EDUCATION AND TRAINING COMMITTEE

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

Blackburn High School — Thursday, 16 May 2013

Members

Mr P. Crisp
Mr N. Elasmar
Ms E. Miller

Mr D. Southwick
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Witnesses

Matt, Year 12 student,
Boris, Year 12 student,
Lachlan, Year 12 student,
Siobhan, Year 11 student,
Jessica, Year 11 student,
Josiah, Year 11 student,
Zac, Year 11 student, and
Oliver, Year 11 student, Blackburn High School
Ms MILLER — Good morning everyone. Now, what we’ll be doing today is asking you all some questions. You can say whatever you like. It is all under what we call parliamentary privilege, but certain things should not be repeated outside. So, you can say what you like in here.

What will happen is we have a gentleman from Hansard who is recording everything we talk about. Once our discussions have concluded, the Principal will look a look at the transcript to make sure everything is correct and accurate. And, then, that will be a contribution to our inquiry that will formulate recommendations down the track.

So, what I would like you to do is when we ask you questions if you could just say your first name first and then speak, and that’s the process. So, I will start off with questions. You can sort of like just say — we’re not going to necessarily go in order, we’ll just be jumping in and out when you choose to.

So, my first question is what instrument are you learning? When did you start learning it, and why?

LACHLAN — I started when I was in Year 7. I hadn’t done any music before I came to the school and so I started when I was in Year 7 when they had the open night and when the musical expo and all the instrumental staff came along to the school, and they had an open night where you could try all the instruments. So, I went around with my family and we played each of the instruments. We got a score from the teachers who gave you sort of an idea about how adept you were at that particular instrument and having to try and find an instrument that suited you really well. So, I came to choose the cello from recommendations from the cello teacher and after discussing it with my parents.

SIOBHAN — I play the violin, and I started when I was four years old. I was encouraged by my family. I think the reason I chose it was because my sister played the violin and she used to play to me when I was younger, and I just really liked the sound of it. And, so, when I was four years old I asked mum if I could start learning, and I kept going.

Ms MILLER — Good on you.

MATT — I started playing trumpet in Year 3, but I didn’t necessarily start getting really involved in it until I came here in Year 7 and was able to be inspired by actually seeing complete bands and hearing them played, because I came from a primary school that had a relatively weak music department, so I didn’t exactly do much until I came here in Year 7. But, yeah, that’s how I started playing.

JESSICA — I went to the same primary school as Matt, and like Lachlan was saying, in Year 7, I didn’t know any instruments and the school had the open night, and I went around with my family as well, tried out all the instruments, and I found that the clarinet suited me best, and then actually later on in Year 9, I decided that I actually wanted to learn saxophone as well and so I started playing that. I’m still playing both the clarinet and saxophone.

OLIVER — I started playing drum kit when I was in primary school, probably about Year 2 or 3 and I only played drum kit until about Year 5, where I started learning with Steve, and I learnt classical percussion as well, which is if you can’t just play drum kit you have to play a classical percussion as well, or only.

And then, once I got to school in Year 7, I also went to the open night thing and decided I wanted to play trombone as well. And, I played that for four years, and now my focus is back on drums and percussion.

ZAC — I play the saxophone; mainly alto saxophone. I started playing the Christmas before Year 7, so I got a saxophone before Christmas. And, so I played a little bit and then I started at the start of Year 7 instead of term 2 when after the open night things start up.
So, I sort of just started playing because I got a saxophone before Christmas, and then started taking it a little bit more seriously once I came to Blackburn and saw what I could do, I guess.

**JOSIAH** — I started playing in Year 7, like most of the other people. But, yeah, I started playing the French horn because of the Year 7 and 9 thing, and was mostly inspired by the range of all of the ensembles that we could choose from and stuff like that. That was what kind of inspired me to pick up the instrument and really practice hard to get to those ensembles.

**BORIS** — I started when I was six years old. I played trombone. I started in Christchurch, New Zealand. So, I did the same process that they go through here at Blackburn, but it was one-on-one with the Head of Music at the school in Christchurch. I picked trombone because it was pretty much the only instrument I could hold as a six-year-old.

**Mr ELASMAR** — What music subject are you currently studying and why did you choose it? And the second part of it is what are your favourite things about studying music, and any aspects that you would improve about the subject?

**SIOBHAN** — I’m doing music performance as a subject, and I really like that subject because it’s really good because you’ve got to get up and perform because it’s part of the subject. And so, you have to conquer your — well, if you have stage fright or just those nerves that you get when you’ve got to perform. And, so I think it’s really good from that aspect. And, then, you’ve got the theory side as well, because theory is very important.

And, I think the way it’s structured is quite good because you’ve got a range of what you do. Each class is never the same thing — like you’ll have one class where you will be doing theory and you get split up into groups as your ability for theory, and higher level people might be off practising for a performance and I just think that’s really good, because then everyone gets what they need in that time.

**JESSICA** — I’m like Siobhan, and I also do music performance. One of the things I really like about it is music is such a difficult subject as opposed to your typical ones like maths, English, science, and so it’s that little bit of like a break up and sort of, you know, not having to write down notes, listen to the teacher all the time sort of thing. You get up, perform, play what you want, you know, express yourself, and also overcome things as Siobhan said, like stage fright and just something you have to face, you know, later on in life and speak in front of, you know, an audience or whatever.

**BORIS** — I’m doing music performance, and I like the subject because in Year 12 it’s often difficult to find time to practice, but this gives you kind of a good reason to justify spending an hour or two just playing an instrument.

If there’s one thing I’d change it would probably be for performing of the music subjects. The theory side of it has been dumbed down, for want of another word, over the few years and I think that it should probably be kept at a higher esteem because it’s beneficial to being able to play your instrument and following through in creative music.

**OLIVER** — Me and Zac, we actually do the Year 12 music performance subject in Year 11 a year early, and we did the Year 11 subject in Year 10 last year as well as doing the Year 10 music subjects. So, we had two music subjects at once last year, and this year, we’re also doing Year 11 music styles and composition, where you study music history, basically, and you analyse how different moods are created in the music, how that is technically achieved. You also get to compose your own music as well, which is great to release all your creativity.

**LACHLAN** — Adding on to what Boris said, the only thing I would change about the current way it’s structured is that there isn’t an adequate recognition for the fact that it is possibly the most
difficult subject to do in the sense that it’s not like English or science where you can pick it up two years before you go into Year 12 and you can decide a year out I am going to work hard, I’m going to learn the course content and I’m going to study hard.

Music is quite unique in the sense that to get a decent score, working on it for six years beforehand, and that it involves a lot more time and effort than any other subject that I know of requires, and the fact that the scaling is only very small — I don’t think is reflective of how hard the subject is and what skill level is required to actually ascertain a decent mark in the subject.

ZAC — I’m in the same class as the Year 12 music performance and music styles. The thing I like most about music is performing, getting up and playing things with Olly and Rohan. And, the one thing I think I would improve about the subject is probably like as Lachlan said, starting the subject earlier would have made now a lot more easy, and I would have been able to excel. I would be much better now if I had have started three years or so before I had it.

In primary school I didn’t have much music. There wasn’t much of a music thing going on there. And here, it’s much better, but I think although it’s great, it could be better.

Ms MILLER — My next question is what role does your family play in supporting you studying music and how much practice and work do you put into learning your musical instrument?

MATT — Well, my parents have always been almost overly supporting me as a musician. My mum will show up to just about every single school gig that we have ever done, which is nice. But, I was never really pressured by my parents to practice or to study music. It was more my own decision, but they’ve always just kind of helped me along with it, I guess, and have always been ready to, I don’t know, pay for any extra tuition I might have needed or drive me to any performances or anything as far as that goes.

Ms MILLER — How much time do you put into it?

MATT — I put in maybe two hours of practice every night. Like, it will usually be one hour and then I’ll study for another hour and then practice for a bit. That’s usually, I guess, what I’ve had to put in for the VCE performance.

SIOBHAN — My family have been really supportive of my music, because I have a very musical family. All of my siblings play two musical instruments each, and so there was always encouragement to do it, but I was never forced to practice. Like mum would say, ‘Oh, you should probably do some practice’ but it was an encouraging thing and wasn’t like saying, ‘Go and do it now.’ So, that was really helpful I think, just knowing that they were there to support me and they come to every single performance, which is good.

And, practising-wise I do a lot of practice. I probably do one and-a-half hours to two hours every single night just because you have to if you want to keep getting better.

ZAC — My parents are very supportive about music. My dad’s actually my saxophone teacher. He teaches at this school and he takes the stage band at school. So, they’re very supportive. Sometimes dad tries to sort of step back. He never tells me to practice, ever, because if he did I wouldn’t practice just to try and rebel against it.

Ms MILLER — How many hours?

ZAC — I try and play for four hours a day, which includes rehearsals and things, although, saying that, it rarely happens because that’s a lot of time playing saxophone. But I think the more hours the better really.
BORIS — My parents have been very supportive of my playing. The music has been a big part of my family since my sister started at a very young age on piano as well — my older sister. And, so, my parents were sort of used to what was going to happen with having music in the family and have been very supportive. They are always happy to drive me halfway across Melbourne or wherever I need to go to get a lesson to do a performance or anything like that. And, practising I did a lot of practice last year and almost to the point of over practising because I gave myself RSI in both my wrists. That was probably a mistake. So, this year, I’ve been taking it a little bit more easy and trying to recover.

JOSIAH — My parents are pretty supportive of everything. They come to pretty much all the concerts and stuff like that.

Practice-wise, I do quite a lot but I think, you know, the good thing about music is that there’s never a limit to how much you can do with practice. You can, you know, do four hours a day and keep getting better. It’s just a very good thing. I think because of the practice that I’ve done since Year 7, I’ve developed other study techniques in other subjects with the same kind of theories of study of practising my instrument like, you know, repetition and all that kind of stuff that you really need to do to be playing your instrument, which I think is hugely beneficial for both my playing and my skills.

Ms MILLER — Did your primary school offer you the opportunity to learn an instrument?

JOSIAH — Yeah, well, in primary school I did play the base guitar and they had a band there that I could play in and stuff like that.

Ms MILLER — What grade were you in in primary school when you learnt to play?

JOSIAH — Year 6.

Ms MILLER — Boris, your primary school experience?

BORIS — I was home schooled in primary school because of my dad’s work. We moved around quite a bit, so it just made it a bit easier. Like, in whichever city I was in, I was always invited into the school bands and all that sort of stuff. I was always accepted quite a lot, and the same happened here when I moved to Melbourne. I was offered pretty much straight away a position in the orchestra to play trombone, and was accepted quite quickly.

Ms MILLER — So, how old were you when you start playing a musical instrument?

BORIS — Six years old.

LACHLAN — Music — there was none to speak of at my primary school. In terms of instrumental teaching, that was very lacking. My brother still goes to the same primary school, and they’ve now got guitar lessons, so they’re stepping in a good direction in terms of offering lessons, but while I was there, there was no music formation at all.

Ms MILLER — What grade are they offering that at the moment?

LACHLAN — Any level.

SIOBHAN — At my primary school there was actually quite a good chance to be involved in music. It may not have been very high standard, but you had the opportunity to learn trumpet, guitar, violin and flute, I believe, and there was like a small string quartet sort of thing here. And then you had the typical music class, but it wasn’t just recorder. You got to use like different instruments. So, that really was good, I think. It was just good to have it in primary school because I think music is really beneficial to everyone.
JESSICA — When I was in primary school there was one instrumental teacher that could teach the trumpet, clarinet, guitar and possibly the drums. But, it was very limited in what he could do. We had classroom music and like most primary schools learnt to play the recorder but it wasn’t much, but it was at least something. But, I was never really interested in it at the time, because it wasn’t really spoken of very highly whereas, you know, here at Blackburn obviously the music program is very well-known.

MATT — I went the same primary school as Jessica, and there was only one teacher. Now that I look back on it, I think the only instrument he could actually play was guitar. But he could still teach instruments like trumpet, trombone, saxophone to like a reasonable first year level but nothing really much beyond that point. And, as far as ensembles goes, you were very, very limited and couldn’t get past a certain point. So, I guess that’s why when I came here in Year 7, I was sort of still only at the first year level like everyone else who was just starting, and I had to put in a lot of work to catch up.

OLIVER — The thing about choosing to play a musical instrument is that in terms of the work you put in for it, because it is an optional thing you choose to do it. It kind of falls to you of putting the work in. Like, with other subjects, you have to do the work because it’s a school. With music, you choose to do it yourself and because you put in the work to prepare for it yourself, teaches you that you can put in that extra work that you put into your other compulsory subjects. You don’t have to do them, but it’s your spare time to benefit those subjects yourself.

ZAC — It was an okay music department. Music was my favourite subject at primary school, and it was one of the things that motivated me to do other work. Without the music course, I guess at my primary school — which wasn’t great but it was certainly fun — I feel that if the music course at primary school wasn’t there I wouldn’t have done as well with other things.

Ms MILLER — What year did they offer you?

ZAC — From prep.

Mr ELASMAR — Do you think all students should be required to learn music at school, and in what years should it be taught?

MATT — I don’t believe it should ever be compulsory for students to learn music just like sport or anything else like that. But, I believe that if they want to that the required facilities and things should be available to them and whoever wants to learn music.

Like, here, for example, we’re not entirely selective. There’s no an audition. Anyone who wants to at Year 7 can learn an instrument and can come in and start playing but they have to work to catch up with kids who have been playing at primary school for many, many years and may be up to a certain standard.

BORIS — I don’t think music should be required at school as an extracurricular actively just like sport, as Matt said. But, I do think it should be encouraged. It’s really great. It’s fun. It helps you a lot with all your other subjects, time management and everything.

Mr ELASMAR — And what year do you recommend?

BORIS — I think if you are going to start music, I think you should start soon as you can. I started when I was six, and the best decision I made.

LACHLAN — I think it should be compulsory in primary schools. I think that’s really important. And, if you listen to the way Richard Gill talks about classroom music teaching, the way that he encourages students to be creative, especially young people in all of their subject areas, I think it’s really fantastic in primary school. In terms of high school teaching — this is just classroom music — I
agree with what we do here, seven and eight, and having that compulsory I think is really important. It gives students a well rounded education in all areas so not much — because nearly every school or most schools do like art as in visual arts, and that music is just another form of those arts. It’s important to encourage students to become well rounded people in that sense and be exposed to that sort of art.

In terms of instrumental music, so elective music at school, it should definitely be encouraged, and it should be made that all students have the ability to become part of and learn an instrument, especially in public schools where that’s the point of public schools. You can go in and get a good, well, rounded education, which is paid for by the government.

In terms of that, when funding from the region of the past 10 years has decreased very severely to the point where 10 years’ ago teachers who were hired by the school from the department were almost going to be paid for by the department to the point now where an incredible sum of money is paid so that students have to pay to hire the teachers for school. I think it is quite detrimental for music programs, not just for this school but all around the state, and so is decreasing the ability that other students have to participate in programs such as these.

OLIVER — I think music should be compulsory as a subject for everyone for one year or even a semester at the start of high school to give you an idea of what can be done with music and what will happen when you go on to maybe year levels to see if they want to continue music. But, probably not much beyond that because if you make something compulsory it will have the reverse effect. People would go I am being forced to do this or I’m not going to do it or I’m not going to try or whatever.

So, I think it should be compulsory, even for a semester or a year at the start of high school so people know if it’s something they want to do, but not much further beyond that.

Ms MILLER — Well, that concludes our questions.

I just wanted to thank each and every one of you. Thank you for coming in and being part of this inquiry. It’s been really interesting talking to you all.

I wish the Year 11s all the best, and the Year 12s all the best for the remainder of the school year, and best wishes for your futures as well. Keep up the good work playing your musical instruments.

Witnesses withdrew.