EDUCATION AND TRAINING COMMITTEE

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

Melbourne — 9 April 2013

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Professor M. Rose, Vice-president, Victorian Aboriginal Education Association Inc.
The CHAIR — Mark, thanks for joining us today. I know you know the drill with all of this, but I have to go through the process anyway. Firstly, the evidence you give today is covered under parliamentary privilege, so feel free to say what you wish. That privilege does not apply outside of here, so you cannot do a doorstep — unless it is a positive one, of course!

Prof. ROSE — Right!

The CHAIR — Also, we will be recording everything via Hansard. You will have the opportunity to look at that and review any issues with that. We will give you an opportunity for an opening statement, and then we will go into some questions that we have for you. Over to you.

Prof. ROSE — David, thank you and thank you to the committee for this opportunity. Walking up, I saw that there are renovations happening outside, but the firmest foundation this building has is the fact that it is on Aboriginal land. To that point, I would like to recognise that we are on Aboriginal land, and I pay respect to elders past and present. I implore ancestral spirits to intervene on everything that is said today and what happens in this building. I pay respect to the elders.

Thank you for the opportunity to present. I am representing Lionel Bamblett, the GM of VAEAI. I am vice-president of VAEAI. Also, for a very small number of days now, I hold a chair at Deakin University in indigenous knowledge systems. However, I am about to assume a position at Latrobe in three weeks time, after finding a very exotic beach to lie on — and I cannot wait.

Having read the submission, and having reflected on it, there are a couple of things I would like to say as a threshold statement. First of all, that we can dissect Aboriginal perspectives in music education into two parts — the teaching of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander kids across this state, and the teaching about Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander issues to all kids across the state. Both are important. It is not just one or the other. We come with that duality in mind.

We know from history that the education system in this state started formally in 1872 with the first Education Act. In that time we have seen that the way that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and kids have fared is on the improve, but there are also a lot of areas that we should be cautious and alarmed about. That is why it is really important to give a submission to this committee, because while education has been around since 1872, in our world that is only a speck compared to the longitudinal education that our people have maintained and provided on this land dating back 30 000 or 40 000 years in a very unique knowledge system. In that knowledge system song and dance were critical expressions of that knowledge, and it is an integral part. That is why at the Victorian Aboriginal Education Association Incorporated, which I am representing today, one of the planks in our philosophy is the holistic education of our people, from birth to death, and dance and song are integral parts of holistic. While this is a high point of the city, this place would have been a place of song and dance in gatherings of Aboriginal people.

In the education of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander kids, our kids are immensely talented in music. You just have to go back a couple of nights ago. I am not holding this up as a seminal example, but we saw at the Logie Awards the other night that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people are surfacing in the Arts. It has been a very important way for our people to surface in historical things but also transmit culture. That culture is important for the whole nation; it is a critical ingredient to progress towards national maturity. As I said before, the teaching of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander kids is important, but spreading that culture across to every other kid is also crucial.

We would say that traditionally we have been silent and mute in the curriculum, but since the partnership of VAEAI and the government has progressed we are more and more pleased with the uptake of Aboriginal perspectives, along with a whole lot of programs, such as the Koorie Academy of Excellence, of which dance and song are critical planks, and the language programs, which have a connection to music.

Popular media for broader audience is developing. Three weeks ago on a Monday I was at Worawa Aboriginal College, an independent Aboriginal girls school in Healesville that is directed by one of the original Sapphires. They have just developed a program using The Sapphires movie to transmit culture and understanding.
They are my threshold statements, but we want a piece of the action. We see music as part of our holistic philosophy. We look very optimistically with the national curriculum coming online and AITSL frameworks where teacher requirements 1.4 and 2.4 require a workable knowledge of Aboriginal culture. We are very happy to have made this presentation, which you would have, and I will be pleased to answer any questions. As an academic I am trained to give 3-hour lectures without drawing breath — David, you know that — so if I talk too much, please shut me up by asking a question.

**The CHAIR** — Thank you, Mark. You have touched on some of this first question, but could you briefly outline the importance of both traditional and contemporary music to the Koorie community?

**Prof. ROSE** — Absolutely. First, traditional music. We understand from history that through successive regimes that our people in this state have been forced to migrate to other parts of the country, and the only thing that held our people together, apart from family et cetera, was music.

Traditionally the music was songlines, which were like a GPS: people followed particular songs to find their way. However, with the forced migration of stolen generations, they were kind of like a pilot light that kept people’s emotions burning for culture. Traditional aspects of music are very important, as are contemporary. In this state we have got Archie Roach’s *Took the children away* — Archie himself was taken away — and there is not a dry eye when Archie sings that from the depths of his spirit and soul. As we know, contemporary music reinforces identity, promotes cohesion and also promotes a positive perspective of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander culture, so the traditional and the contemporary are very important.

**The CHAIR** — Extending on from that, it is my understanding that a lot of the teaching of music in the Koorie community is both formal and informal, so a lot of the stuff is learnt in the home. Could you elaborate on that in terms of music’s place in the classroom as opposed to within the community itself?

**Prof. ROSE** — I often worry about my iPhone. If ever it got stolen, it has got most of my music on it. I have got on it from *Bran Nue Dae*. There’s nothing I would rather be than to be an Aborigine is an anthem around social gatherings. There are those seminal pieces of music, but in the home it holds on from the days when our people lived on missions — a lot of that was forced living — and that music took people out of the confines of their situation. It is emotive, solidifies your own culture and understanding and serves to give a great sense of identity.

Next, the home. We have got some of the greatest talents from the Aboriginal community in music. I am sorry to say I am not one of them; I do not have an inch of musical talent in me. In fact recently someone broke into my car, went through my CDs and decided to leave them all. That was very distressing!

In every Aboriginal household music is a very important part. You are travelling along the highway going to a meeting and put on songs that portray and project the inner workings and the inner sentiments and ethos of our very strong culture. That is why it is very important. Kids go to school and hear *From Little Things Big Things Grow*, which is an unofficial Aboriginal national anthem, as are a whole range of other songs. It is very important.

**Ms TIERNEY** — The submission mentions the lack of music programs that cater to the learning and cultural needs of Aboriginal students. What action do you think can be taken to address this issue?

**Prof. ROSE** — I think that is a symptom of a greater issue. That greater issue is the fact that many of our educators in their education received little understanding or knowledge about Aboriginal perspectives. That was part of a broader political agenda of their days, but there is a chance that a little kid sitting on the reading mat today will go through the whole of their education without being exposed to Aboriginal perspectives.

When they leave the sandpit and enter the sandstone, and emerge as professional educators, what have they had? What assets or interventions have they had to be able to include indigenous perspectives in a contemporary and sophisticated manner? I think that is the thing. If that is the case, it is likely that we will not see, except by accident, significant programs. There are a couple around which are good, but the
average teacher is very ill-equipped to project indigenous perspectives through the curriculum. That is a reflection of a whole lot of stuff, including universities.

Ms TIERNEY — If we were to get over that hurdle and the time, the money and commitment happened, and we got closer to that point, where we had teachers in the classroom that were sensitive and did understand a lot more, what then do you think would be necessary to bring out the richness for Aboriginal students?

Prof. ROSE — It is winning the hearts and the minds. If we got to a stage — and we are getting there — again with ACARA and its Aboriginal perspectives in the national curriculum and with AITSL, and some universities are heading down that way and making indigenous perspectives, I think it would ignite a revolution. It would be a very significant plank in national maturity. That is what I would say.

I would love to see non-Aboriginal kids embrace Aboriginal cultural through music, and that is not hard. They do it through football. As a socialisation process, music is probably much richer than sport. Kids will run around with Buddy Franklin T-shirts and things like that, but through music there is a whole lot of healing and a whole lot of national maturity that could come from it. I would be very excited.

Ms MILLER — Your submission suggests that music is an important way in which schools can teach the Koorie culture and the perspectives towards students. Can you elaborate on how you think schools should be using music to do this?

Prof. ROSE — When you look at iconic representations of this country, that soothing sound of the didge, although it is not a Victorian instrument and although there are gender issues around playing it, it is a great instrument that connects contemporary Australia with traditional Australia. I think that would be good. The clapsticks — for someone with no talent in music, I can be as proficient on clapsticks as anyone who lacks my proficiency — have a great haunting and soothing sound.

The other way is to capture iconic aspects of history through music and also the natural relation to contemporary indigenous sounds. Jessica Mauboy is a great example of young Aboriginal youth who are standing up. But in Victoria we have got our own Jessicas out there and musical talent is really strong. As I said, as a community we punch above our weight in musical talent. If that was replicated in a curriculum, all kids would be the beneficiaries of that.

Ms MILLER — Why do you think there are not more of the Jessica Mauboys? Is it because they have not been identified or given the opportunities? With a lot of music as your way of life, why have more not come out before?

Prof. ROSE — That is a good question. Did you have a second question?

Ms MILLER — You can come back to it, if you like.

Prof. ROSE — No, it is really good. I have to say that the elephant in the room is that our culture at times and periods has been cloistered. I have got a cousin, Peter Rodamuh, who has got one of the best blues voices you will ever hear. Jess is highly talented.

Sometimes our Aboriginal talent may not look like the people from up north, too, so there are issues there. But that is the elephant in the room — the institutional opportunity. The evolution of our society is accepting Aboriginal vitality and dynamism, and its perspectives, in a more inclusive way than ever before. That is a really positive thing. At the Premier’s diversity dinner, at which I did not catch up with you, David, they had that Aboriginal choir, who were magnificent. So there is that.

If you go out to the airport you might see three Aboriginal woman doing a sort of vaudeville act in an old traditional photo; the history has been there. Uncle Herb Patten and the leaf blowing represents a whole culture from back in the mission days when music was the escape from the confines of the mission.
I dare say you see the confidence of the Deadly Awards and Redfern Now. When the actors won the Logie award the other day, they just beamed and enthused. Once we break the black ceiling, or we have at least got a crack in it, it will come. But the talent is there, except for me — I have got no talent. I passed music in teachers college under a strict contractual agreement that I would not take it up in second year.

**The CHAIR** — Are there as many people teaching the didge now as there were years ago? Are most young people still exposed to that form of instrumental music and education from a Koorie perspective?

**Prof. ROSE** — One of the most exciting programs I have seen of late came out of the northern region of the education department. It is a Koorie Academy of Excellence. There are a whole lot of kids between Years 7 and 10 who have come up and become part of this virtual academy where one of the principles is to anchor culture. The boys will be going through didge and formal dancing. That is part of their after-school activities.

The Koorie Academy was the idea of Wayne Craig, the ex-northern regional director from the education department, and Lionel Bamblett. Those two guys got together and created it. They were way out at the Alpine school at Glenormiston, and Gnurad-Gundidj, which is a great place. I spoke to them on the tram on the way in. That cultural anchoring is very good.

The didge was never a Victorian instrument, but it has become one of those iconic instruments which we play. It was never a Victorian instrument, but it is great for those kids and is what the Koorie Academy of Excellence is about. We have got some very talented kids and is about building on that strength.

**The CHAIR** — Are there examples of where the Koorie community is utilised to teach Koorie music education — so, of drawing on the community itself? If not, or if so, what strategies could there be to incorporate more of that activity happening?

**Prof. ROSE** — Like your work with gifted children — and logic would say that we have got proportionally the same representation of gifted kids — again with music it is raising the fact that it needs to be incorporated in high-level conversations about education. That is one of the best things, and the fact that we were asked to come here and that we chose that — yes, we want a stake in that. Music education is very important, traditionally — it is a way that we retain and project that knowledge. Yes, the fact is that we have a very talented group of young kids, and we want them to have the best opportunity, and if it is fully rounded, with as many options as ever, it will mean that kids of this generation will be able to achieve. That probably goes to answer your question about whether there are Jessica Mauboys from down here. That will go a long way.

**The CHAIR** — So some of the Koorie performers, bands and what have you, are there examples of those going into the schools and doing workshops or having a closer collaboration?

**Prof. ROSE** — At one stage I ran the KODE school in Glenroy, the Koorie school, a long time ago back in the mid-90s. We had Kutcha Edwards, who is prolific. He has worked with the kids, getting them to write their own songs and that. It is really important for anchoring identity, which will anchor confidence and then propel kids into the future. I cannot speak more highly about it.

**Ms TIERNEY** — I agree. We just need more of it.

**Prof. ROSE** — Yes.

**Ms TIERNEY** — In terms of musically gifted Aboriginal students — you have made reference to the inquiry that we had fairly recently — how do you see Indigenous kids who have enormous talent and are gifted? I know that we cannot have a general rule, but do you think steering them into the specialist gifted programs is the way to go? Or is it a matter of trying to steer them more towards the academies where there would be, I would assume, a lot more support? What is really needed for these kids?
Prof. ROSE — I think, Gayle, in answer to your question, one of the best assets we have had in the last 30 or something years is VAEAI. VAEAI, the Victorian Aboriginal Education Association, is actually 33 local communities blanketing the state. I hear you are going to Mildura, which is great. We have an LAECG there — local Aboriginal education consultative group. That organisation is setting up academies but it also directs students into specialist schools, or whatever. The problem that we have, Gayle, and we have taken a while to recognise it, is the demographics of our kids and that very few of our kids are in concentrations. Schools of 1000 will have one or two Aboriginal kids; therefore, we cannot realistically predict that a program for Aboriginal kids in a school is going to work if there are only two kids in the school. That is why the academy hooks a kid into 20 days of activities to hold membership in that academy. Our kids also, with their talent, would be just as much at home in schools that provide that specialist opportunity. Yes, both that — VAEAI is really good at directing and enhancing outcomes.

We have moved in our partnership with the government through Yalca and Wannik and other policies so that we can make sure they have the best outcome. One of the sad reflections is that Aboriginal people have only been allowed to go to university in large numbers since the 1980s, yet in that time we have had a number of PhDs and professors and we have punched above our weight. I think it is all about opportunity. There is a mindset that Aboriginal kids have got their own programs. Those programs are necessary, but we also need inclusion in other general specialised programs. We need to create level playing fields. Uneven distribution of resources are great, but we need even playing fields.

Ms MILLER — In terms of the benefits that music education has to Koorie students can you give some examples of where it has had positive impact on students?

Prof. ROSE — I would say that some students have taken opportunities and scholarships and whatever, but the first plank in it is feeling at home in a school. There is that 40-year difference that our kids have been involved in education. Their parents and their parents before them got a pretty raw deal. While all Aboriginal parents want the best for their kids it is sometimes a leap of faith for our parents to believe in a system that let them and their parents and their parents before them down so poorly. Issues of inclusion are important, issues of confidence are important as are those just based on opportunity. It is an opportunity, and they will not disappoint. Does that answer your question? I do not know if I did.

Ms MILLER — Essentially from what I was hearing, you are sort of saying if the parents have the belief to take a chance because they have had a different experience, then it could have a positive outcome for that student. But if they do not, then they are just going to go —

Prof. ROSE — Parents want the best for the kids. I will share with you a situation, and this is probably a bit of a metaphor. I refer to the former Alpine School and Gnurad-Gundidj. In 2006, back before that school was created and when the only campus was at Dinner Plain, we had a whole lot of Koorie kids from the state coming in to do a term at the Alpine School, which was great. I flew to Mildura with a colleague, and the parents there were petrified. They knew who I was and they knew who my colleague was, but in their living memory they can remember kids going off to camp and not coming back. They knew who I was and they knew who my colleague was, but in their living memory they can remember kids going off to camp and not coming back.

Opportunities might be put there, but we need a whole network. We have Koorie KESOs and KECs on the ground to make sure that the parents understand that, so it is not just making the opportunity but working with families to say, ‘Hey this is good stuff. Your kids are going to be protected’, and whatever.

The CHAIR — I just want to ask you about the Koorei language program in schools and the correlation between the language programs and music, particularly when music is used in some ways to teach words.
Prof. ROSE — The language program is happening at Hutton Street primary school in Thornbury, at Healesville, at Heywood in the Western District, and there is somewhere else I should know. There is an obvious link between music and language. Traditionally once there was a meeting of nations and groups that would come together to exchange knowledge. There was a dance and a song to reinforce that, like a post-conference report. The link between the language and the regeneration of language and music is very strong; it is a natural, harmonious nexus.

The CHAIR — What are your views on where Koorie music fits into the new national curriculum?

Prof. ROSE — I hesitate. I am on the Indigenous committee for the national curriculum and the Melbourne Declaration, which is a fine document and aspirational. I worked with that committee on what curriculum writers have written. They are dealing with the Arts at this very moment. It has not progressed. I can say, because I am under a commonwealth agreement there, that the Arts is a great place for our culture to be. I look very optimistically for that place to be a lot clearer and a lot more pronounced in that curriculum document.

The whole national curriculum excites me greatly because it is the first time that our perspectives have been considered. I believe very optimistically in the glass being half full. I know it is not half full as I point to it, but it is the first time that this country can make a leap towards national maturity. There is only one culture that will link every kid back to the traditional roots of this country and it is the Indigenous culture. The notion of it being mandated in a national curriculum is great, but I am also aware that for the next 5 to 10 years it will be taught by teachers who may not know enough about Aboriginal culture to leverage the greatest outcome. But still that glass has to be half full. I would like to see more strict representation of Aboriginal culture, not to progress a political argument but to make every Australian feel a part of the richest asset this country has, and that is the cultural heritage of this nation.

The CHAIR — Great. Is there anything else you wanted to add, Mark?

Prof. ROSE — Not a thing. I am just going to finish the half glass.

The CHAIR — Thank you very much.

Witness withdrew.