masks created an uncomfortable atmosphere of hyper-vigilance and vulnerability.

Although Canberra experienced three deaths in this phase of the pandemic, by early August 2020 there were no more active cases of COVID-19. In the Stage 3 recovery plan, restrictions on food-courts, casinos, community sporting activities and group bookings at bars were eased. The number of patrons allowed at gym and health club facilities was raised and this meant that Kulture Break could recommence classes.

The research team and the artistic and administrative staff at Kulture Break maintained contact over this time through regular Zoom meetings. Six Zoom meetings were held from late April, 2020 to mid-September, when the research team visited Canberra and face-to-face data collection could actually begin.

The research visit

The research team arrived in Canberra for a two-day field research trip on Thursday, September 17th and Friday the 18th September 2020. The return of signed consent forms gave the team permission to engage 45 students in face-to-face interviews, which were filmed. A number of Kulture Break classes were observed by one of the research team, who also engaged the students in performance methodology: a movement-based focus group in which dance and movement were used to create embodied responses to the research questions.

The research team conducted interviews with students who were attending class that afternoon/evening who had consented, with their parents, to be interviewed. The first class observed was Learning Skills for Life class, an inclusive class for students with special needs, with five students. Later that evening, three hip-hop classes were observed with some consenting students being interviewed. Not all students chose to be interviewed; however, the research team interviewed all students who wanted to be heard.

The performance methodology guided the interviews, which were recorded and also filmed. On Friday morning the research team interviewed nine Kulture Break staff, made up of administrative staff and dance teachers or coaches.

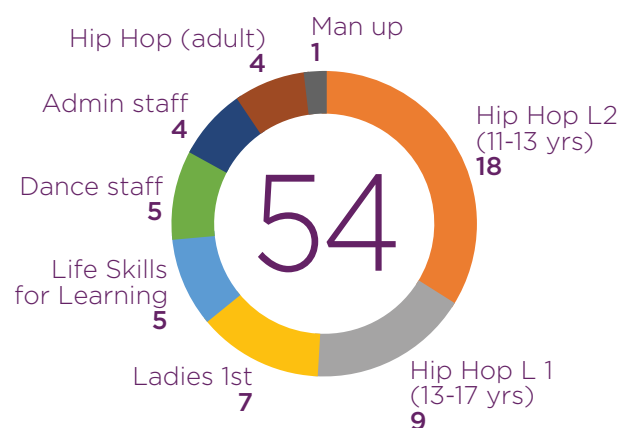
The face-to-face interviews

The researchers used a set of semi-formal interview questions (see Appendix A) over two days to conduct videoed interviews of approximately 20 to 40 minutes each. Interviews were filmed with the intention of collecting quality data as well as developing a video record. Participants attending class (whose parents had consented to their participation in the research) were asked if they wanted to participate in the interview and were withdrawn from class for a short period. Students had the research project verbally explained to them and were asked if they were willing to answer a series of short questions.

The research team asked questions that focused on each individual's feelings towards their own Kulture Break experience. Participants were invited to reflect on their impressions of the programs offered, the skills they have acquired, their wellbeing experiences, the benefit and challenges they experienced during the programs, and to express any other reflections on the programs that might arise during the interview. Energy amongst the participants was enthusiastic and engaged, something that perhaps reflected the welcome return to class time and the end of COVID-19 restrictions.

Primary students were then offered a range of emojis to circle in response to questions about confidence, friendship and their general level of happiness. Finally, all students were asked how they felt about the suspension of face-to-face classes and how they think the pandemic has impacted on their wellbeing in general.

Number interviewed by focus group



Movement-based focus groups

The research team contained one researcher with a background as a dancer, choreographer and studio owner. They formed movement-based focus groups, based on performance methodology theory. Permission from teachers was sought and given prior to the research team's arrival. The researcher began by conducting a class warm-up to introduce students to the exercise, establish familiarity with the environment, and also to build rapport with other learners. They then invited the class to devise dance activities that would illustrate their experience at Kulture Break. The students were given re-phrased versions of the individual interview questions and were asked to respond in movement, freeze frame or choreography, in a pair or in a group. Students were asked to show through movement how they felt about coming to Kulture Break; what they missed most about Kulture Break during the lockdown and their most satisfying moment at Kulture Break. This exercise fed into one of the three questions the students then discussed during their focus groups, which concerned arts practice, in this case dance and music, and wellbeing.

These embodied focus groups were video-recorded with the participants' permission, and analysed together with other data. The students reacted positively to the expressive dance-based, immersion experience which led to a discussion. Both these research tools combined took approximately 30-45 mins to execute.

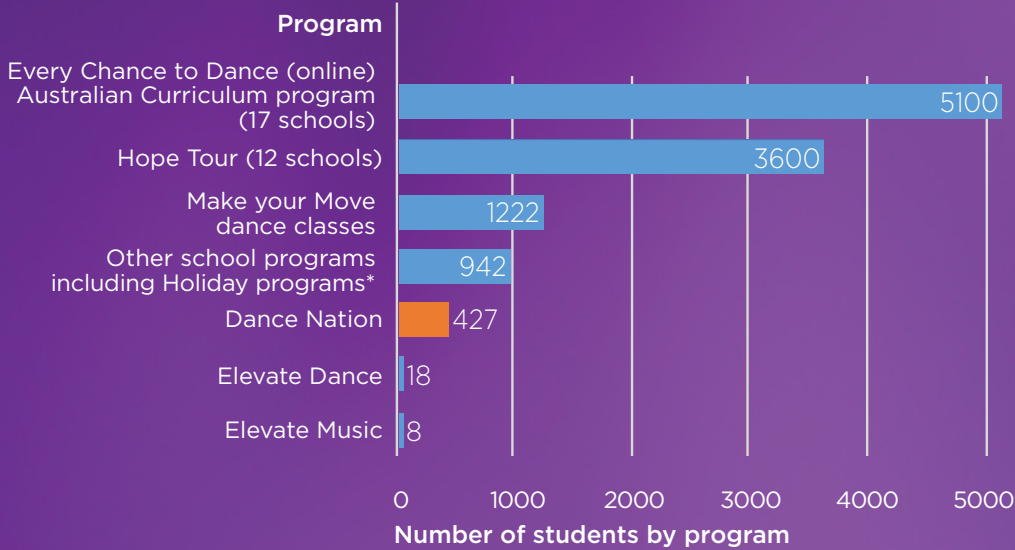
Apart from the focus groups associated with the classes above, the research team also joined a fifth class, Ladies 1st, with nine participants between 12 and 16 years old. This group was not conducting a dance class at the time, but held a discussion ahead of a social movie and pizza night. The group was also engaged in a movement-based focus group, which was successful in building rapport with the researchers and unlocking the ability to articulate their experiences and feelings about themselves and Kulture Break.

Data Analysis

De-identification of the interviews and focus group data was undertaken to anonymise participants. Data from individual interviews and focus groups was extracted through multiple viewings of the videos. The data was collated then analysed, with emerging themes identified in order to address the research questions. An analysis of Kulture Break's website, and Strategic Plan 2014–2020 was carried out. Common themes across the interviews, focus groups and document examination were analysed in response to the research questions and project aims, with relevant findings highlighted. Key findings were discussed among the research team, and data was revisited to find illustrative quotes for each of the findings. Quotes from interviews and focus groups were selected to highlight major turning points in the data. The relevant findings were edited for readability and flow.



2019 Program Participants



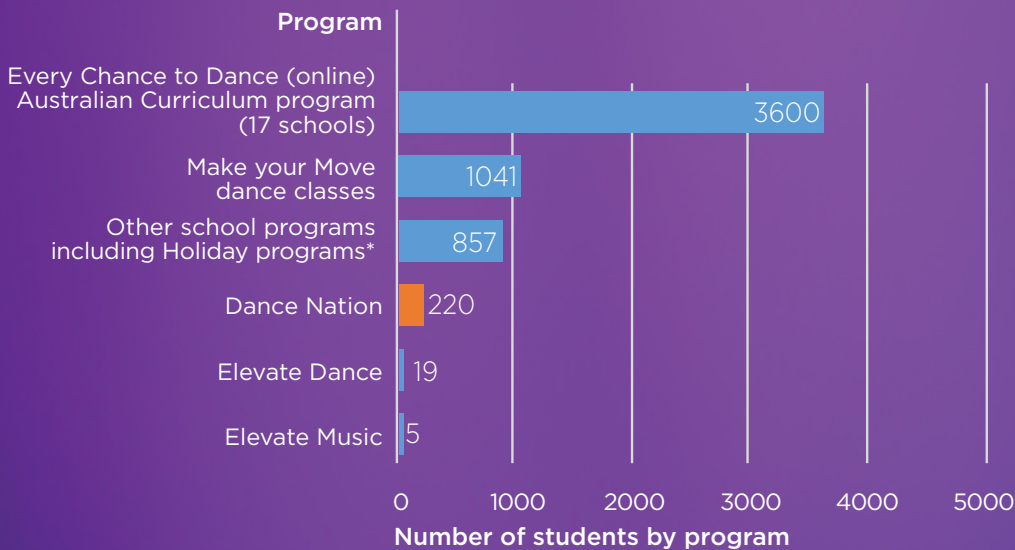
*2019 Schools / Holiday programs

- CGS horizons
- St Benedicts
- Canberra Grammar School
- Kaleen
- Canberra Girls Grammar
- Alfred Deakin
- Marist College
- Mawson OOHSC
- Learning Skills for Life
- Hughes
- St Gregory's
- Caroline Chisholm
- Embracing Ministries
- Holiday Program

Total students reached 942

Total 11,317 program participants

2020 Program Participants



*2020 Schools / Holiday programs

- CGS Horizons Holiday Program
- CGS Co Curricular Program
- Canberra Grammar School
- Fraser Primary School
- St Gregory's Primary
- Embracing Ministries

Total students reached 857

Total 5,742 program participants

Findings: Dance for Wellbeing

1 / Wellbeing leadership in a regional area

The development of leadership and facilitation skills is a prominent focus at all levels of the Kulture Break organisation. The organisation's culture of confidence building and wellbeing extends to the purposeful development of students to progress towards teaching at Kulture Break. Dance participants are encouraged to progress their knowledge and skills of dance over several years of attending dance classes. Young students from 16 years of age who have taken the opportunity to teach classes, have shared their immense enjoyment and personal self-esteem benefits and stated that, while challenging, they had learnt invaluable career skills and life skills from their experiences of teaching dance.

The life experiences of students are central to both the dance skill development and the wellbeing messaging at Kulture Break. The dance and wellbeing model developed by CEO, Francis Owusu, is based on his own lived experience that he used as a young man to overcome challenges when moving from a city to regional area. The life experience approach includes story, art expression, connectedness values, place and belonging aligns well with Mackay's Cultural Wellbeing model (Mackay 2014) as it demonstrates the ever shifting nature of wellbeing as opposed to an assumption that wellbeing is static.

Kulture Break's leadership in dance and wellbeing using a life experience approach is a critical difference to other dance organisations in the ACT. Kulture Break offers visionary leadership in how to address wellbeing needs through creative expression for young people in regional areas showing in practice how their approach can have a significant and positive impact on young people's lives.

“It was here that I found my confidence and self-esteem. It was a warm loving environment. I learnt skills through a 1-year internship opportunity...that was amazing! I had a full-time job and was living the dream. I have experienced public speaking in schools to inspire them [students]. I am interested in youth work, mental health, mentoring in school settings, doing more in schools. I am now doing a diploma in leadership with Francis and others.”

Student and now dance teacher at Kulture Break

Learning about and through wellbeing was incorporated into the classes directly through focusing on wellbeing-related themes and spending time before and after classes for approximately 15 minutes to ask students to discuss their own wellbeing. For example, teachers asked students how their week had been, what positive experiences they could share, as well as what difficulties they might be facing.

Positive self-talk was also used within the classes to bolster young people's self-esteem. For example: 'You do not become somebody—you are somebody'. A strengths-based focus on what individuals could achieve was reinforced through the dance classes, with encouraging language like 'You may not get it first go but the main thing is you keep trying'. This approach to teaching dance was in contrast to what a number of young people experienced at other dance classes in the area, which they felt had an overly competitive dance culture.

“It’s not about competition or anything, it’s just about having fun.”

Student

In response to the needs of students, Kulture Break has developed more specific classes targeted on wellbeing. These classes are Ladies 1st and Man Up. One participant expressed how she felt about the Ladies 1st program by saying.

“No matter what you are going through in life you could bring that to Ladies 1st. I felt accepted and included. Everyone is valued.”

Student

The Ladies 1st participants reported that this group had been an important sanctuary for them where they found support and were able to discuss issues in their lives ranging from bullying, sexual identity, family tensions and hope and dreams for the future. While gender-based groups play an important role in creating a safe space, there also needs to be consideration of similar spaces for LGBTQI young people.

It was noted that Kulture Break instigated a child safe policy in May 2020 with use of software from Childsafe, an initiative of Scripture Union Australia. This actively manages staff and volunteer appointments, including Working with Children Checks. The Kulture Break child safe policy advises on staff to student ratios, the use of respectful language and ensuring clear and safe boundaries between staff and students, specifically in relation to touching.



2/ Dance as the doorway to wellbeing

“A lot of people see us as a dance class...and we’re more than that and it’s been a challenge to get people to understand that what we’re doing is giving people a safe place to be and early intervention.”

Kulture Break staff member

Kulture Break is simultaneously a social program and a dance organisation. This evaluation has enquired into the relationship between dance and wellbeing. We conclude that Kulture Break is an organisation with a mission to ‘Provide early intervention programs that enhance youth empowerment, belonging, inclusion, identity, confidence and self-expression’ (Kulture Break website) and dance is the vehicle through which this is achieved. Kulture Break’s website explains the culture, vision, mission, end goal and origin story, but does not mention dance. It is, indeed, possible to engage with Kulture Break without dancing, via one of the mentoring and leadership programs such as Ladies 1st or Man-Up, which are wellbeing-focused.

Having said this, Kulture Break offers high-quality dance instruction, choreography, artistic experiences and performances. Some of its programs for more committed and developed dancers reflect a culture of excellence and high achievement. Kulture Break is known throughout Canberra as one of the powerhouses of urban dance and hip-hop, and this attracts many participants to join its classes. Yet Kulture Break is modest about its growing reputation. None of its advertising materials promote ‘dance excellence’ in the way that other studios might. Instead, the values of inclusion, transformation and empowerment are highlighted and the dance is allowed to speak for itself through videos and performance. Kulture Break is, at its heart, a social wellbeing organisation. Dance is a doorway through which participants walk to arrive at personal transformation.

“I think giving kids a space to be who they are in a safe empowering encouraging environment and giving them a place they can explore creative arts through concerts, singing, props, and there’s not many places you get to do that.”

Kulture Break staff member

This brings us to an analysis of the overall vision of Kulture Break. The culture, vision, mission and end goal articulated on the website are all inspirational and meaningful, but are not aligned to each other. Therefore, a central vision (and how it will be achieved) is required. Additionally, the current vision statement is somewhat passive compared to what Kulture Break is able to achieve. For example, the vision to ‘influence a culture’ is less concrete than the goals set out in Kulture Break’s mission.

3/ Strong links with schools

Kulture Break’s engagement in the schools sector in Canberra is significant with an impressive breadth of coverage across the city. The school programs of dance education are robust and age-targeted, with a strong focus on adolescent personal development as well as physical wellbeing.

“Dance has made me more mentally and physically active.”

Student

“You learn to take care of your body because your body is like your instrument.”

Student

Primary and high school programs promote wellbeing through confidence building, identity and inclusivity. Social skills and dance skills are interwoven as participants collaborate and often work towards a culminating performance. Schools programs are often themed, connecting dance activity to personal growth and self-esteem as they perform a celebratory routine that enables them to shine as individuals. Themes are usually chosen by Kulture Break staff or school teachers, but in some cases participants can have a say in the theming, messaging, artistic direction or choreography.

On the Kulture Break website, the goals and benefits of school programs are clearly outlined. It is claimed that the programs are linked to the Australian Curriculum, although the website does not specify in what way.

Like many dance organisations, Kulture Break offers workshops, performances and shorter dance education sessions in schools. Once again, these are positively themed around messages of empowerment and resilience.

GOALS AND BENEFITS

- The program enhances student wellbeing, dance skills and social skilling
- The program attracts positive attention and publicity for your school community
- The program increases connectedness and community between ACT schools with the educational directorate
- The program has links to the Australian Curriculum outcomes

TERMS



CLASS FEES



REGISTRATION



Kulture Break has also developed a unique movement resource, 'Every Chance to Dance' (EC2D), supporting primary teachers to deliver sections of the Dance and Physical Education components of the Australian Curriculum. This resource is vital. The Arts (the curriculum in which Dance sits in the Australian Curriculum) and Health and Physical Education are two learning areas that are notoriously under-resourced and few professional development opportunities are provided, particularly at the primary level. Although not strictly part of this evaluation, it is worth noting that this resource includes lesson plans and practical ideas for classes. The resource de-mystifies dance, an area in which most Primary teachers have little efficacy (Jacobs, 2020) and fills a gap in dance education. It demonstrates that Kulture Break is invested in supporting the flourishing of dance beyond their own classes. They believe in the creative capacity of school teachers and want to see teachers capable of integrating dance into the classroom for the benefit of all students. Kulture Break is simultaneously establishing itself as a pedagogical authority on dance in the region. While the resource appears to concentrate on the performative aspect of dance, there is ample scope to provide additional support in the areas of 'Creative making of dance' and 'Responding to dance', both of which are emphasised in the Australian Curriculum.

4/ Belonging and community connectedness

Friendship, family and a sense of belonging are integral to the Kulture Break experience; students interviewed for this report repeated these words like a mantra: 'I feel like I belong here. I feel welcome', 'I feel safe here', 'People become your friends. People become your family'. In their interviews, students reflected repeatedly that Kulture Break offered a unique space in which they can make friends, form strong bonds and feel accepted. For some students, this was not happening in other learning spaces in their life, such as school. A sense of appreciation for the individual and their differences was a strong theme emerging in student interviews. This acceptance leads to a sense of belonging in which wellbeing is fostered. The intersection between belonging, community and a reduction of stress was apparent in many student interviews.

“The best thing about KB and coming here is I feel like I belong and I have something to belong to...To me belonging is somewhere I can feel like I'm safe, and take stuff off my chest so I don't hold onto it myself.”

Student

Fostering a sense of belonging and community, while not explicitly stated, is a key aim of Kulture Break. Their identity statements refer to 'validating and affirming young people's identity and capabilities' (Kulture Break website). This was affirmed in the research team's interaction with staff, students and community members, with most participants reflecting on the ideas of community and belonging as one of the strongest attributes of Kulture Break.

“Belonging is almost like family to me. You don't feel you're earning your way in. You walk in and feel like that was where you're meant to be.”

Kulture Break staff member

5/ Confidence building through self-expression

Kulture Break is an inclusive environment, as well as a community of acceptance and belonging and this results in increased self-confidence for students. That confidence was evident in students' reflections on their positive growth since joining Kulture Break, as well as in their ability to articulate the positive feelings they have when they perform or come to class.

“I feel like no one’s watching me and I love dancing.

Student

Self-expression through the body, developing a new skill and having a creative outlet also contributed to improved confidence, with many students commenting that they flourished through growing body awareness.

“It does get you to express yourself and you can become more confident because I was such a shy person and in dance it’s like a journey...then this year I stepped up and pushed myself.”

Student

“I think it’s a way you can express yourself creatively and get away from other things and grow.”

Student

Students are encouraged to display their growing confidence in performances and events. Several students mentioned that their most memorable experiences at Kulture Break came when they conquered a fear of performing, mastered choreography or a particular dance move or simply felt amazing when they were on stage. Additionally, dance itself is a bonding agent. It allows connections with others, and is a vehicle through which students can encourage each other and grow together.

“I do it because it’s how I express myself...and also to connect with people.”

Student

“I feel all the stresses float off my...I feel calm and I just think about dance and not the stress.”

Student

6/ Diversity and inclusion

Kulture Break's motto 'You don't become somebody—you are somebody', reflects that the organisation sees every person as special and unique, and they respect individual identities and diversity in the community. One of Kulture Break's strengths lies in the diversity of its staff, students, ambassadors, interns and community members. The diversity is evident with regards to ethnicity and cultural background, neurodiversity and disability, all of which are catered for with targeted programs. This ethos supports the strong sense of inclusivity that came through from the student interviews.

One older student commented at length on the value of a culturally diverse dance community, including being able to see people like herself represented in Kulture Break's racially diverse teachers, management and performers.

“Kulture Break was the first time I found kids that were like me. If I'm in a classroom full of white kids like I am in school, they could say nothing bad to me, but you still feel different, there's like this separation...But at Kulture Break, they understand how I grew up...I can dance with my hair out or whatever, and it's not wrong. I don't look or feel wrong. They're like me so they get it.”

Student

Students with disabilities and neurodivergence are invited to access Kulture Break programs through targeted dance programs and can enjoy an inclusive culture in all classes. Once again, dance is a doorway into providing a space that is safe, healthy and accepting in the hope of building confidence and a positive sense of self. The position of a 'social inclusion ambassador' has been created to articulate the achievements and possibilities of what is a very diverse group of students. The ambassador seeks and highlights possibilities for atypical students to experience social acceptance and growth and ultimately become role models in their communities.

“I did this show and everyone at school saw me more as a role model and inspiration rather than a human punching bag.”

Student

While Kulture Break's students and teachers represent diverse cultures and life experiences, the research team notes that this diversity is not represented in Kulture Break's Board of Directors. There is an international movement today that organisations should have governance bodies that reflect the diversity of the organisations they represent. While Kulture Break board members are experienced, skilled and highly suitable for their roles, an expanded board, following targeted recruitment, would serve to reflect the diversity of the organisation as a whole.

7/ Student voice

The environment at Kulture Break was warm and welcoming, which encouraged open dialogue where students could express their wellbeing needs. There were many ways that young people could have their thoughts, ideas and opinions heard and validated; for example, dance teachers held wellbeing check-ins before and after class. Students were also given many opportunities for the creation of their own creative dance moves during the class as well as participation in an end-of-year concert.

“I think giving kids a space to be who they are in a safe empowering encouraging environment and giving them a place they can explore creative arts through concerts, singing, props, and there’s not many places you get to do that.”

Student

The end of year dance and music performances were themed to inspire expression and dialogue on a specific topic. This theme was set by the CEO. It was unclear if students were consulted about the choice of theme and we suggest in future that Kulture Break could encourage a more youth-led process and ownership of the theme.

When students were asked ‘Do you have any suggestions or plans for future projects for KB?’ there were several responses along these lines:

“...more promotion, consistent Instagram, podcasts, videos (like they used to do). Reach out to kids everywhere.”

Student

Students who had become teachers or those that had been involved with the organisation for more than five years said they appreciated past community outreach and engagement messaging; they commented that this is how they found out about Kulture Break and that these communications were their inspiration for joining. They suggested that these are activities that Kulture Break could reinstate. Researchers also noted that notwithstanding some limitations on staffing and resourcing of Kulture Break programs there is an opportunity to develop a stronger student voice within the organisation through development of more consultative and co-designed programs.

8/ Skill building and personal growth mindset

As mentioned previously, dance is the vehicle through which wellbeing, belonging, personal growth and confidence are developed. There are also, of course, significant opportunities for students to build a skill base in both dance and leadership. Kulture Break offers numerous avenues for growth in dance and movement, particularly developing expertise in hip-hop and urban dance styles. Xcel Dance (formerly the Elevate Academy) offers young people industry mentorship, expert choreographers and intensive classes, with subsequent performance crews, troupes, live performance opportunities, tours (pre-COVID) and shows. Students are also able to grow into becoming teachers themselves through Kulture Break's mentoring program, providing them both an avenue of future employment and valuable pedagogical skills for the future. However, Kulture Break appears to have limited avenues for advancement outside of the organisation. In interviews, some of the more advanced students, interns and teachers reflected that the dance world outside Kulture Break remained quite unknown to them, even though they aspired to having careers in dance.

“I want a career in dance, I need to get going...I knew I needed to boost my awareness that I'm not the only one trying to get into this industry...and then I met so many girls who want to do the exact same thing as I do.”

Student

9/ Risk and Responsibility and opportunities beyond Kulture Break

When dealing with vulnerable and or impressionable young people there is a considerable duty of care and responsibility that needs to be exercised. While the wellbeing messaging was strong there were some significant gaps in risk assessment, policies, procedures and training that need to be addressed to ensure the ongoing wellbeing of staff and students. This deficit poses significant potential future risk to the organisation and remedying it should be a future priority.

Trust, safety, feeling included and shared aspirations were all cited by staff as important for the dance and the coaching process, and the students certainly appreciated the level of support they received from teaching and administrative staff.

“Just the people who work here are easy to talk to and the people are really supportive.”

Student

Dance itself leads to social bonding. Staff were well versed in ‘the Kulture Break vibe, the electricity in the air’. Five wellbeing measures were articulated by one staff member:

- **A sense of belonging and a sense of family** – relationships begin with yourself
- **Inclusion** – everyone is valued, everyone has their own way of doing things
- **Confidence** – being somebody
- **Empowerment** – achievable goals
- **Dance** – action, integration, performance – being visible and inspiring others

It was noted that there was limited training in leadership or mental health assessment. In fact, these were not mentioned by dance teachers or staff as a formal part of their training. To match the Kulture Break vision with state of the art wellbeing training it is strongly recommended that all staff are mandated to undergo recognised mental health training and be provided with ongoing training opportunities to incorporate more sophisticated models of wellbeing into the dance programs.

Young people who acted as dance coaches were given a great deal of responsibility at a young age, with some as young as 16 responsible for dance programs with neurodiverse students. Some young dance coaches stated that they felt ‘burnt out’.

“As a teacher at Kulture Break, I learnt how to teach. Understanding them helps me to teach them and acknowledges different perspectives. I have to reading personalities. There is a lot of pressure when mentoring. It is hard to find teachers to stay.”

Dance teacher

While mentoring and building leadership can be an incredibly positive experience for young people, this needs to be balanced with proper training in collaboration with expert mental health organisations.

The provision of quality wellbeing and mental health support should ensure that there is not too much responsibility placed on young people as they deal with difficult social issues.

10/ Vision, limitations and growth

There was a clear desire from the CEO to build on Kulture Break’s successful model of dance for wellbeing in the ACT and to take this further and expand. Currently Kulture Break is represented in many schools in the ACT and would like to expand their programs to schools in other states. The forward thinking trajectory for the organisation has a strong sense of its unique program offerings for young people in terms of mental health, social connectedness and wellbeing. Kulture Break has sought to work with ACT Health, Lifeline, and Headspace and The Department of Education to further develop dance and wellbeing programs.

While there is strong potential for growth and development for Kulture Break programs with the current vision, for it to break through to the next growth point there needs to be succession planning and additional staff resourcing to make the most of future opportunities. Administration staff at Kulture Break are competent and committed, with several staff members having a long-term association of over five years with the organisation. Similarly, several of the coaching and dancing staff have been associated with the organisation for long periods of up to 10 years. However, high staff turnover was evident, perhaps due to high workloads when more projects were taken on than staff were able to manage.

The organisation produces an annual report and is governed by a Board of Directors who have the potential to become more influential in the direction of the organisation and bolster future opportunities. The CEO has strong networking skills which attracts support from influential community leaders and is beginning to lead to partnering with mental health and educational organisations beyond Kulture Break itself.

Discussion

The results of this small-scale but rigorous study finds that Kulture Break makes a valuable contribution to the Canberra community and to individual students' lives. Their work should be continued, expanded and celebrated. Participants in this study not only attested to the positive impact on students who engage with Kulture Break, but also flows on to their families and communities and schools. Participants also shared interesting insights which may serve to further improve the processes and outcomes of Kulture Break demonstrating clear evidence of the Creative Cultural Wellbeing Framework domains of social connectedness, values and belonging, shared experience and creative cultural practices (Mackay2014).

Many students and staff expressed positive thoughts of feeling valued, a sense of belonging and acceptance. This is not a universal experience in the world of the arts, and Kulture Break is to be commended for its strong culture of inclusion. Through dance it contributes positive wellbeing and social connectedness to the wider community. At Kulture Break, dance is a doorway through which students can walk to join this inclusive community. Expression through movement is known to contribute to health and creative wellbeing outcomes and this research has shown that combining dance and wellbeing programming contributes to both individual and community wellbeing.

While Kulture Break is a wellbeing-focused organisation, it also purports to offer students high-quality dance experiences and opportunities to achieve dance excellence. However, some students reflected on certain limitations if they wanted to pursue dance as a career. Some noted the need for challenging technique classes, and others wanted to experience the world of dance outside of Kulture Break. Dance experts outside of Kulture Break could be consulted to show interested students pathways to careers in dance and the arts.

Finally, the culture of Kulture Break is strong, but its resilience must be tested at times when students find themselves outside the familiarity of their own community. Kulture Break staff need professional training to work with young people at risk and should know how and where to seek referral for times when additional support is needed. All staff working with students with special needs also require training, as teaching these groups is a specialised field.

Expressive arts and cultural wellbeing for young people

WHO reports that the social determinants of the health and non-health sectors contribute more to public health than the health sector itself. One important shift in WHO recommendations is the incorporation of environmental factors and health equity into health policy. This entails a clear recognition of the intersectional influences on health and the importance of understanding that where a person lives and how much power they have will impact on their health outcomes.

While WHO has called for the incorporation of community voices into health policy to address health equity, how to do this in a way that fully embraces diverse understandings of wellbeing and what constitutes empowered communities is less well articulated. Despite the move towards more nuanced conceptions of health, how these intersect and influence wellbeing is still just beginning to be understood (Pega et al. 2010).

Contextual knowledge of how wellbeing is experienced individually and within communities is vital if health interventions are to contribute meaningfully to community voices. This includes a serious assessment of how dance and creative expression can support young people's wellbeing and mental health.

The creative arts provide a significant arena where community voices can be heard, and participation in the arts has been shown to have clear health benefits (Davies et al. 2016). Arts health approaches are well developed in the UK, Finland, USA, Australia and New Zealand, albeit with marked differences in how practitioners view the arts–health nexus. Some practitioner researchers may view arts more as a tool for health, and remain closer to medicalised models of physical or mental health, while others value engagement in the arts more for healthy social connectedness and intrinsic wellbeing. Both perspectives offer valuable ways to address societal needs, yet both are problematic in that they are not able to integrate non-hierarchical and sustainable ways of viewing health and wellbeing.

For example, the movement towards social prescriptions for arts health activities relegates power to the health practitioner to diagnose and treat a perceived social deficit and may not necessarily take into account what kind of activities are culturally significant for individual or community wellbeing. Concurrently there is a growing recognition of how important the shared ecologies of health and wellbeing are between humans and the environment,

which raises the critical question of who controls our health and what constitutes wellbeing. Creative Cultural Wellbeing is an emerging approach to wellbeing that intertwines empowerment and wellbeing through cultural expression, cultural identity, spirituality, connection to place, heritage and the arts (Mackay 2014, 2016, 2018; Dalziel & Saunders 2019). Mackay's Creative Cultural Wellbeing approach to health makes an attempt to reposition health and wellbeing as an ecocultural nexus that views expressive and performing arts as central to both individual and societal wellbeing.

Participatory dance programs and wellbeing

Participation in community dance programs has numerous benefits, documented in research over a number of years. One might immediately presume that participation in dance programs leads to technical proficiency and competence in a dance style; for example, turning someone with no previous training into a dancer. This misrepresents the aim and purpose of the arts, which do not always need to lead towards a pragmatic career path. Community dance programs have many benefits aside from developing dance ability. In the first instance, community dance classes encourage students to demonstrate their uniqueness and individuality (Tsompanaki & Lykesas, 2020). Participants feel a special sense of accomplishment at having learned an art form as a collective, as opposed to learning individually or privately at home. Community dance is highly participatory, in that many people are welcomed and encouraged to try, regardless of their previous experience. Community dance spaces value and promote equity, democracy, safety, diversity, curiosity, perseverance and participation, while making the learning fun and reflective (Buck & Snook, 2017). Participants are encouraged to develop their self-knowledge, self-esteem, and autonomy, and develop the ability to manipulate strong emotions and thoughts, improve communication and build trust with others (MacFarlane & Pethybridge, 2016).

The dance activity itself can take many forms but dance classes often go beyond replicating a teacher's routines or movements. Dance classes often involve experimentation, exploration and creative thinking skills (Russell-Bowie, 2006; Isbell & Raines, 2007). Dance classes use whole body movement, becoming a medium through which participants can experience the world, express feelings or convey meaning kinaesthetically, without words (Schiller & Meiners, 2003). In a study by Lykesas and Zachopoulou (2006) it was found that music and movement programs had a positive effect

on the active participation of students in dance, increasing primary school students' fulfillment, cooperation and communication skills. People who dance express themselves creatively, learn new ways to interact with each other, and frequently learn about different cultures and ways of being (MacFarlane & Pethybridge, 2016).

There is much research that attests to the benefits of participating in dance programs as both a liberating and educative act (Gersak, 2012). Participants firstly develop their body movements, concentration and improvisation, kinaesthetic problem solving (Cecil-Fizdale, 1991). They also develop higher-level thinking, risk-taking, motivation to learn (MacDonald, Stodel & Farres, 2001), physical strength and health, positive social interactions and collaboration skills. Musical awareness is also increased.

Through participation in dance, students are provided with a kaleidoscope of opportunities to:

- appreciate aesthetic means of ordering movement and structuring gesture
- understand that dance is a universal means of expression and communication
- increase their confidence in their own physicality
- appreciate that dance as a living expression of culture, spirituality and history
- develop the stamina to rehearse, rework and refine movement sequences
- value the contribution dance has made in various cultural, social and historical contexts. (Barrett, n.d.).

Spaces such as Kulture Break work to increase participants' confidence in their own physical abilities, create, structure rehearse and perform movement sequences, and analyse their own and others' performance (Jacobs, 2020).

For these reasons, community dance can play a significant role in young people's socialisation. Personal fulfilment can be achieved, using art as a means of expression. Chapman (2015) also argues that engaging in dance contributes to the creation of artistic heritage and culture developing the learner socially, for example, as they collaborate, and culturally, for example, by contributing to their identity. Finally, the sense of belonging to a group (Amans, 2017) is significant, as participants find themselves amongst those who accept and nurture their nature beyond mastering the technical skills of dancing. The attributes mentioned in this section are by no means universal and different community dance organisations may achieve them to different extents.

Recommendations

This report recommends that Kulture Break:

1/ Create a clear strategic vision for 2022–2027 clarifying what Kulture Break is and what it wants to achieve. Kulture Break's culture and mission is well communicated on the website and also through promotional materials. However, sometimes the messaging is inconsistent and it is unclear how the vision will be achieved. A strategic vision for the next five years needs to be written in consultation with key stakeholders. This is the joint responsibility of the Board and the CEO and can be informed by an expert advisory group. It is recommended that a review of the advisory board membership is conducted to check for appropriate inclusion of experts in the fields of mental health, wellbeing, education and dance. Ensure in the writing of the 2022–2027 strategic vision that consultation with staff, students and parents is included. Achievable and measurable goals should be stated clearly. The strategic vision statement should also include a systematic and phased plan of how to achieve the vision.

2/ Partner with expert mental health, wellbeing, educational and dance organisations on specific needs-based targeted goals identified in the strategic vision. To achieve the desired growth in the delivery of dance wellbeing programs a collaborative model would assist in broadening the workload and expertise available. Once a clear vision and action plan has been agreed upon and ratified by the Board, Kulture Break would benefit from partnering with appropriate organisations to leverage their expertise and devise collaborative sector-wide strategies for taking manageable steps to developing quality wellbeing programs through dance. The organisation would benefit from engaging in longer-term, deeper, strategic, more sustained partnerships, rather than short-term, limited engagements that may not align with the strategic vision of the organisation.

3/ Training for wellbeing. Availability of training tools for wellbeing and mental health for all staff. All staff must engage in appropriate training for working with young vulnerable students and be able to identify referral pathways to relevant support and counselling services. A review of the staff training manuals for the dance coaching and wellbeing programs should be made a priority. This is to mitigate potential risk for the organisation and ensure duty of care for staff and students. Kulture Break should also regularly collaborate with wellbeing experts, inviting them to give talks or upskill teachers.

4/ Introduce formal wellbeing policies and procedures into the organisation's core business. While some sound wellbeing practices take place, the organisation would benefit from having these formally documented and ratified by the Board to ensure that there is a consistent way of teaching and addressing wellbeing issues. It was noted that the organisation had instigated a child-safe policy for the minimum standards of safety and duty of care. This could be reviewed to include more robust inclusive policies around gender, LGBTQI, culturally diverse or disabled students. Also, as the organisation wishes to lead in the area of wellbeing it is recommended that specific wellbeing modules be developed for staff to incorporate into their teaching programs. Legal advice may be needed to ensure these are within the law. Wellbeing policies and procedures need to be made readily available to staff, students and the public to ensure transparency and foster trust in the sensitive work that Kulture Break is engaged with. Rigorous and evidence-based wellbeing messaging needs to be documented and formally incorporated into the program.

5/ Mentor and extend advanced students, interns and teachers with dance exposure experiences in the wider community. Through these experiences they can explore pathways to careers in dance outside of Kulture Break, which may include studying options, industry visits, guest mentorships and the like.

6/ Prioritise social programs with deep impact that are well aligned with Kulture Break's vision. Examples of this include Ladies 1st and Man Up. Activities or programs that are less aligned to the strategic vision should be reduced.

7/ Instigate a student advisory board to develop strategies to engage contemporary audiences using media accessible to young people. Current thinking around student voice in community and government-sponsored projects has shifted strongly towards co-designed projects and this new body would allow the young people of Kulture Break more leadership opportunities and a stronger voice.

8/ Expand the existing work with schools, both with the programs for school students and teacher professional development. Kulture Break may wish to include more student-centred approaches to dance and creativity as part of these packages, such as allowing participants to determine the theming, choreographic explorations and responses to dance, in line with the Australian Curriculum strands of 'Making' and 'Responding'.

9/ Broaden the leadership for succession and growth. Kulture Break's leadership has been passionately and expertly steered by founder and CEO, Francis Owusu to date. However, Kulture Break has grown so much that steering this very large vessel should not be the responsibility of a single person. There are benefits too in broadening the leadership and either elevating some prominent team members to be involved in higher-level decision making or building leadership partnerships that allow collective decision making.

10/ Engage in outreach and communications that bolster the wellbeing profile of Kulture Break in the Canberra community. Kulture Break's dance profile is impressive, but the organisation is not widely known for its critically important work with young people at risk or for how it promotes cultural wellbeing.



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Appendices

Appendix A: Dance classes at Kulture Break

Make your Move (MYM)

A fun and inclusive dance program that covers a wide range of dance essentials. It offers various skill levels and age brackets and students can choose from hip-hop, break dance, ballet, contemporary or jazz.

Level 1 | Genesis (0-1 years experience)

If you have never danced before or have a little dance experience and would like a refresher on this style's foundations and techniques before progressing to the next level, then Genesis is for you!

Level 2 | Nexis (1-2 years experience)

You've been dancing for a little while, have the foundations but aren't quite ready for fast-paced learning and want to build up to more advanced techniques... jump into one of our Nexis classes!

Level 3 | Edge (3+ years experience)

If you've had enough dance experience that you confidently know the techniques and foundations of the style, and you're ready for a bit of a challenge with more fast-paced learning, live on the edge with one of our Edge classes!

Level 4 | Master (5+ years experience)

You've mastered the techniques and foundations for the style and can keep up with fast-paced learning. You're also looking for a challenge or something a bit different to our usual Edge classes. If this sounds like you, join one of our Master Class workshops... and you might also consider looking into the Xcel Dance program.

Performance opportunities

Mid-Year Expo | Saturday 4 July

End of Year Concert | Saturday 12 December

Xcel Dance (formerly Elevate Academy)

The Xcel Dance program (formerly Elevate Academy) offers young people the opportunity to elevate their confidence and dance skills under the guidance of professional industry mentors. Students of Xcel Dance participate in intensive classes, exclusive workshops, gain personal development hacks, enjoy social gatherings and receive an unlimited class pass. Students will also have the opportunity to join our new performance crews and troupes for more live performances and tours.

There are two age groups:

IGNITE DANCE | Dancers aged 10-13

BLAZE DANCE | Dancers aged 13-18



Mentoring and Leadership

Man Up

Man Up is an early intervention mentoring program for young people aged 11 to 17 years. It supports wellbeing through physical movement and life skills development. We aim to empower young males from all backgrounds to acquire the skills to be confident in who they are, help their brothers and make a difference.

Ladies 1st

Ladies 1st is an early intervention mentoring program for young females. Targeted at students aged 11 to 17 years, participants are engaged in physical movement and personal development skills to improve their confidence and sense of self-worth. The program runs on a weekly basis during school terms on Tuesdays 6:15pm to 7:45pm at our Kulture Break studio in Erindale. Classes will generally follow the structure of half an hour of mentoring and an hour of dance/fitness.

iinspire Leadership Program

iinspire is a leadership program for primary and high school students. The program prepares and empowers young people to be agents of change. It is designed to inspire leadership aspirations in young people and to add their voice to the change they want to see in their school, community and the world. The iinspire leadership program focuses on developing student leadership skills, empowering them to be people of positive influence, providing students with ongoing leadership and mentorship support from community and business leaders.

Internships

The YES Internship provides opportunities for young people to gain dance coaching skills as well as practical life skills. Through a structured training program interns will have one-on-one teacher training, mentorship, vocational development and leadership training. Successful applicants become a part of the Kulture Break team in an unpaid capacity. If you are a student in secondary school or are looking for an internship to up-skill or learn new skills, you can either request a relevant teacher to get in contact with us or personally send us an email.

School Programs

Dance Nation

Dance Nation is a school dance program uniquely designed to build resilience in students through movement. It engages hundreds of students from across the ACT region and brings them together to celebrate in a community Showcase Spectacular. Over a 15-week period, hundreds of young people from across the ACT are engaged in 'designing and rehearsing' a dance, showcasing this routine in a celebratory atmosphere that enables them to shine. Each school is provided with a weekly dance coach to work with your teachers and students to develop a dance based on a positive theme that builds school culture. The program concludes with a large performance called the Dance Nation Schools Spectacular held at the Royal Theatre – National Convention Centre.



Appendix B: Interview Schedule

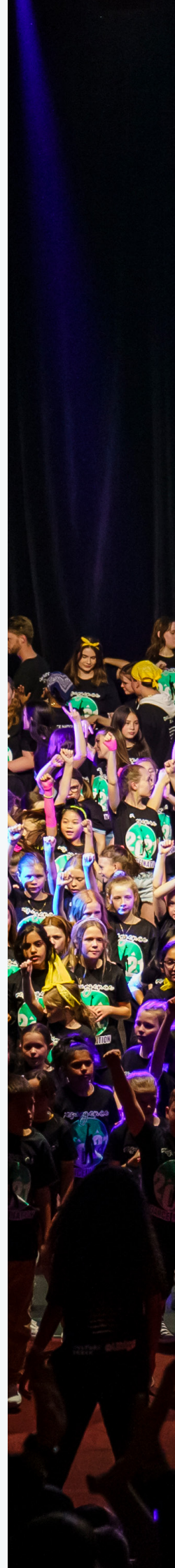
Interview questions for teachers and staff

Questions asked of the 7 staff members on the second filed research day included:

1. What drew you to working for Kulture Break?
 2. How long have you been at KB?
 3. What are your qualifications?
 4. Best thing about working at KB?
 5. Challenges of working at KB?
 6. How long do you plan to stay working at KB?
 7. Do you have any suggestions or plans for future projects for KB?
 8. How did you get your job here?
 9. Do you have any training in counselling or wellbeing?
 10. Do you have any input into setting the wellbeing themes?
 11. Describe how your class includes aspects of wellbeing?
 12. How do you think dance is implicated in a person's sense of wellbeing?
-

Interview questions for adult participants

1. What drew you to attend KB classes?
 2. How long have you been attending KB?
 3. Best thing about attending KB?
 4. Most challenging things about attending KB?
 5. Do you intend continuing to attend KB?
 6. Do you have any suggestions or plans for future projects for KB?
 7. How does participating in classes impact on other aspects of your life?
 8. How would you rate your overall general wellbeing at the moment?
 9. How important is the social aspect of attending class?
 10. How important is the physical aspect of attending class?
 11. Describe how your class includes aspects of wellbeing?
 12. How do you think dance is implicated in a person's sense of wellbeing?
-



KULTURE BREAK





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