CORRECTED VERSION

EDUCATION AND TRAINING COMMITTEE

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

Melbourne — 27 March 2013

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Witnesses

Dr R. Letts, Executive Director, Music Council of Australia; and
Ms M. Stefanakis, Director of Music, Christ Church Grammar School.
The CHAIR — Firstly, thank you, Richard, for coming down from Sydney to be with us today.

Dr LETTS — Nice welcome.

The CHAIR — We really appreciate that. Mandy, thanks for joining us again. Again, the information today is being recorded by Hansard. You will have an opportunity to review that and certainly make any changes that need to be made. Also your evidence is covered by parliamentary privilege, which allows you to make whatever comment, but that is only afforded within the hearing proper. We will invite you to make a brief statement, and then we will get straight into an act.

Dr LETTS — Good. I do not work at the coalface, and Mandy does. I got a bit anxious about not being able to answer some of your questions, and I asked Mandy to be here to add real experience.

I am the director of the national music council, which I established in 1994. It has a membership of 50, covering all the aspects of the music sector. We were going to have our first conference, and I was thinking, ‘Here is a testing moment. We are going to have opera people in the same room as country music singers. We will have early childhood people in there with the recording industry. What are they going to be able to say to each other?’ It turned out that everybody was a bit amazed to be in this situation, but one of the things that we needed to do was figure out what was a common agenda for such a disparate group of people, because the music sector is extremely fragmented. The one thing that everybody agreed on was the great importance of music education. Consequently, although I am not expert in that area, I have spent a lot of time since then trying to get on top of it.

The CHAIR — When did that happen?

Dr LETTS — In 1994.

We take the view that there should be universal opportunity for music education. That is probably unnecessary to mention here, since the tenor of the conversation has been in that direction, but it is not necessarily accepted everywhere. I was just in Perth, and it seems in secondary education there music education is sort of regarded as something for the talented. That is also really the way that our society works. We have handed music making over to the professionals, whereas in a lot of other societies and in this one earlier everyone sang along around the piano — there was a living communal music culture.

The Victorian Government, along with all the others, has signed on to the Melbourne declaration, and it has also agreed to participate in the national curriculum, so we assume that it in some way also has the goal of universal music education. You have heard a lot about reasons for teaching music, so I do not need to go over all of that. In a month or two we will have a national curriculum in music. I think people so far are reasonably comfortable with that. The problem is that it is going to be there and the embarrassing situation will come up that in most schools it will not be able to be taught.

We just had a piece of research that shows that 63% of primary schools in Australia have no classroom music. We know that in Queensland and Tasmania primary school music is taught by specialists, and we know that is also the case in independent schools. If you do some extrapolation, probably 80 per cent or more of Victorian primary schools have no classroom music.

The CHAIR — So that first figure of 63% that was — —

Dr LETTS — That was no classroom music in primary schools nationally.

The CHAIR — So you would suggest that it is about 83% in Victoria?

Dr LETTS — It looks like it is more than 80%, because the 63% is of the systems other than those two states and the independent system. Why is it not taught? Because specialists are not used in most of the country in the public schools, and because the generalists who get the responsibility for teaching music in a lot of states are on average given 17 hours of mandatory music training in their undergraduate degrees. If their award qualification is a postgraduate diploma or degree, they would have only 10 hours on average.
The range is 0 to 54 hours. There are universities that are producing students with no music education, and there is a national curriculum in music that obviously they are going to be unable to teach except by accident.

Ms MILLER — Is that because it is an additional educational requirement? You come out as a normal teacher, but if you want to be a specialist you have to do something additional — a double degree, for argument’s sake?

Dr LETTS — I am really just talking about the generalists at the moment. If you are a specialist, then you have done a special music degree. You have made that choice.

One of the curious things about this is that you would expect that a university would produce music teachers who are capable of teaching the national curriculum. Even though there is not a national curriculum yet, there are state curricula. Apparently there is no actual requirement that the graduates can demonstrate competency in any subject, because the state institutes of teaching, or whoever the accrediting bodies are, do not require that. In theory the first thing that might be possible is that the states start requiring it, and if a teacher training program cannot demonstrate that its graduates can teach the curriculum — that they are actually going into the schools to teach — it should not be accredited, and maybe the state should not hire those teachers. That is probably a pretty tall order, but conceptually it seems right.

Ms STEFANAKIS — One of the things in Tasmania is that because it is small all the music people there know each other. The university sector, music educators and performers all know each other and all work together to facilitate music education experiences. I think that is one of the things that is missing here. As Dick said, it is very fragmented, and there is not that connection. There is not a connection between the education department and the universities to suggest what the curriculum needs to be. There is not then that connection between the universities and VCAA to say, ‘This is how things could be implemented’. It is drawing all those areas together. Although all the music people, we all know each other, at an administrative level there are not the connections to facilitate that kind of operation.

The CHAIR — We might go into some questions.

Dr LETTS — Yes, a good idea.

The CHAIR — Those are interesting introductory comments. Apart from the obvious, what you have just stated about the university teaching, what do you believe to be an essential ingredient of a successful music program?

Dr LETTS — A successful teacher — that is the crucial thing, it seems to me. We already have curricula; what is absent is the schools to teach them.

Ms STEFANAKIS — Can I add a little bit to that? I think Helen said this morning that the classroom curricula that have been developed in Victoria and across all states and the Australian Curriculum are really good at accommodating the really diverse needs of different school communities in rural areas, in disadvantaged areas and in areas which have a plethora of different languages as the main language. I think that is really good. They also look at the fact that children need to be able to sing, play, create, listen, respond, analyse — do all of those. It is a very broadbased curriculum, and the development of the curriculum has happened over a long period of time, over a 30-year period, so it is getting better and better and better. As Dick said, it is a matter of having ways of implementing the curriculum rather than the curriculum itself. Victoria in fact leads the way in many ways in that it has also done a lot of work in being up to assess music curriculum, assess outcomes of students and validate the outcomes of particular levels. We have all those things in place. It is just that we do not have the facilities to be able to implement the programs that are there; that is the problem.

Ms TIERNEY — I am going to ask the same question I asked the previous witnesses. The evidence before us now is clear about the positive impact that music has. Why do you think there has not been the
translation of that into the school system, with schools wanting to offer a very strong arts and music program?

Mr LETTS — I was tipped off that this question might be asked and I have a long list of conjectures. One is I suppose the long emphasis on literacy and numeracy, boosted in recent times by the Prime Minister. There is actually on the NAPLAN site a time series of the outcomes from 2008 to 2012. In most subjects — and I think there are three or four different aspects of literacy and one of maths — there is no change. In a few there is a statistically significant increase and in a few a decrease. A statistically significant increase could be half a per cent — it is not necessarily pedagogically significant. Most of these changes are very small. I guess it is a bit of digression from your question, but the whole emphasis on NAPLAN seems to be futile. As Professor Caldwell said, we are losing out by having people withdrawn from music classes and given extra coaching.

I think there is a sort of literalism that says that the only way to improve literacy is to teach literacy and the more time given to it the better. There is an inability for more nuanced thinking. I am imagining Peter Garrett saying to Julia Gillard, ‘Oh, you want higher literacy and numeracy scores. Good, I will institute a music program’ and not getting too far with that argument. I think the view from the top which attributes no importance to the research on the benefits of music programs causes the principals to fall into line. There is still a view that the arts are merely decorative or entertaining at the edge of our society, not worthy of serious study and not really contributory to the economy. I think because the arts are being taught well to so few children, probably most decision-makers have not had personal experiences of their value. And because they are too often taught badly by teachers who themselves are not qualified to teach them, some decision-makers will have had bad experiences of the arts. I think that is enough.

Ms STEFANAKIS — Can I just add a couple of things? I think the research is relatively new and the problem is quite old, going back again to the late 1970s when we had regional music advisers in Victoria and there was lots of music happening and that all got broken down enormously. The research that we have now has only been coming through in the last 20 years or so, particularly since there has been a lot of MRI imaging available, opening up what is happening.

You asked a really good question before about how it is that it impacts. Even though the data is coming through that it does happen, the information and the research into how it happens is still coming through. But I would have to say that one of the things is that music tends to engage the whole person, and I think Brian mentioned that too. Music engages areas all over the brain. It engages some areas of the brain that are not utilised a lot in other learning areas, particularly mathematics and English. There is a lot of right hemisphere thinking in the arts and music specifically, just through having to use both hands simultaneously in playing an instrument and doing different things.

There is a whole lot of stuff that happens when you are engaged in music. It is not just the physical, it is also the emotional. I think really importantly there is a sense of identity — both personal identity and cultural identity — that happens through music, and that makes people feel good about themselves. When you feel good about yourself, you are motivated to learn, because you think you can do something, so you do it. I think all that is really important in learning in music, and it transfers over to other subject areas.

Mr CRISP — Your submission suggests that rural and regional primary schools struggle to attract specialist music teachers. What strategies can you suggest to attract more specialist music teachers to our rural and remote schools?

Dr LETTS — It is a logistical problem I suppose. I think online provision may be the solution. You still need someone who is there who can take what is online and deliver it to the kids. Even if you had a specialist paradigm for teaching music, there is an argument that the classroom teachers should still get a music education so they are capable of doing that.

Ms MILLER — Stakeholders suggest that it is challenging for schools to find the time to deliver all the subjects within the Arts learning area. What do you believe is the right balance in the curriculum between music and other forms of art such as dance, drama and the visual arts?
Dr LETTS — I am a member of something called the National Advocates for Arts Education. It is the national arts education associations, and we have discussed this issue, because it is obviously problematic in a practical way. In the 90s there was something called the arts key learning area that brought the various art forms together into a sort of porridge called creative arts, and their identities got lost in that. We have been very intent on having separate curricula for the art forms, but we recognise that it could be difficult for every school to teach every art form in depth. We would prefer to see a couple taught in depth and experiences given in the others than to have token education in all of them.

Ms MILLER — There was talk earlier about networks to address this kind of issue. Am I hearing that potentially you could have a cluster of five schools and you could have two of the five that specialised in, say, music or dance to share the resources?

Dr LETTS — Yes, we thought that schools should specialise in two or more. The idea of a cluster is great, because you can also have specialist teachers that move around.

Ms STEFANAKIS — Within music classroom programs in primary schools I do not just teach music, and I think Helen also talked about this this morning. The great emphasis is on music, but we do movement, we do visual art, we do English and we do history. We look at all aspects of the curriculum, but the emphasis is on music and the development of music right across a range of experiences. I think you can incorporate things using a whole range of strategies.

Dr LETTS — I personally think there is a problem with expecting anybody to be on top of five art forms. That is one big argument for specialisation.

Mr ELASMAR — Thank you for that, and I do agree with you on that. Let’s talk about technology. Is there a potential for schools to make greater use of music technology when delivering music education? If so, what opportunity is there?

Dr LETTS — What opportunity is there now?

Mr ELASMAR — Yes.

Dr LETTS — I had better share this question with you, Mandy. Technology is being used but, as one of the previous speakers said, there is a problem with latency — with that delay of sound from one party to another 300 kilometres away. However, that is going to be overcome with the NBN, and New South Wales has a state education network that is very fast. I think it is possible when that facility is there.

Ms STEFANAKIS — There is lots of work being done in that regard in terms of professional development of classroom teachers in music and as a way of connecting music specialists. There is also such a plethora of programs for students. Some of the students know a lot more about them than the teachers do. With things like GarageBand a lot of students will know more than teachers do. For example, AMUSE — Kevin Kelley was here before — runs programs in music technology to introduce classroom teachers and specialist music teachers to music programs that are available and show them ways of implementing them as parts of their curricula and so on. There is a lot of work going on in that area, and certainly there are masses and masses of resources.

Dr LETTS — I have seen a little bit of what The Song Room and Musica Viva have. Musica Viva uses an interactive whiteboard, and it is terrific. It is there in the classroom, the kids can work with it and the teacher can work with it. The teacher can pretty much be learning as the kids learn. The only problem I can see at the moment is that they are not going to have provision that will take you through an entire year. They have sequences of six lessons and that sort of thing, which will not fill the year. It is a big job to put all that together. It is going to take a while.

Ms STEFANAKIS — And kids still need those connecting experiences of actually playing together. That is really important.
Mr CRISP — The council’s submission suggested three proposals for the systematic introduction of specialist music teachers to primary schools. How could that be achieved?

Dr LETTS — First of all, it would have to be funded. One of the proposals was to have primary school teachers become specialists in three or four subjects. Once they were specialists, operating the system would not cost any more money, but there would have to be a pretty big investment in the training. Otherwise I suppose apart from operating funds the main issue would be training specialist teachers, because you would need a lot more of them.

Interestingly, just last week I was with the head of music for the South Australian schools, who had sent a questionnaire around the primary schools there asking teachers if they were interested in doing some sort of music specialisation, and she got 750 responses saying yes, which was about one and a half teachers per school. So if you add that to the existing professional musicians who might be interested, probably there is a potential supply that would not be too difficult to tap.

Ms MILLER — What is involved in becoming a specialist, as opposed to a generalist? What is the difference?

Dr LETTS — Well, I think you do a music degree and then you add pedagogy. That would be right, wouldn’t it?

Ms STEFANAKIS — Yes. In terms of primary teaching, it used to be that you could specialise in music.

Ms TIERNEY — In the undergraduate degree.

Ms STEFANAKIS — Yes, and so people used to have special registration as music teachers within their primary course. But I think that the emphasis now is starting to be that people do a music degree and they are starting to be trained so that they can teach right across the board, so they can teach both classroom and also one-on-one teaching as instrumental teachers.

Dr LETTS — And ensembles and things.

Ms STEFANAKIS — And ensembles and so forth. It is starting to stretch out a little bit. The masters degree of performance teaching at Melbourne University is trying to fill those gaps a little bit, particularly for the instrumental teachers who cannot get VIT registration. We accommodate those students at Christ Church Grammar School, and they come in and observe a classroom program as well, so they are obviously becoming trained at classroom teaching as well, which is really good because it is very different.

Ms TIERNEY — Any other questions? Is there anything else that you wanted to say to us, that there is a gap?

Dr LETTS — No, I do not think so.

Ms STEFANAKIS — Thank you.

Ms TIERNEY — I thank you for being here, and especially for coming down from Sydney for the day. It is very much appreciated.

Dr LETTS — Thank you. It was a good experience.

Witnesses withdrew.