EDUCATION AND TRAINING COMMITTEE

Inquiry into the extent, benefits and potential of music education in Victorian schools

Broadmeadows — 6 May 2013

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Witnesses
Dr M. Osborne, Music Psychology Researcher, Melbourne University;
Ms B. Lobb, Education Manager, and
Ms D. Arcaro, Lead Teaching Artist on Pizzicato Effect program, Melbourne Symphony Orchestra; and
Ms H. Hatzikalis, Curriculum Leader, Coordinator Pizzicato Effect Program, Meadows Primary School.
The CHAIR — Before we commence, I need to point out a couple of things. The microphones are recording for Hansard, and you will have an opportunity to review the transcript and make any changes that need to be made. Also, the evidence you give is covered by what we call parliamentary privilege, which is the same privilege afforded to members of Parliament. You can say whatever you like without fear or favour, but that only applies to the hearing proper, not to anything you might say afterwards. Thank you and welcome. We have some questions. We might kick off with those, and then if you have anything else afterwards —

Dr OSBORNE — I have a document that I could submit, if it is possible.

The CHAIR — Absolutely, you can submit that document, and we will take it as part of the evidence.

Dr OSBORNE — I will pass it over

The CHAIR — Thank you. Can you provide the committee with an overview of the research that you are currently undertaking on the program, and are you able to discuss some preliminary findings about the program?

Dr OSBORNE — Yes. I looked that up this morning. I have got a brief summary together. The reason I am here is that I am working on an ARC, Australian Research Council, discovery project, held by Professor Gary McPherson, who is the director of the Melbourne Conservatorium of Music at the University of Melbourne. That project is basically all about creating Musical Futures in Australia’s schools and communities and looking at a multitude of studies and the different ways that we can start to get evidence about how and why music works and how we can promote more music activity in schools and throughout the community.

We are looking at young people’s beliefs surrounding music and their motivation to study it, compared to other things that they could do. We are looking at developmental assets, so those are the sorts of non-intellectual improvements in functioning — for example, a sense of belonging in the community; a sense of feeling safe and supported by adults around them; a sense of being valued in the community for something they do, and this is all relating to what I am going to talk about later; an internal sense of achievement and motivation, because they can start to learn to do things that are valued by others and can express themselves in ways that are appropriate and constructive; learning how to basically manage their time; and being involved in an activity that means they are less likely to be involved in other activities that are less socially advantageous, like undesirable social behaviour.

We are profiling a number of different institutions, like Pizzicato, students at the Victorian College of the Arts Secondary School, all sorts of students, just to see what is feeding into their interest in music and what supports them.

The CHAIR — Where are you at the moment?

Dr OSBORNE — One more term of data collection. Data collection finishes June this year, and then I have about 18 months of data analysis, so in the second half of next year we should be able to compile all of those findings into a book. It will be similar I guess to what Brian Caldwell put into Bridging the Gap, though there are differences in our methodologies, which is good. In terms of what we are looking at here, I will talk about the research that we are doing. We have got about 95 students, which is tremendous. So in term 3 last year, 95 students from Years 3, 4 and 5 who were involved in the individual interviews run by myself and Helen, as well as computerised assessments of scholastic ability and achievement — numeracy, literacy, all those million-dollar questions about does music make you smarter. We may or may not find that out, but we will certainly get a profile of students over time who stay in the program and those who do not, which is the benefit of a year-long longitudinal study. Are there differences in spatial reasoning? Are they able quite literally to detect patterns and complete them better? Because musical notation is quite spatial. Are they able to concentrate longer? It is simple things like that, as well as understanding sounds.

It is a very divided literature in terms of whether music makes you smarter or not. Certainly we know that the skills and abilities most related to music in terms of auditory ability — the ability to hear, the ability to
detect sounds and understand speech — are enhanced by learning music. Whether it enhances literacy and numeracy is probably a bit of a stretch, but it also depends on how the program is delivered and how long it is delivered for. A flash-in-the-pan three-month program will not work; it has to have more longevity. That is the benefit of the Pizzicato program — it has that longevity and it has that intensity. You were talking before about classroom music failing. It is failing because teachers are not as musically able themselves, so they are less comfortable putting it into practice in the classroom in front of others. It is a systemic reduction of musical knowledge to the sufferance of us all.

I digress. Basically there are a number of things we ask. For example, which is your favourite school subject — music, maths, English, science, history or art? God, I should know after thousands of interviews. Music was the number one favourite subject mid-last year. It is still the number one favourite for the students who continue, of course, which is great. For those who discontinue it is sport, but sport is always second. So it is always that music-sport question of where do schools put their resourcing. Do we put it in the sports program or music? Sports is easier because everyone knows how to run and catch a ball — presumably throw a ball and catch a ball. Music is a little trickier.

Top three reasons why students want to be in the program. The first is that they are self-determined. I remember noting this with Bronwyn mid-last year. They want to learn music. They really want to learn a musical instrument. It is not the teacher telling them, not the parents. They love music and they really want to be in the group. So it is all self-determined, which is marvellous intrinsic motivation. Young people are intrinsically motivated to learn instruments. It is kinaesthetic, it is auditory, it is the sort of thing that they do not get to express and learn in English and maths because it is very pen and paper or computer-driven. It is much more diverse, which is very interesting.

When we look at the discontinued students from earlier this year — so term 1 — 58% of the students would want to be in the program again. That is a whopping two-thirds. It is really significant. Why? Because it sounds good when you play an instrument. They enjoy learning the pieces. They want to have a better future. Their friends are still involved and they get jealous watching them on stage performing concerts and doing all these activities, and they are no longer involved. It is a fun thing to do and it is a value-add and they recognise it.

Negatives — why are they no longer involved? The lesson might have been boring. The trouble is it is group lessons. Particularly at the beginning there was a lot of work, I recall from people reporting to me, just trying to get students to understand how to be in the lesson together, to wait in line and to do things in time together and to sit and be still, to be able to hold an instrument. Those sorts of gross motor activities, really, had to be learnt, and it takes a long time before you then get to start and to want to produce a sound out of the instrument.

Also in terms of resourcing there is an issue about being taken away from lunch and other classroom activities. A lot of students report that. As much as Meadows is working around making it less disruptive to other subjects and other learning you still have to find the time somewhere. In terms of the broader implication for offering music in the future in schools and making it effective, it is scheduling it into the curriculum so that they do not lose out on other things that are fairly basic and fundamental, like going out, getting some oxygen and getting some sunlight. These are young kids. They need to run around. Do you know what I mean? They are the balances. Also not being supported by family and not having an instrument at home to practise on, so these students on the whole have very little in terms of things in their lives — products, money to get lessons, money to have an instrument at home. They really value these instruments and this program teaches them responsibility for things that are valuable, but certainly if they have more of a chance to have those instruments and more contact with them, I believe you would find that they would be more likely to achieve success and improve musically quicker and therefore you would get that lovely aspiring, positive feedback loop of their getting better and improving as they are getting time and as they are getting access and all that sort of thing.

Family support is a real issue. Some students have definitely reported that parents do not quite like the squeaks on the instrument. In some cases it is difficult, but in other cases we find really poignant stories of
the musical involvement having flow-on effects through the family and calming autistic siblings, so the whole family gets the whole sense of cohesiveness as a result of music.

The last point is that 33% of follow-up discontinued students would like to learn an instrument again if they had the chance. This includes string and also other instruments, so drums, electric guitars are not included in Pizzicato. Why? Because they want to be like the people that they see on the television — the pop. Okay, fine. They want to identify with others, but a lot of people did say, ‘I would like to try the cello. I was on the violin. I want to try something else’. There may not be the flexibility, because the support is not there at the moment.

Ms LOBB — And the resources.

Dr OSBORNE — The resources, absolutely. But if the resources were there and they could have a pick and peck trial, it might also have more of a flow-on.

The CHAIR — Thank you for that.

Dr OSBORNE — That is all right.

The CHAIR — That was very comprehensive. From your perspective as an academic, why should young people learn music?

Dr OSBORNE — It was mentioned before; Danielle mentioned it. The mode of learning is very different to anything else that they would normally do. They use their bodies, but not in the very gross physical activity way of running 100-metre sprints. They use their minds in a way that is not two plus two equals four. I had to think about that one. They are able to express themselves physically and use their bodies in a way that they do not normally, and they are able to work in teams. Music is a very emotional language essentially, and the more musically advanced and skilled you get, the more you can start to express emotions and feelings that you might not be able to express or feel comfortable doing in any other way. That is why music therapy works. It expresses that which is inexpressible. A lot of children here struggle to express themselves verbally, struggle to express themselves physically in a way that is tolerated and that is constructive. Rather than beating a stick against a wall — —

Ms HATZIKALIS — Or beating each other up

Dr OSBORNE — Or beating each other up. Rather than being the centre of attention for some activity that is not desirable and is actually destructive, they can be the centre of activity in something that is valued by us all.

Ms MILLER — I just want to clarify something. So you did a 12 months study?

Dr OSBORNE — We are still in the process of it.

Ms MILLER — Longitudinal, 95 students, Years 3, 4 and 5?

Dr OSBORNE — Yes

Ms MILLER — Did I hear correctly in that so far you have got positive feedback in terms of the achieved result that ultimately has increased their mental health and wellbeing?

Dr OSBORNE — We do not know that yet.

Ms MILLER — But is that the way it is going?

Dr OSBORNE — I cannot say for sure; I really cannot.

Ms MILLER — I will ask the question a different way.

Dr OSBORNE — I could say yes.
Ms MILLER — Can you make an observational comment on the mental health and wellbeing of the students participating in the study?

Dr OSBORNE — I am still hesitant to say that, because I do not know the history of these students that well before I stepped in. But what I can say is that the students who are really engaged in the program genuinely seem to be engaged in a lot of other academic activities at work and they seem to be the ones that are paying attention in class more often.

Ms HATZIKALIS — What about out of their mouths in the interview? There was one specific question: ‘How do you think music has assisted you?’ and they would say, ‘I don’t why, but I am better at maths’ — that is a funny one — or ‘It makes me plan, because I go home and I have to plan what I am doing. I know I have to schedule in my’ whatever. There are lots of things like that, or else the emotive writing, when I get them to say what it is they are feeling as they are playing. They are talking about their grandpa who passed away; they are accessing such emotions and it is coming out in literacy.

Ms MILLER — Something else, Margaret, that you touched on was that you cannot say conclusively that it enhances science or maths, but I wonder if it is the discipline of learning the instrument and the theory that motivates them to do it, to want to do it again, then apply that discipline to other learnings.

Dr OSBORNE — In other domains.

Ms MILLER — What do you think?

Dr OSBORNE — Quite possibly. I would say generally, yes. If they are developing and strengthening that skill of being able to sit and attend to a task in something as intrinsically motivating as music, then they are more likely to be able to do that in another subject. They might also love science. We are not assessing scientific aptitude per se. But certainly those metaskills of learning how to learn I would not doubt are being strengthened, because I know they are.

Mr ELASMAR — What strategies can you suggest for improving the overall quality and provision of music in Victorian schools?

Dr OSBORNE — Let us just try to keep it condensed, because that is a million more questions in itself. For example, this school has been built with a music room off the gym that is out of the way, it is a little dark and there are no windows to the outside. Architecturally it does not look like music has been given a real acknowledgement of its importance. It is a great school, do not get me wrong. I am absolutely not making any other comment. But it is just interesting how music plays in relation to everything else in terms of building design. As a result, you have the teaching artists trying to deliver lessons in the board room, or in another room that is used for community welfare (behavioural issues), or in the kinder. That is a struggle. There is a lot of time and money essentially being spent on figuring out how to manipulate a clunky physical environment to support a program that requires instruments. People have to lug instruments back and forth across the school. That does not facilitate an ease of learning in music.

As I compare this, you have the strength, passion and conviction of people who make it work, but these are elite performers and this is one of the lead orchestras in the nation supporting this to get it working. Compared to upper SES areas, for example, in Melbourne that have grand performance halls, grand performing arts centres, multiple practice rooms, lots of equipment, a music department and a performing arts department, of course it is easier to have music of everyday learning when you have all those facilities. Fundamentally you make sure it is built into the logistics of the school itself.

Ms LOBB — A brand-new school, or two years old.

The CHAIR — With music being the focus.

Ms LOBB — At that time we were not consulted. I guess it was still very early days for the program happening within a school, but I remember the first time coming to school and saying, ‘Is that the only room we have for music? What do you mean?’.
Dr OSBORNE — We have not even talked about this, by the way.

Ms LOBB — It is a really interesting point. The basketballs have a storeroom, but the instruments do not.

Ms HATZIKALIS — Given we had so many conversations with the pedagogical geniuses about learning spaces and so forth, we did not even think about that.

Dr OSBORNE — That is a really valid point.

The CHAIR — I have a general question to finish up with. If you compare the music industry as a whole in Victoria, which is a huge industry that provides a whole lot of jobs and a range of different things, with the other end of the spectrum where we have sport, which is similar in many ways but has a different profile and emphasis, particularly in our schools — and the gym is a classic example — what could we be doing to give music the same sort of profile that sport and other things might have in schools? This is for all of you to finish up with.

Ms ARCARO — It needs that high profile. If you look at Auskick or whatever — —

Ms LOBB — Ambassadors.

Ms ARCARO — Yes, ambassadors. That was the word I was looking for.

Ms LOBB — High-profile ambassadors that are leading the way and with the support of the greater community behind them. Sport is on TV the whole time. I guess also greater exposure, more arts exposure on TV and all the other channels of communication that people are accessing all the time.

Ms ARCARO — Some of the programs in the UK of this style all have high-profile ambassadors. They will have a Julian Lloyd Webber or somebody that everybody knows fronting it and doing that kind of work.

Ms HATZIKALIS — They must have funding — —

Ms LOBB — When you compare sport, that is right.

Ms HATZIKALIS — I just wanted to say that because the families do not pay for the sporting opportunities we bring to our children, the funding means — —

Ms LOBB — It is cheaper to deliver.

Ms HATZIKALIS — It is different. It is certainly different. They still need a profile.

Ms LOBB — I think ambassadors could be a really key thing there.

The CHAIR — That is nice one to finish on and is certainly very doable as part of our remit. Thank you very much, Margaret, for presenting.

Dr OSBORNE — Thank you.

The CHAIR — We look forward to following it through to eventually reading all about the recommendations.

Dr OSBORNE — Let us hope so.

The CHAIR — Thanks for presenting that paper. We will certainly consider that as part of the evidence. I will finish off by thanking all of you for what you are doing at this school and thanks for having us here. Well done to the MSO for choosing this program. I think it is terrific.

Ms HATZIKALIS — Can we ask you about the time frame for what you are doing?
The CHAIR — Yes. We will be looking to report towards the end of the year. Certainly by the end of the year we will have our report completed.

Ms HATZIKALIS — Is it a written report?

The CHAIR — It will be a written report which will have a number of recommendations, which you will receive a copy of because you appeared before the committee. That report then goes to the minister. It will have a number of recommendations which are suggestive of how we would like to see things move forward. The minister then has a certain time frame — usually within six months — to report back in terms of what recommendations will be taken up by the department. From that point on, the government would be looking at how they would be implemented going forward.

Ms LOBB — I would just like to add one thing, and I know I mentioned it to a couple of you as we walked around. This is still a work-in-progress for us. It is a pilot where every week we change and chat about how we can make it better. It is interesting that you asked: how big can this be? We are still refining our model. I am not saying it is at a perfect point where we could roll it out, but certainly the more brain power that can get behind how to make this even more comprehensive and have better outcomes is probably like a real aspiration for the future to build on that.

The CHAIR — Just on the work that we are doing, too, which is a useful part of any of this sort of stuff, is that for us it is really gathering together information about a whole range of different things and what is on offer here in Victoria and in other states and internationally as well. Quite often these sorts of things are really useful to us and to others in learning, sharing, collaborating — all those sorts of different things. It is not just the recommendations for what we can do as a government; it is also really good because it is signalling to others and learning from others about best practice and what and where it is happening.

Ms HATZIKALIS — We will be having a concert. If you wish to see the children and see the stages of learning, that would be quite an eye-opener too for you.

The CHAIR — Can you send us through the information? That would be excellent. Thank you.

Committee adjourned.