EDUCATION AND TRAINING COMMITTEE

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

Melbourne — 15 April 2013

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Professor D. Forrest, Professor of Music Education, RMIT University.
The CHAIR — There are a couple of things I need to point out in terms of the inquiry itself. These microphones in front of you are to record evidence by Hansard. You will have the opportunity to review the transcript, and if there are any typographical errors, you can have those fixed. The evidence you give today is covered under parliamentary privilege, which is the same privilege afforded to members of Parliament. That privilege only applies in the hearing and does not extend to anything said outside the hearing. What we might do is open up and give you the opportunity for some brief introductory remarks, and then we have some questions for you.

Prof. FORREST — I will start by saying thank you to this committee and to the Parliament for calling this inquiry. I think it is a tremendous thing you have done and I hope, as I said in my submission, that it does not stop here, that something actually happens with it and that the findings from this inquiry can be implemented. I have been working in the policy area of education for many years now and I see so many wonderful things happening, but the big issue is will these actually be translated into action, from policy to implementation. So as a starting point, thank you.

The second point is that the submissions already received by the committee will form some fantastic literature of views for graduate students across the country. They will be coming to this inquiry, to the literature here. Already, through reading them myself, I have been astounded with what has come out of them. The academic literature is there and we access it all the time. But hearing the teachers’ voices has been so important, and I think there is actually a lot more that can still come through. We heard those voices in the national review of school music education a few years ago, as you would be aware, and this is most certainly adding to that and adding to the strength of the value of music education.

From a personal perspective, my own research over the last 20 years has been on — it might seem a little bit left of field — a Russian Soviet composer called Dmitri Kabalevsky. Those of you who play piano would have played some Kabalevsky. However, my work was actually to do with his educational theory. As an educator he influenced four generations of Soviet and Russian children in their music education, so we are dealing with millions of people who were impacted by his views on music education. The whole nub of his work was that music must be accessible to everyone, not just the gifted and talented. I was just reminded over the weekend that in the epitaph to his great book, the book that every child in Russia used in music education, he referred to the Soviet educator, Vasyl Sukhomlinsky, who talked about music education not being about educating the musician but about educating the human. It is from that view of music education that I am coming; it is not to do with educating the skills and teaching how to read crotchets and quavers but educating the human and the person behind the music. I will stop there and let you ask questions.

The CHAIR — Thank you for that. We have had many stakeholders who have submitted to the inquiry and some who have presented have suggested that music should be taught by specialist teachers in primary schools rather than classroom teachers. What do you think about that? Who do you think should be responsible for teaching music in primary school?

Prof. FORREST — A lovely question, thank you. Ideally music should be taught by specialists. It should be taught by people who are trained over a three or four-year degree in music. However, the reality is a specialist cannot be in a classroom all the time and the generalist teacher must be trained and educated in teaching music. I believe it is actually both: it should be a specialist and a generalist working with a child in their education. The generalist teacher, particularly in primary school, is there all the time and they need to be skilled in order to deal with the English, maths and science lessons with music, so that it is not just this thing we had on at one end of the day or on Friday afternoon; it is happening throughout the day.

A specialist most certainly can come in and define skills; however, the generalist teacher is the one who is there all the time. In that respect we need to be training both the specialist and the generalist teachers to work in classrooms. In secondary schools we have to a greater extent a situation where people mostly come in with music degrees so there is specialism there; however in a primary school, it is not there.

The CHAIR — I will pick that up a little bit later.
Ms TIERNEY — How much time do you think schools should allocate on a weekly basis to music?

Prof. FORREST — As much as possible. I said in my submission it would be lovely if the schools actually allocated 5 minutes a day — it is as basic as that — but, as I also said, I do not believe that is possible. If there could be 5 minutes every day in a classroom across the state, we would have a sensational system operating. If we had 10 minutes, we would be even better and we would keep moving on. If it is a case of allocating just one class of music a week, I do not think that is enough for any of the art forms, but the reality of timetabling will not allow much more. But if there was a small slot of time — I am definitely not advocating the 2-hour block of literacy and numeracy on that — that is a music slot.

Ms TIERNEY — How would you balance that music with other forms of the Arts — visual arts, dance and everything else?

Prof. FORREST — I am here for music. However, the national curriculum most certainly is providing us with an opportunity that every child should have the experience of all five art forms. So if we got 25 minutes every day for the Arts, would that not be lovely? Again, the reality is, from some of the calculations, that even that is not possible. There has to be a balance. They do have a place, but maybe we start with music and visual art and we work from there. There is a starting point for the Arts. The other art forms are most certainly represented in other subject areas. However, music and visual art are not.

The CHAIR — It is suggested that many of the teacher training courses do not properly equip pre-service teachers with the skills and confidence to teach in the classroom. What do you think needs to be done in terms of preparing teachers to teach music and what is your view about the current preparation of our teachers?

Prof. FORREST — There has been quite a lot done on the amount of time allocated to music and the performing arts, particularly within teacher education programs. I think my university can claim to be one of the highest providers of music education in the state. For primary teaching students, we are currently offering 30 hours within a performing arts course on music. That was a decision of a head of school who said, ‘Let’s direct this performing arts course towards music’. I do not believe any other universities are offering 30 hours in a generalist primary degree. Thirty hours is not enough. We are dealing with a whole range of things, but it is at the expense of other things not being delivered.

I think while we are under the direction of the Victorian Institute of Teaching, which requires teachers to be registered with particular skills and attributes, the universities will not provide any more than they have to and students will not be paying any more than they have to. One course in the Arts is not enough for anyone, but again within a really tight timetable it is very difficult to advocate for more time. I guess I am in a very fortunate situation that my university has decided it wants to put its time into music and it has done so. I understand that in some degree programs there is as little as 12 hours on the performing arts, not even on music. So something has to happen there and more time needs to be allocated, but more time will not be allocated unless we have bodies such as the VIT actually insisting on more time. Maybe it needs to be directed that more time must be there.

The CHAIR — Do you think there is anything else that would encourage more confidence in teachers to teach music at the primary level?

Prof. FORREST — I have found that confidence comes through practice and through exposure — or, as Kabalevsky said, through access. If you are accessing a lot of ideas, you can see that it is possible to do, that it is not a scary thing over there, and you will get up and sing because it is not something that is unique and so different that it is available for only trained people or whatever and that people will actually do it. By the end of their 30 hours, my students are actually doing things they had never even dreamt of at the start of their semester; there are those who are saying, ‘I wish I had more’. It is a case of providing access to opportunities and building skills that some already have.

Ms MILLER — You sort of touched a little bit earlier, in your introduction, on introducing more singing programs at primary school level. It is suggested that these programs could be delivered by
generalist classroom teachers, provided they receive the necessary professional learning and support. Do you believe this idea has merit?

Prof. FORREST — Yes, absolutely.

Ms MILLER — If so, what type of professional learning and support would generalist classroom teachers need to be able to confidently deliver these programs?

Prof. FORREST — Could I just take a step back? It is actually delivery by the teacher, regardless of whether they are specialist or generalist. It is not the parachuting in of an organisation that actually delivers a singing program as such. It is actually the teacher in the classroom, whether that teacher be the specialist or the generalist, not an external body coming in. I take issue with education money being directed to outside organisations that are delivering music programs and taking away in effect funding available to schools.

But back to the issue of the singing, I think everyone can sing. We cannot all sing well, but we can sing and we can be guided in how we can actually teach a song. There are many resources available for us in teaching. There are not only resources but also training programs in getting people to use their voices. I think there is more to your question, though.

Ms MILLER — No. I think that is pretty much along the lines of what I wanted to know.

Prof. FORREST — On professional development, in fact Dr Lierse reminded me when we were talking just before that in the early 1990s there was a fund for the NPDP, the National Professional Development Program, which was a significant commonwealth fund that delivered a whole series of professional development courses to teachers. In those days an organisation called Cross Arts Victoria was developed and it ran for about five years. I think the NPDP funding went for about three to four years and within that framework, organisations such as the one I belong to, which is the Australian Society for Music Education, the dance, drama, media and visual art people all worked together on professional development with teachers and we covered the state. I remember driving a couple of times to places like Mildura and Swan Hill to deliver workshops in music. There were models in the early 1990s that were really successful in getting teachers and arts teachers working in and across a range of art forms, so there are models out there of how to upskill, develop and enable teachers to do things.

The CHAIR — Can I just pick up on a point you mentioned earlier about your having concern with external providers coming in and providing programs in schools? Could you just elaborate on that? If those external providers were actually upskilling the teachers to then teach music, do you see that still being an issue?

Prof. FORREST — I see that as a phenomenal thing, that it happens, but I hate to think of that segment of six to eight weeks when people from an organisation come in, upskill the teachers for a program, whether it be the equivalent of a Musica Viva or The Song Room or whatever type of program, that teach a particular idea or a particular ensemble, then leave and the school says, ‘We’ve completed music this year’ — tick; ‘We’ve gone to the zoo this year; we’ve done that’ — tick; or ‘We’ve employed this’. That is what I disagree with. I think anything that can add to or enhance education is phenomenal. That is tremendous. What I would not like to see is that it becomes the replacement for music in schools.

Ms TIERNEY — How do you think music technology can enhance the experience of music students?

Prof. FORREST — I think it is tremendous. I am not a geek, but I like using technology. It cannot replace the notion of a teacher. It is there to enhance — your word — to assist, to develop and to potentially learn or gain skills, but it is there as the addition to our learning and in support of our learning.

Ms TIERNEY — What are some of the preferred technologies that are around at the moment?

Prof. FORREST — I like using something as basic as GarageBand, where kids can just start working on some of the building blocks of music and they can start to see that if they do this, this and this, it ends
up in this sort of sound. They can then start to become discriminating and say, ‘That sounds pretty awful’ or ‘That’s tremendous’. They can start to become discerning consumers. Unfortunately so often when things are pumping through our headphones we are not too discerning about things, but if we can actually make decisions about what works and what does not because of these reasons, we are a long way along the way to actually understanding what music is about and we can start building through the elements of music, whether it be melody, harmony, rhythm or whatever. It is there for us to be able to start using those building blocks of music in a really constructive way. I am absolutely in favour of technology, as long as there is a teacher in the room.

There was a lovely cartoon that came out a couple of years ago now. I initially used it in music perception classes. It was of a little dancer in the middle of a classroom and she had a little thought bubble, which was a beautiful flower. The kids around her were all watching her intently and every child’s thought bubble was something very different from her flower. There were battleships, there were pirates, there were mass murderers and whatever happening, and in the corner of the room was the teacher standing there without a thought bubble. I thought, ‘Tremendous. She has enabled that’, but next to her — and we are talking 20 years ago — was a record player. The technology was the record player then enabling that child to dance the flower and for those kids in the classroom to be seeing so many other things. I see the record player as being the technology which is so significant in any classroom.

The CHAIR — Could you elaborate on or give us some context for your arts unit as part of the bachelor of education at RMIT and how that contributes to the music?

Prof. FORREST — The course is called performing arts. The course description was written from a music perspective. It balances against a fairly hefty visual art course, and the other art forms are then picked up in two integrated arts subjects through the degree, so that the students get four opportunities at the Arts over their degree and can then add in independent projects as well. Within the performing arts course we actually come from a basis of composition, of getting the students to compose and to create. It is such a technical word, ‘composition’, but it really is just putting sounds together and it is actually enabling the students to see that if they add that gong to the drum they have actually created something. It is giving them the skills to create something and to start to make judgements about things.

We do some movement in that class. We do some singing. It is not dominated by singing, but there is singing. There is also a serious amount of listening, as in how to listen, what to listen to, what is appropriate and what may not be appropriate for children to be exposed to. A lot of it is giving the students an opportunity to bring music into the class as well — bringing their favourite sound to class, bringing their favourite piece of music to class and talking about it. So it is the experience of performing and listening and composing that is fairly locked together in every opportunity with the students.

The CHAIR — We have heard so much evidence in terms of the benefits of music, whether it has improved literacy and numeracy, creativity, teamwork — all those wonderful things. Why do you think, given all those benefits, that has not translated into more music programs in schools?

Prof. FORREST — Back to the government. Why not?

The CHAIR — From your perspective.

Prof. FORREST — Thank you. But I have to say that the arguments that music does this for these areas is almost a cop-out — ‘that we do music because’. We do music because it is music because it is actually there. It is one of the great disciplines; it is one of the great ancient disciplines of learning. Coming back to that earlier statement, it helps us to become human. It does enable a lot of learning in other areas. It is there and it should be there in its own right. Most certainly it does help the literacy, it does help the numeracy, but it is there because it is music. There was something else to your question, sorry. Why has it not happened?

The CHAIR — Why has it been taken out?
Prof. FORREST — It is often not the sexy topic, is it? When we have kids who cannot read and cannot add up, why are we nominally out there singing? Maybe we should be singing our tables, maybe we should be singing our texts, whatever; surely that will enable us to be better people as well?

Ms MILLER — Just on that, I remember when I was young we used to sing the times tables.

Prof. FORREST — We sure did.

Ms MILLER — And we used to remember them. From your perspective, what do you think has changed between that time years ago and today?

Prof. FORREST — Maybe we are not singing our tables any more. Maybe we need a beat under it; all the rappers are doing it so well. Maybe we need to be applying a lot of other things to other areas of learning. Cross Arts Victoria, the organisation I referred to earlier, has spent a huge amount of time actually linking the Arts to other areas. Part of the National Professional Development Program was how do the Arts and how do each of the subject areas work together. This was the time of CSF 1 into 2, that period of time when the curriculum standards framework was going through its revisions. We saw great changes in education, in the ways of seeing. In those times we were actually fighting — and, I think, successfully — to get children in the early years of schooling to have an experience of the visual and the performing arts. The document was not written that way until the second of the CSFs came through.

Ms MILLER — Was that the 80s or the 90s?

Prof. FORREST — No, it was the 90s. It was well and truly into the 90s. It was a really good move where children were not just doing visual art in some form as their arts experience, they were actually having an experience of visual and performing arts. I do not know what has happened subsequently. We should still be singing our tables.

Ms TIERNEY — I know we are dealing with music education, but can you give me a really quick overview of what is covered in the visual arts component?

Prof. FORREST — No, I cannot. There has been a huge amount of work in the Australian curriculum on repositioning both the visual arts and music, along with drama, dance and media. But no, I cannot. It is as if, particularly in Victoria, the visual arts are a really dominant area of the school curriculum. Maybe teachers feel they can do things more easily or with more skill in the visual arts than they can in music. I think New South Wales has it, the only authority that has still has the 100 hours of music and visual art in the curriculum; Victoria does not and the other states do not. Maybe too the teaching of visual arts has always been to enable teachers to do things and therefore to transmit that to students more easily than we have done in music.

The CHAIR — David, is there anything we have not covered that you wanted to mention?

Prof. FORREST — With your permission, I would like to table a letter from the National President of the Australian Society of Music Education, Dr Hartwig.

The CHAIR — Sure. Thank you.

Prof. FORREST — I am a member of the national executive of the Australian Society of Music Education. The letter simply applauds the committee and the inquiry, though it is a very short statement on behalf of ASME, the national music education body, and most certainly welcomes the opportunity for this inquiry. The second is that ASME was involved, back in the middle 2000s, in the development of a national framework for music teaching standards. This came out at the same time or just after the English-maths-science professional bodies developed standards for their expert teachers. ASME developed this unfunded — we did not have any government funding — but as a national organisation we brought together our state and territory chapters to develop a series of national teaching standards. With your permission I will table that as well.
The CHAIR — Okay. Thank you very much. We will certainly take those into consideration.

Prof. FORREST — Thank you.

The CHAIR — I will finish by thanking you for appearing before the committee and also for presenting your submission as part of the inquiry. We wish you all the best with your continued work.

Prof. FORREST — Thank you.

Witness withdrew.