EDUCATION AND TRAINING COMMITTEE

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

Mildura — 1 May 2013

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Witnesses

Ms M. Curran, Principal, and
Ms F. Gray, Music Coordinator, Mildura Specialist School.
The CHAIR — Thank you for coming along. Hansard reporters are recording all of this information so we can have a document of all of the people who have appeared before the committee, so from that we can determine our recommendations. It looks very daunting but don’t worry, it is not too bad.

I do have to point out a couple of things. You will have the opportunity to review the evidence, so it will be typed up and presented to you at a later point, and if there are any typographical errors or what have you that need to be changed you will have that opportunity. The evidence that you give today is covered by parliamentary privilege, which is the same privilege afforded to members of Parliament, which means you can say whatever you like in here, but you cannot do the same outside the room proper and the hearing proper. It only applies to here.

That is the formal part. But it is a discussion. Today is really to hear about some of the things that you are doing in your school and to learn from that, and also for you to provide us some ideas potentially on how we can improve music in schools. What we are going to do is ask you a number of questions — and just feel free, whoever would like to chip in and answer those — and then if we have not covered anything at the end that you wish to cover we will give you that opportunity.

I might kick it off if I could. Could you provide the committee with an overview of your school, how music education is delivered at the school and who is responsible for delivering music education — is it the classroom teacher or a classroom music specialist?

Ms GRAY — Okay. If you do the overview of the school, I will do the music part.

Ms CURRAN — The school caters for students aged 5 to 18 years. We virtually cover an area of a two and a half hour radius from Mildura and all students with intellectual disabilities within that who are eligible and funded under the disability program for public schools in Victoria. Parents have the choice between the public mainstream or our school. We are not specialised in a particular area, as a city school would be, so at our school we would have students who also have physical disabilities. We have children who are blind, we have children who have autism and we have children who are currently involved with the juvenile justice system, and within the confines of the space we occupy we manage the needs of all those students as best we can to maintain a really thriving educational facility that is also safe along the way.

There are many varied programs that we can give to stimulate our students, to engage them and to meet the needs of their intellectual disability. That is really paramount to the success of student outcomes. One of the programs that we do is music. The students thrive on it; they love it and respond to it, given any of those disabilities. Fiona Gray is our Music Coordinator in the school who delivers the program.

The CHAIR — Before we go over to Fiona, class sizes — roughly how many students in a class?

Ms CURRAN — It would depend. You might have students who are very mobile and appear not to need assistance, but depending on their emotional stability and their level of behaviour management they could be in a 1 to 4 ratio. In a group where you might have a student or students who have autism in prep they might be 1 to 5, 1 to 4 or 1 to 3. In areas where there is physical disability it might be more like a ratio of 1 to 3, and for some classes it might be 1 to 10. There is a variance based on the needs of the students who are within the room. We have class teachers and we have class assistants, and then we have specialists who offer the programs. It is quite varied, because our cohort of students is very varied.

The CHAIR — Fiona, you might want to talk to us about the specific music programs that you have at the school and what the benefits of those programs are for your school.

Ms GRAY — Basically the music program is run by me in a music room, so the children come out of their specific class and come to me for roughly — it varies — a half-hour to 45-minute session. I run the program throughout the whole school, so it starts with the early years where the whole class comes for a music session. I offer a very varied program. For the early years music incorporates a lot of movement. I also run it through a system called Dalcroze Eurhythmics, which I am trained in, so I incorporate that into their music. Then we have the middle years. We start to use more tuned and untuned percussion instruments. They start to learn rhythm and beat and bring in movement with that too, and that is again in a whole class setting. I also run a program for the multisensory students. That is a completely multisensory class. I have a lot of tactile sensory movement.
programs brought into that, so the music is inclusive with all the other disciplines — in with the visual and the
movement and tactile.

I also run a program with seniors, which is an elective. We have a choir which they can choose to do. We also
occasionally run bands, when I can fit it in, so they start to learn the basics of band instruments. Once a year we
also have a school concert. That is inclusive — the whole school — so in some form or another all students are
involved in the concert. They get to have an idea of involvement in some kind of performance. It might be from
being on stage to helping backstage. It might be as simple as contributing to the program on the computer. It
might be doing some MC-ing or helping in the art room to make some props. That is the program in the school.

I do not know if you have heard from any of the other schools, but in Mildura we have a combined schools
concert called The Beat, which is held once a year. I try to involve some of our higher functioning students in
that so they get to experience music with peers their age. That is basically the music program that I run every
week over two days.

The CHAIR — And the benefits to the students? There are obvious benefits that we all know.

Ms GRAY — Yes, I am sure you have heard the benefits today. Music is such a universal language.
Especially with special needs students you can engage them because everyone can relate to it and they can
interact at their own level. It can be a language for those students who cannot speak or communicate. They can
express themselves through music and movement. They will let you know what kind of music they like in the
way they respond to it. As well as responding, it helps with their fine motor and gross motor skills; it helps with
cognitive development.

There are so many other aspects that children with special needs have problems with that we do not generally
have to think about. It enables them to learn through music — learning their basic necessary skills that they
need to help them get through the day. As well as your maths and English skills, which I am sure you have
heard from other schools, there is an overall wellbeing in music. I do not think I have any students who do not
enjoy coming to music. It is something that they engage in and enjoy, and they are able to express themselves.

The CHAIR — Do you have any twice-exceptional students in your school who you have discovered
through music or who thrive on that music?

Ms GRAY — Yes, I have had a couple of students who I would say are outstanding. We have one particular
student who has multiple disabilities. He is also blind. When I first started to teach him he was completely
non-communicative, but he listened to the plastic toys that play nursery rhymes. I started to sing nursery rhymes
to him. From there we then went to me playing the piano to him. He then started to play along with me and can
now play pretty much any nursery rhyme or tune. He can find the notes and play himself, even to the point that I
played one particular nursery rhyme, Row, Row, Row Your Boat, which is a very simple tune, and I found
that — because I normally sing in a very simple key for him to be able to find the notes — when I pitched up a
semitone he actually worked out the notes in the next key. We went through all the keys and I worked out that
he was able to play in any key without being able to talk, without being able to see. At this point he really was
not capable of doing an awful lot himself, but it was something that we did not even realise he could do.

The CHAIR — At what age?

Ms CURRAN — He would have been eight or nine.

The CHAIR — And would it be fair to say that without music that child would have really struggled —
without having that outlet?

Ms GRAY — Yes, it is an outlet for him where he has very few outlets that he is able to interact with and to
do.

The CHAIR — Great; thank you.

Mr CRISP — We have heard so much about your programs and the adequacy of them within your school,
which is impressive. Are there any recommendations you would make to improve the provision of music
education to your students?
Ms GRAY — Yes. In my music program it is class music. Two years ago we were able to secure some funding through the Stride Foundation. They offer a variety of music and arts programs through mentors. Does anyone know the Stride program?

The CHAIR — Yes.

Ms GRAY — Through a partnership we had the Mentoring through Music program, so they found some funding and then we had to find more funding locally. Through this funding we were able to have a one-on-one instrumental program with a young musician mentor. As well as learning music as an instrument rather than a group class setting — it was various band instruments — they also had a mentor who was there to help them engage in their general education. This was a fantastic program. At the end of it the students had a mini concert and performed an item with their mentor. We found that all the students engaged with their mentor. They loved the program — they really enjoyed it and really responded — but this was something that we were only able to do over three terms through that year. Due to the funding we do not have a one-on-one instrumental program that we can offer students. We have students who are capable of learning an instrument and who would benefit from the experience of being able to do that.

Mr ELASMAR — What are the difficulties or barriers that rural and regional schools face in trying to deliver music education? What support or policies do you think could be put in place to improve the provision of music education in rural and regional Victoria?

Ms GRAY — Because music needs interaction, you need to be able to play with people, you need to be able to experience it other than just on your own, but when it is in a rural setting it is very hard for children to be able to experience anything other than just themselves. We do not have a lot of access to a wider range of experiences where they can have musicians or entertainers come and perform in the school or interact with them. Often if there are travelling artists or groups, because we are a small school they usually require a larger number than we are able to bring to actually hold a function at a school, so that is one thing. We do not have a lot of local musicians or other people because so many of those people who have a bit of time to help move to the cities once they are at a stage where they want to grow themselves or want to get more musical experience. We are limited in that it is what you provide yourself. There is really not a greater music facility to draw upon other than what you do.

Ms MILLER — In terms of support for music education, are the available teacher professional learning activities and teacher resources directed at music meeting your needs? If not, what additional activities or resources would you like to see developed?

Ms GRAY — It would be great to have more PDs and to be able to have music PDs in our area. We have to travel a long way, and it is a big expense for us to be able to do that. And as I said before, a lot of what we do is very much individual; it is what you do. There is not a lot of funding for group things or to be able to vary or to bring in a diversity of other musicians and other groups, because we are so far. It is really what you do and what funding you can find, and that is always a battle, because music is an expensive part of the education, there is no doubt that it is, and so that is always hard. We would always be looking for more. Just PDs, to have that continual feeding of new ideas and new ways to engage and keep the music alive in the area. Actually another thing that we have done is the One Song event, where all the schools in Australia get together to perform a song throughout the country on one day. You get to learn a song. That is through Music for Life. We have also done that with our school to try to engage in a bigger music compass.

The CHAIR — How do you find that program?

Ms GRAY — Great.

The CHAIR — Do you think it is worthwhile?

Ms GRAY — Yes, because we perform at our school a version of the song that our students can learn. So it is not about having to play an instrument at a certain level or sing in a certain way; it is about you performing the song your way but still being part of a greater music community.

Ms CURRAN — I think our students have really responded to even the national anthem at assemblies on the Tuesday. If we have visitors they are blown away that we actually do the second verse and the students know it.
Ms MILLER — Do you do the Aboriginal version?

Ms CURRAN — Yes, and it is a slower version, too. It is sort of slow in time for our students to be able to take part in that. They do respond to any form of music. But I think what you are saying as well as that, Fiona, is that when our students come to school from early intervention they have not been to music preschool groups. It seems there are not a lot of groups of under 5s that they would be exposed to. They might go to the playgroups, but it is not where you offer eurythmics; not a lot of families with students with intellectual disability might access that or financially be able to support going to that. Even beginning at the very beginning under 5, that idea of music and rhythm playgroups, there would be some in kindergarten but it is still in the confines of a structured program, and students with an intellectual disability would struggle with that.

As a principal, trying to find staff to run programs is very difficult. We would take Fiona full time if we could get her, but she is used by any number of schools trying to access Fiona’s programs. So there is a great shortage in Mildura. Our distance and isolation does not attract people who might have those skills in teaching or the training to offer those programs.

The CHAIR — How often are you in the school?

Ms GRAY — I do two days at the school.

The CHAIR — When Fiona is not around, is there other music that goes on in the classroom or are there things that might happen to stimulate the kids, I suppose in a more informal way?

Ms CURRAN — I think with our students — and remember the great range of students that are there — you would have teenagers bopping along to music. They can go and sign out their iPods at breaks to listen to music. There would be students who would be listening to music for calming time.

The CHAIR — Remedial, yes.

Ms CURRAN — And students with autism, to calm down and block out sensory areas so that they can refocus. Our later years students would always be bopping on to their music. That is a recreation; that is something that they immediately go to when structured lessons are not on. They all respond to the iPads and anything that has got sound to it, and sometimes in the morning before the early years they begin with their ‘Good morning’ songs and their ‘Hello’. They seem to learn and respond to language through the music first, and the patterns of music. That often forms the basis of their routines and their language, and that would be done daily through early years. When they would do movement songs in PE a lot of it would be using music to actually engage them and get the rhythm going as well. So it is incidental. It might be part of the programs, but we do have a fairly varied program. In our phys ed area there would be a small component that may be offering dance. Our senior students are currently doing training for the debutante ball that is coming up, so they will do an eight-week program in preparation for formal dance, and they love that too and respond to it. And they can do it, which is amazing. When you look at them on the night — you have been there, Peter — you think, ‘Well, they can do this; they can do it’.

Students with intellectual disabilities, sensory processing disorders, autism spectrum disorders and physical disabilities have trouble in motor planning. It makes it difficult for them to even negotiate their physical environment, so the music education program through physiotherapy and phys ed can help them to really organise their sensory motor integration skills as well — just the auditory skills they get from it and copying rhythms and copying each other, the movement that they have in crossing the midline to do different actions that would go with songs. That all plays a part in their development but it affects them cognitively, as Fiona said earlier, and it can develop their strength and mobility as well. And they respond to the Soundbeam when you introduce that, which is another — —

Ms GRAY — Yes, there are so many various tools and things that you can use for music. It is interesting, just talking about autism, that the part of the brain that is used for music is almost always fully functioning in autistic children, so you find that in particular autistic children will respond because there is a regular beat, there is a regular sound — a note. A C note is always a C note, and they love the definition of that — that it is always the same. You could break it down into so many different aspects of how it helps, how they respond and how they enjoy it. It would take a lot longer than half an hour to break each part down, but it gives you a bit of an idea of how important and how beneficial it is.
Mr CRISP — Just a quick one: our research indicates 16 per cent of your students are Indigenous. Do you offer anything different for your Indigenous students in your music program compared to the other students?

Ms GRAY — No, they have the same program. The Stride was actually for Indigenous and non-engaged students, so that was a particular program that was designed for them. But other than that, at the moment in music they have the same program as the others.

The CHAIR — We have concluded our questions. Is there anything that we have not covered that you would like to add, or are there any ideas you think we should be taking into consideration to improve music in schools? That is a very general question, I know.

Ms GRAY — It is a general question, and I guess from a music teacher’s point of view you would always be looking for more funding to be able to access more programs and a bigger music facility, knowing the benefits.

Ms CURRAN — I think in early intervention, if our students had been involved in music programs from nought to five as playgroups evolve. I do not know the access that families had to those.

The CHAIR — Particularly with kids with special needs?

Ms CURRAN — Yes. They might have a special needs playgroup once a week, but the intensity of the training that needs to happen before five, before they get to school, is enormous, and I do not think that is an area that is provided in the intensity that is needed. It is not available there, especially in rural areas like this.

The CHAIR — Do you know of any research that has taken place to suggest that by getting in early with kids with special needs and providing music at those levels they have a propensity to advance more? You mentioned before some of the kids learning music in terms of autistic kids. But is there anything in those early years, particularly with kids with special needs, that suggests we need to be doing that to give them a chance of a better education? Again, I know I am putting you on the spot.

Ms CURRAN — We can see that in our early years the response to music is language and the response to following the actions. If you took the music away and you asked those children to come and sit down and stay for a period of time to even begin to extend attention skills or get them to follow instructions, there is no incentive, there is no reason. But to put a song on and add some games — such as Follow the Leader, where people sit and then jump up — they respond to the music and actions, learn and copy that language and their auditory skills increase. So from a language point of view we can see that being really successful at school. I think there is research; I do not know.

Ms GRAY — I am sure there is, because all the early intervention — especially because it is those primary years — shows that they develop the most and that if you intervene early then you see greater change. Whether you have play therapy, music therapy or occupational therapy, all of those therapies that aid the child’s development are so important at that preschool age and all of those have been shown to be important.

The CHAIR — Excellent. Thank you very much for coming out today and appearing before the committee, and well done on the great work that you seem to be doing. Keep it up.

Ms GRAY — Thank you.

Ms CURRAN — Thank you for giving us the opportunity to come and talk to you. If there is any money around to cover the travel that rural schools need to access Melbourne for training sometimes, that would be great, because it sucks so much out of the budgets to access the training or experiences that are so far away. Thank you so much.

The CHAIR — Good point. Thank you.

Committee adjourned.