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Developing a Resource for Arts Educators to Enhance the Social and Emotional Well-being of Young People

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Abstract

Background: Mental health concerns prevent positive well-being and are key challenges for Australian children and young people. Arts organisations play a role in enhancing the positive mental health of children and young people. This paper describes the involvement of young people and their parents in the development of a resource for arts organisations' intentional support of social and emotional well-being.

Methods: Six focus groups were conducted with 19 young people who participate in dance, drama, and circus programs, and 17 of their parents. Questions explored how the arts currently, and potentially, support their social and emotional well-being.

Results: Three overarching themes: *Connecting with Others*; *Being Myself*; and *Teaching Methods*, plus 14 sub-themes were identified.

Conclusion: A framework of well-being factors and pedagogies was developed to guide the creation of a resource to help support the social and emotional well-being of young people participating in arts programs.

Background

For children and young people to live rich lives and reach their full potential, it is important they attain social and emotional milestones. These milestones serve as a platform to develop the intra- and interpersonal skills to support healthy psychological and identity development and resilience (National Mental Health Commission, 2021). Currently, mental health concerns

are key challenges for many of Australia's children and young people, accounting for three of the top five causes of total burden of disease in Australia (Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, 2016) and a major public health barrier to obtaining and sustaining well-being (Australian Government Department of Health, 2019). Survey data collected by Mission Australia indicates approximately two out of five children and young people aged 13 to 19 do not feel happy with their life, 10% are often sad or very sad, 13% negative or very negative, and 42% feel stressed (Tiller et al., 2020). Furthermore, many mental health problems have intensified during the COVID-19 pandemic (National Mental Health Commission, 2021).

The growing demand for mental health care has seen the need for an increasing focus on strengthening the systems that prevent and respond to mental illness (World Health Organisation, 2022). In Australia, most mental health care resources are allocated to acute care hospital services rather than to protecting and preventing mental health problems and promoting well-being (Jorm, 2014). While it is vital to treat mental illness, it is possible some mental illnesses could be avoided if governments and communities invested in strategies and environments that support the social and emotional well-being (SEWB) of children and young people (Jenkins & Minoletti, 2013).

A potentially powerful way to support the SEWB of children and young people is through the arts (Allensworth et al., 2018). In a literature review and gap analysis exploring multiple art forms, Menzer (2015) found children's socio-emotional development was improved significantly when they engaged in music, drama, and visual art activities. Other reviews have found that involvement in the arts can improve behaviour, self-esteem, and self-confidence in children and young people (Bungay & Vella-Burrows, 2013) and support over-all child development (Fancourt & Finn, 2019). Other benefits of engaging in the arts include self-expression, distraction from illness/problems, and a perceived improvement in mental health and well-being (Dray et al., 2017; Thomson et al., 2020; Uttley et al., 2015; Zarobe & Bungay, 2017). While recent studies have begun to investigate the mechanisms through which the arts affect positive well-being (Shim et al., 2019; Tay et al., 2018) little is still known about the processes by which arts involvement can impact SEWB. This gap also extends to the role of arts educators in improving impact for all participating children and young people (Allensworth et al., 2018). Providing arts educators with the necessary knowledge and skills could support them to intentionally and consciously encourage children and young people to take advantage of opportunities for social-emotional development during participatory arts experiences and guide them toward improved social-emotional competencies and thereby improved mental health.

Research Approach and Methodology

Our project involved four formative phases to develop a resource to build the capacity of arts

organisations for enhancing the positive mental health of young people through the intentional promotion of SEWB in arts programs. *Phase One* involved collecting data from stakeholders about how arts organisations currently support SEWB, and the supports and resources needed to further enhance the SEWB of the young people who attend their arts programs. In *Phase Two* young people and their parents were asked how these programs support, and could further enhance, their SEWB. In *Phase Three* a draft strengths-based, young person-centred resource was developed in consultation with arts-based advisors. This resource was designed to enable arts personnel to positively and intentionally promote and support young people's social-emotional competencies . In *Phase Four* the resource was piloted with arts organisations to assess its useability and acceptability by these groups. This paper reports on *Phase Two* of the project.

The objectives of *Phase Two* were to:

 (1) identify how the SEWB of young people was being supported through their involvement in the arts;

 (2) identify how young people's SEWB could be further enhanced through the arts; and

 (3) develop a framework for a draft resource to build the capacity of arts educators to support the SEWB of young people participating in their arts programs.

Qualitative description research methods, based on constructivist assumptions and an interpretive approach, were used to achieve the objectives. These methods are appropriate in exploring experiences, meanings, and perspectives (Patton, 2002) and bridging the gap between theory and practice (Hunt, 2009). Focus groups were chosen as a means of eliciting personal accounts and allowing ideas to be developed and articulated through discussion (Krueger, 2014). Focus groups can be particularly appropriate for young people who may feel more supported and confident in a group situation (Vaughn, Schumm & Sinagub, 1996). Ethics approval to conduct this study was granted by the Human Research Ethics Office at the University of Western Australia.

Procedure

Young people aged 11 to 21 years and their parents were invited from three arts organisations (dance, drama, and circus) to participate in focus groups in metropolitan Perth, Western Australia between May and November 2021. Invitations were emailed by arts personnel from each of the arts organisations to parents of young people and young people enrolled in their arts programs. Separate focus groups were conducted for each art form, including distinct sessions for parents and young people. The focus groups were conducted at each arts organisation after an arts session. Circular seating arrangements were used for each focus

group to encourage equal participation and food and beverages were provided.

A discussion guide was created for each of the young person and parent focus groups. Each focus group began with an ice breaker question to help create an open and relaxed atmosphere. Feedback about the suitability of the discussion guide questions was sought from arts personnel prior to commencing the focus groups. Questions addressed participant perceptions of how the arts currently impact the SEWB of young people and how the arts could further enhance their SEWB. For example, young people were asked to consider how participating in the arts impacts their SEWB and what they have discovered about themselves from participating in the arts. Parents were asked, for example, how they thought the arts impacts their child's SEWB and in what ways their child's SEWB could be further enhanced. Discussion guide questions were supported by prompts, where participants, for example, could reflect on their emotional experience when participating in the arts. The focus groups were facilitated by the lead researcher, an experienced facilitator, with research team members providing co-facilitation and note-taking.

Data Collection

All focus group conversations were recorded by group note-takers who received prior instruction on taking detailed notes as well as capturing accurate quotes. Notes from each note-taker were collated and sent to research team members who attended the focus groups to check for accuracy. The duration of the focus groups was one hour, and participants received a $30 gift voucher on completion. A survey designed to capture demographic data including age, gender, current and previous arts involvement was self-administered on completion of each focus group.

Data Analysis

Analysis took place systematically and was guided by Braun and Clarke's (2006) framework for thematic analysis. All data collected were analysed holistically. To maintain dependability and determine credibility, two members of the research team (LF and SF) worked independently in the initial stages of the analysis (Bryman, 2016) with the assistance of the qualitative research software package, QSR NVivo version 12 (QSR International Pty Ltd, 2018). Focus group notes and quotes were read multiple times to develop initial ideas and codes. Open coding was used to assign the data to codes, which were then grouped into potential categories and themes. Categories were clustered further into overarching themes associated with how the arts currently contribute to the SEWB of young people and how their SEWB could be further enhanced. The two researchers then collaborated to discuss themes, categories, and codes. The coding and themes were then presented to the research team, with minor inconsistencies between researchers discussed until a consensus was reached. Demographic data were presented using descriptive statistics.

Results

There were six focus groups in total: three with parents and three with young people conducted at the three arts organisations. Nineteen young people and 17 parents participated (total *n*=36). Characteristics of young participants can be seen in Table 1 and parent characteristics in Table 2.

Table 1

Young people focus group participant demographics (n=19)

Young people		n[1]
Gender	Male	5
	Female	11
Age	11 - 13	6
	14 - 16	10
Years engaged with current arts program	≤3	10
	>3	6
Arts programs previously engaged with[2]	Visual arts	3
	Music	10
	Drama	12
	Other	5

[1] *Three did not complete the survey*

[2] *Multiple responses permitted*

Table 2

Parent focus group participant demographics

Parents		n[1]
Gender	Male	3
	Female	12
Age	≥ 30 years	1
	31 – 41	2
	42 – 51	5
	52 – 61	7
Previous Arts engagement[b]	Interest	5
	Profession	6
	None	4

[1] *Two did not complete the survey*

[b] *Multiple responses permitted*

The analysed data described how the arts contribute to the SEWB of young people (Objective 1) and how their SEWB could be further enhanced through the arts (Objective 2). Three overarching themes representing both Objective 1 and 2 were identified: *Connecting with Others*, *Being Myself* and *Teaching Methods*. Fourteen sub-themes related to these themes were also identified. The sub-themes for *Connecting with Others* and *Being Myself* represented factors that enabled well-being and were termed well-being factors. The sub-themes for *Teaching Methods* represented the ways arts educators do and can teach to support young people's SEWB. Themes and sub-themes provided the framework for the draft resource (Objective 3). Focus group notes did not include participant identifiers. Therefore, quotes are representative of the parent (P) or young person group (YP) with the arts organisations identified as dance, drama, and circus.

Connecting with Others

Focus group participants identified various ways in which involvement in the arts contributed to young people's SEWB, including facilitating strong connection to others, exposing them to like-minded people and allowing the exploration of friendships and groups external to the school environment. Their connection with others through the arts was supported by positive peer connections, helping others, and social support. Of these, positive peer connections could be further enhanced through the arts.

Positive Peer Connection
Participants discussed how the arts enhanced their SEWB by creating positive peer connection through facilitating opportunities to share skills and experiences with others: "[In the arts they have] personal challenges, where it's not about outdoing others, it's about participating" [YP Circus].

Comparing yourself to others was considered to drive an improvement in skills. "You need to be as good if not better than your peers. If I see them improving, I then put pressure on myself to improve" [YP Dance].

However, views were expressed about how the highly competitive nature of certain art forms worked against positive peer connection and this was considered in need of a particular focus in some art forms to enhance SEWB.

Helping Others
Helping others was identified as another way that the SEWB of young people was enhanced through the arts. Participants said that performing in the arts was a way of helping other people. "It is great to watch others perform and help other people by showing them what you can do" [YP Circus]. The multi-age grouping offered in some arts classes was seen as

enabling young people to help others and learn from older students [P Circus].

Social Support
Participating in the arts was said to promote SEWB by "allowing for a greater social circle" [P Dance], providing "another outlet, another social group of friends" [P Dance], increasing opportunities for young people to "find their tribe" [P Circus] and "learn from others" [P Circus]. Participants noted that when performing "you spend a lot of time backstage and make strong friendships with others who perform with you" [YP Dance]. The arts created many opportunities to make friends and to be supported by them. This was important as "friends can help me more than I can help myself [when I am feeling down]" [YP Dance].

Being Myself

Participants frequently discussed how they can 'be themselves' through their art form. "No one has prior expectations of what you need to live up to – therefore you're able to be yourself. That's the beauty of the arts" [YP Drama]. Being myself was enabled through the arts by being in a state of flow, developing self-awareness and identity, managing pressure, feeling safe, body image, developing compassion and developing passion. Of these, developing self-awareness and identity, managing pressure, body image and developing compassion (self-compassion) could be further enhanced through the arts.

In a State of Flow (or being in the zone)
The arts were said to positively impact SEWB by providing an environment that facilitated young people being "in the zone" [YP Circus]. This was recognised by the researchers as the concept of "flow" (Csikszentmihalyi & Rathunde, 1993). Flow was enabled through the arts by promoting greater autonomy than other environments (i.e., school). Parents acknowledged that arts participation assisted with increasing flow by reducing technology use [P Dance] and referred to '*being in the zone*' as mentally relaxing for their children [P Circus]. Being involved in the arts was seen as much needed escapism: "If you have one thing you love doing, it gives you an escape from [the] pressures [of school]" [YP Circus] … "[providing] a break from the intensity of school" [YP Drama].

Developing Self-Awareness and Identity
Young people identified how the capacity to learn about themselves through the arts was important to enhancing their SEWB. They explained how check-ins at the beginning and end of each arts session allowed time to reflect and report back on their state of mind and how they were feeling. "[We have] more of a connection with self as we are able to identify if we are feeling low through check-ins" [YP Drama].

Exploring identity was seen by parents as important to the SEWB of young people. "Being at

the time of your life when you're trying to define your identity, at school it's hard to do that, being a part of this [the arts] is an opportunity to explore that identity more" [P Drama]. Young people said they would like to understand more about themselves and how their minds work and felt that the arts could further promote this [YP Drama].

Managing Pressure

Managing pressure was identified as necessary for good SEWB and the arts were not free from stress or pressure. Dance students indicated they experienced both internal and external pressures to perform and discussed how they perform better with a moderate level of pressure —"just enough to push yourself but not too much that it breaks you down" [YP Dance]. Managing pressure was something they had to learn, and it was implied that depending on how it was managed, pressure affected their SEWB. Various ways of managing pressure were identified such as attending "pressure free classes to be able to dance for the fun of it – including no mirrors" [YP Dance]. More support from arts teachers for young people to manage pressure was stated as needed. "You can't be perfect every day and it is even better when your teachers acknowledge that also" [YP Dance].

Feeling Safe

The arts impact SEWB by allowing the freedom to make mistakes through an environment where there was no fear of failure. *"*We don't have to worry about getting it wrong" and "you can get better at [the arts] but there's no right or wrong way to do something" [YP Circus].

The arts approach to making mistakes was seen as very different to school where answers are usually absolute—and "if you get things wrong you feel shame and disappointment" [YP Drama]. Parents commented on the need for young people to take risks: "They have to know … and feel free… and confident enough to try and take risks – [they need] support to prevent the fear of failing" [P Dance].

Body Image

Having positive thoughts about their bodies was important for young people's SEWB. There were contrasting views expressed by participants about the support they receive to feel good about their bodies, indicating that this could be further enhanced through the arts. Participants said that some people may struggle with body image as they are at times required to be self-critical, assessing their abilities and bodies via their own reflection:

> "…mirrors are around you and you are constantly looking at your body and some people may find that uncomfortable" [YP Dance].

> "Feedback from teachers on technique, body image, performance can sometimes be passive aggressive, and it is up to the individual as to how it is interpreted" [YP

Dance].

Conversely, other participants acknowledged that in their art form there was "a greater focus on what they can do with their bodies rather than what they look like" [P Circus] with young people encouraged to recognise "how amazing [their] bodies are [with a] focus [on having] a strong body that does amazing things" [P Circus] … and to think: "I can do awesome things with my body, and I am strong" [P Circus].

Developing Compassion
Participants identified how compassion, important for SEWB, could develop through the arts. Arts participation was thought to assist young people to develop "sensitivity, empathy and resilience" [P Dance] and express themselves through "respectful relationships" [P Circus]. Self-compassion and empathy were described as developing through drama.

> "You play a character, then you step back into yourself, and you can appreciate yourself more. It is easier to be empathetic once you have been in other people's shoes" [YP Drama].

"Not being too hard on yourself" or having self-compassion was identified as important to cope with the pressure of performing and as this was something one participant struggled with, could be further enhanced through the arts [YP Dance].

Developing Passion
The arts enhanced young people's SEWB by offering an avenue for them to pursue their interests and develop passion for something. Freedom of both choice and expression were identified as elements present in encouraging and supportive arts environments, that allowed individuals to "discover what [they] enjoy" [YP Circus] by providing opportunities "to be themselves" [YP Circus], and "feel good about [themselves]" [P Circus], further assisting individuals to unlock their passion and "find their hidden talent" [YP Circus]. One participant stated: "[You learn to] care about something; [participating in the arts] is a choice, something you chose to care about and persist with. You are more passionate about it as it is your choice" [YP Dance].

Teaching methods

The third overarching theme identified in relation to how the SEWB of young people is currently being developed through the arts was the way arts educators taught to support the SEWB of young people. These included student-centred teaching, addressing stereotypes, individualised approaches to teaching, exploring issues and relatable teachers. Of these, addressing stereotypes and relatable teachers could be further enhanced through the arts.

Student-Centred Teaching

Participants discussed how arts educators supported their SEWB by allowing them to be part of the arts process. This enabled student "*ownership, independence, autonomy, and freedom of expression*" [YP Drama]. Depending on the art form, students have a say in what they do.

"There is no pressure to participate in things you don't want to, and you are able to opt out where you like" [YP Drama]. The importance of student-centred approaches was identified: "[In the arts] they feel heard… they need to feel their opinion matters, what they feel matters, even just from being here a short time, it has that effect and that flow on effect" [P Drama].

Addressing Stereotypes

Arts sessions were said to be implemented in a way that broke down stereotypes, allowing freedom from tight gender roles and positively impacting SEWB of young people. "[The arts enables] close contact with the opposite gender; normalises being around other genders and supporting each other… [so that they are] comfortable with working with other people… not just in a sexualised way" [P Circus].

The need for some art forms to move away from teacher stereotypes and costumes that stereotyped and sexualised gender was identified [P Circus].

Individualised Approaches to Teaching

An individualised approach to teaching in the arts enabled positive SEWB. The arts were said to challenge students "each at their own level and always pushing them to progress further" [P Circus], giving them "opportunities to be unique – rather than to just be the best*"* [P Circus] and providing "a very laid-back environment where everyone can progress at their own pace and feel encouraged to participate" [P Circus].

Success was seen as a range of things as the arts promotes "diversity around what success is" [P Circus], and in many art forms students strive for "progress over perfection", where you "work toward collective growth" [YP Drama]. As one participant commented: "The arts provide lots of opportunities to respectfully celebrate individual success as there are no right or wrong ways to express individual creativity" [YP Drama].

Exploring Issues

Participating in the arts was thought to provide opportunities to explore issues or topics of interest that were important for SEWB.

> "What they're exposed to [through the arts], some of the topics, especially when they have some involvement in some of the writing, they get to examine what their issues are at this age. We're probably not having all the discussions we should be

having with this age group, so [the arts] becomes a way to explore these topics/issues, helps their understanding of the issue" [P Drama].

Relatable Teachers

Young people spoke about the importance of having teachers they can relate to. Encouragement from teachers "helps put you in a better mood" [YP Dance]. However, not all teachers of the arts were 'relatable' and therefore this was identified as needing a focus to enhance SEWB. Young people's SEWB suffered when the teacher or arts organisation "isn't functioning," as "…children tend to remember and hold onto what teachers have said to them and how they have said it, they can take it personally and hold onto it" [P Dance]. There was an identified need for a balance between critical appraisal and encouragement. Feedback delivered by an arts educator who has taken the time to connect and understand their students was noted as valuable [P Drama].

Discussion

This paper explored how the SEWB of young people is supported, and could be further enhanced, through dance, theatre, circus, and other arts programs. Thematic analysis of participant responses guided the development of a framework for a draft resource to support arts educators to promote the SEWB of children and young people (Figure 1).

Three overarching themes of Connecting with Others, Being Themselves and Teaching Methods were identified as ways the SEWB of young people participating in the arts was supported and could be further enhanced. Intentional support of social and emotional learning is highly aligned with good practice when working with young people (Shernoff, 2013). Therefore, intentionally promoting 'connection to others' and 'being myself' through the arts by focussing on the associated well-being factors and teaching methods may ensure the SEWB of all participants. Increasing intentional practices to support SEWB can be an important part of achieving SEWB outcomes and can have a long-term impact on youth's social- emotional competence (Blyth et al., 2017). It is possible that some art forms may provide easier access or face greater barriers to achieving specific SEWB outcomes. Therefore, the framework developed in Figure 1, based on the findings of this study, could be used by arts organisations across different art forms to identify the well-being factors or teaching methods they specifically need to focus on to enhance SEWB of young people in their programs.
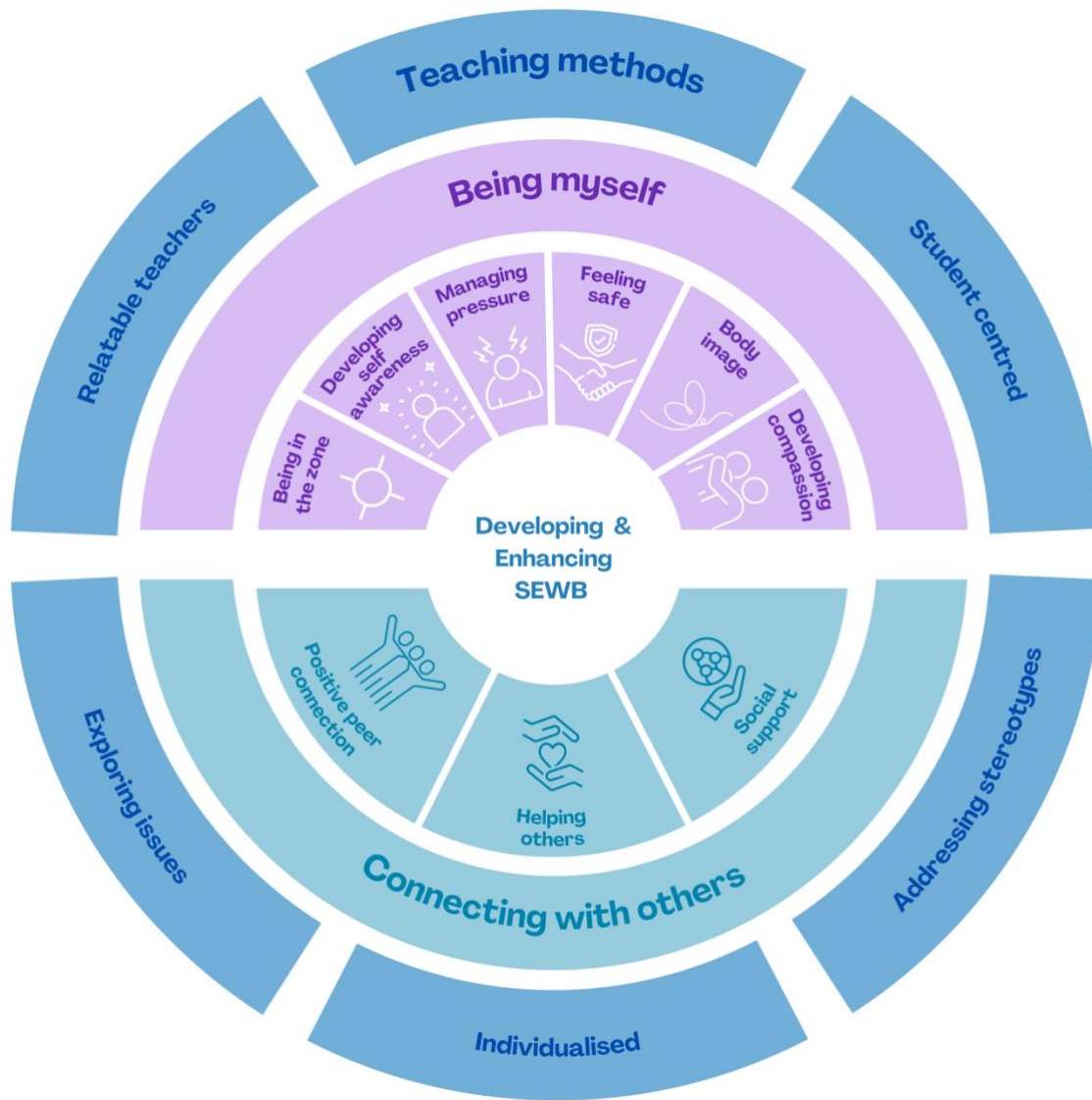
Figure 1. Conceptual Model of Themes Arising in Developing and Enhancing Social-
 Emotional Well-being through the Arts

Connecting with others is important in promoting belonging, a concept well established as necessary for self-determination (Deci & Ryan, 2000) and is increasingly recognised as key to both physical and mental well-being across the lifespan (Farrell et al., 2018; Holt-Lunstad et al., 2017). Adolescents who experience more positivity and support in their friendships tend to perceive themselves as being more accepted, have higher self-esteem and are protected against depression (Berndt, 2002). Participants in our research noted that the arts help them feel more connected to other people. Other studies support this finding, with music identified as playing a key role in building shared identities amongst young adults (North & Hargreaves, 2008), and recreational dance classes helping to establish a sense of connection to cultural

heritage and community and to the development of social relationships in youth (Gardner et al., 2008). Participation in theatre groups has also been shown to support social well-being and collective efficacy in young people at risk (Bradley et al., 2004). While the capacity to promote connection to other people appears inherent in arts programs, an intentional focus on the associated well-being factors may ensure social connection for all participants. As identified in our research, some arts organisations may need a specific focus on promoting positive peer connection.

Being yourself is a strong aspect of identity development and is closely aligned with the concept of authenticity, viewed as a fundamental aspect of well-being (Wood et al., 2008), with lack of authenticity leading to psychopathology and distress (Leary, 2003). Authenticity is described as emotional genuineness and psychological depth and encompasses the ability to achieve goals even when facing external or internal opposition (Peterson & Seligman, 2004). The arts can provide opportunities for young people to be themselves as arts activities draw from students' own experience and provide avenues for identity exploration and discovery (Kniveton, 2017). In our research, specific well-being factors were considered to enable authenticity or "being myself". An intentional focus on these well-being factors may ensure that the arts have a positive impact on SEWB for all young people who participate. Some arts organisations though may need a specific focus on helping students develop self-awareness and identity, strategies for managing pressure, positive body image and self-compassion.

Participants also identified teaching methods used by arts educators when conducting their arts sessions, that supported young peoples' positive SEWB. These included being student-centred, providing an individualised approach, addressing stereotypes, providing opportunities to explore issues of relevance to them and having teachers that are relatable. Of these, a student-centred approach and relatable teachers are best supported empirically as teaching methods that promote the well-being of young people. For example, a student-centred approach is aligned with autonomy support which appears to hold promise for student psychological development (Black & Deci, 2000). Strong relationships with adults, grounded in mutual trust, are fundamental to the development of resilience (Masten, 2001). Promoting the use of each of the teaching methods may ensure the positive SEWB of all young people involved in the arts. Some art organisations though may benefit from a specific focus on addressing stereotypes and providing young people with teachers they can relate to.

While qualitative research is well-suited to exploring people's experiences and perspectives, a limitation is that these study findings cannot be generalised to broader populations. Extending the research to explore the relevance of the findings to various cultural and socio-economic groups will be important in the future. The sample of participants may not have reflected the full range of diverse identities involved in the arts, including identities that confer some

increased risk of mental health challenges, including LGBTQA+ youth (Gilbey et al., 2020) or ethnic minority youth (Ferdinand et al., 2015) living in the dominant white Australian context. A further limitation of this research was the data collection method of notetaking wherein participant comments were recorded without identifiers. Involving young people and parents from different art forms was considered a strength of the research, although the visual arts and music were not represented. The research did not aim to identify the relationship between specific art forms and their current promotion of SEWB but rather to provide an overall framework for SEWB promotion.

Conclusion and Implications

Engaging in extra-curricular arts programming may confer benefits for the SEWB of young people. Discussions with young people involved in arts programs and their parents identified well-being factors and teaching methods that enable young people to have good SEWB. Although not all approaches to arts programming may hold benefits, and it is possible that some approaches could pose their own challenges to SEWB, intentional approaches delivered through the arts, using a framework such as the one developed in this paper, may be an avenue for mental health promotion that cuts across social backgrounds and identities. An intentional approach to the promotion of the well-being factors and teaching methods, through the development of an appropriate professional learning resource, may ensure that arts programs not only develop creative and artistic skills in young people but also act as an important avenue for promoting their SEWB, thus providing a foundation for good mental health.

Acknowledgments

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Christine Lovering has over 40 years teaching experience in various education sectors across the UK and Australia including as an Arts Lecturer at Edith Cowan University. She has coordinated professional development in arts education and led study tours for Early Childhood Pre-Service Teachers and is a passionate advocate for quality teaching and learning in the Arts

Sarah Falconer is a Project Coordinator at the Telethon Kids Institute with expertise in community-based consultations. She has experience with research and health promotion program evaluation, particularly focusing on school-age children and their parents and is skilled at creatively translating research outputs for wider accessibility.

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Dr. Robyn Johnston is a Senior Research Officer at the Telethon Kids Institute who works with young people, parents and community stakeholders to support young people to have a healthier start to life. Robyn believes in the importance of involving young people and their families in the development of interventions to improve young people's health outcomes.

Dr. Karen Lombardi, in her role as Senior Research Officer at Telethon Kids Institute, has worked on various projects examining the impact of parents on their children's health and well-being. She specializes in mixed methods research, particularly qualitative data collection and analysis. Her primary interest lies in empowering parents and caregivers to enhance their children's development, particularly focusing on parental self-efficacy.

Dr. Kevin Runions is currently the Area Lead for Research, Evaluation, and Monitoring at School Mental Health Ontario. He previously held the position of Head, Schools and Community at Telethon Kids Institute. With a PhD in Human Development & Education, Dr Runions has focused his research on promoting children's social and emotional well-being, exploring how social experiences impact mental health, and improving schools' contributions to children's lives.

Karen Forde is a Project Coordinator at the Telethon Kids Institute and has a background in health promotion and health communication science. She's dedicated to translating research into practical outcomes through innovative collaborations, digital platforms, and social marketing. She is passionate about empowering parents, families, communities, and organizations to share research in ways that benefit the health and development of all children.

Naomi Crosby is an Australian actress, singer, public speaker, and freelance writer who holds a Bachelor of Nutrition and Dietetics. Naomi has written for film and publications and produced films to communicate nutrition and well-being messages.

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