

Parliamentary Inquiry into the Extent, Benefits and Potential of Music Education in Victorian Schools

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Personal background musical experience

I have been teaching Instrumental Music in government secondary schools for 28 years, working in a range of schools in both the old southern and eastern metropolitan regions. Both secondary schools I attended as a student were fortunate enough to have instrumental and classroom music. It was at Mitcham Technical School that I first became switched on to music, to the extent that I decided that I would become a music teacher and consequently moved schools to Blackburn High School, which was a designated Music School and had a much more extensive program on offer that better met my needs. My primary school experience was in a Catholic Primary school, where there were no music teachers or formal music lessons – the only music was singing along with the ABC music radio programs. If it weren't for my exposure to music and experiences in the music program and the enthusiasm of the music teachers at Mitcham Technical School, I would never have ended up as a music teacher – I job I love and continue to thoroughly enjoy to this day. Nor would I have developed skills playing several musical instruments which enable me to entertain myself, alone or in an ensemble setting during my leisure time – skills and activities which will remain with me for the rest of my life. For me, music is not just a job, it is part of my whole lifestyle and indeed vital to my personal well-being. I simply could not enjoy life without music.

Evidence supporting music education in schools

There has been so much research documenting the merit, worth and positive impacts of music education on students, in terms of brain and motor skill development, intelligences and learning styles and general life and social skills. From Plato onwards, the value of music education has been extolled.

“Music is a moral law. It gives soul to the universe, wings to the mind, flight to the imagination, and charm and gaiety to life and to everything.” (Plato)

In his book “Frames of Mind”, Howard Gardner outlined the role of musical intelligence in learning styles. He identified seven intelligences, one of which was musical intelligence. The

seven intelligences were identified as being of equal importance and none should have priority over the others. With many schools not even offering music, then clearly those students are disadvantaged from the outset.

The important role of music in establishing and strengthening neural pathways across all sections of the brain has been well –researched and documented. An article on “*Motor Skill Development and Music Participation*” published in “*Why Music is Basic: The Value of Music Education*” ed. Bruce Pearson, presents abstracts from four researchers, all of whom conclude that music participation improves or significantly improves perceptual-motor performance.

Performers of all ages and abilities have commented on the positive social effects of ensemble playing. There was an article in “*The Weekend Australian*” dated 3-4 October, 2009, entitled “*It Feels Good to Lift Every Voice*”. This article was about Musica Viva’s Music for Life program’s retiree choirs and the social and physical benefits they gained from performing music. “*Singing makes you feel good and it’s beautiful*” said 70 year old retiree, Joyce Chalkney. An assessment of Musica Viva’s Music for Life program, conducted by the University of Western Sydney, “*found choir singing increased the fitness levels and flexibility of the seniors and even reduced their blood pressure*”. There were “*overwhelming benefits*” found in the improvement of people’s mood and outlook. “*Musical groups provide a secure social environment where participants can meet new people who share a common goal*”. “*More than 90 per cent of participants in the pilot study reported improved self-esteem, social interaction and overall mood*”. Most of the students in school music ensembles are not going to become professional musicians. The students who keep learning music through to the end of Year 12, especially those doing so in addition to their VCE studies, all mention the relaxation, diversion from academic stress and enjoyment of the social aspects of playing music as reasons they continue. There are many students at my current school who do not have instrumental lessons at the school, but chose to enrol in the ensemble program, because they value the additional skills and social aspects that they gain in this type of setting.

Students need the opportunity to experience and test the limits of their potential in as many areas as possible. If students don’t have the opportunity to develop their music potential at school because of lack of provision, many of them won’t have the chance at all.

The Australian Government National Review of School Music Education of 2005 was a comprehensive review of music education in Australia. It was a wide-ranging study that validated the case for the importance and significance of music in the education of all Australian students and made the case for Music education in all Australian schools. The Review made three over-arching recommendations: “*that the Australian Government and State and Territory governments: 1 - assert the value of Music Education for all Australian students; 2 place immediate priority on improving and sustaining the quality and status of music education; 3 – provide sufficient funding to support effective, quality music education*”

that is accessible for all Australian children and addresses all the specific areas detailed in that Review”.

Similarly, but stated in more in more general “Arts” terms, the National Education and the Arts Statement of 2007 “is underpinned by three key principles:

1. All children and young people should have a high quality arts education in every phase of learning.
2. Creating partnerships strengthens community identity and local cultures.
3. Connecting schools with the arts and cultural sector enriches learning outcomes.

Currently, these recommendations and principles are a long way from being even partially met. Let alone fully fulfilled in many Victorian Government schools.

In this era of inclusiveness and personalisation of education, we need to be looking to maintain as broad a curriculum range as possible to enable all students to follow their preferred pathway. For this reason alone, Music and Instrumental Music must be made available to all students at all stages of their education – pre-primary, primary and secondary schools.

Music caters for all students and often provides a “haven/escape” for students with learning difficulties and social problems. It provides an opportunity for creativity and innovation – key 21st century skills, as well as an emotional outlet. Music can help student retention as it often provides a pathway for the less academically inclined students. Below is an extract from a parent email from one such student, who was struggling in year 9 and could have easily ended up working in a dead-end job. Instead he completed year 12, went on to TAFE and completed a sound engineering course and is now working as a sound engineer.

“I would just like to let you know that being involved in the music program at GWSC has made all the difference to Lachlan’s secondary schooling. He could very easily have been one of those lost boys who can’t really find their way in such a big school. He found a place to belong. Learning the double bass has given him enormous pleasure and it will continue to do so after he leaves school. Being involved in the various bands and having the opportunity to develop leadership skills has been fantastic in terms of his personal development and I would like to thank you and the other teachers in the Music Department who have worked with him..... The fact that Lachlan spent his car savings on a double-bass says more about his commitment and love for music than anything else.”

Nearly every music teacher would be able to relate similar stories – this is by no means an exceptional situation.

Music offers students a chance to develop skills that they can pursue life-long be they amateur or professional. Musical ensemble performance in particular, caters for students with a wide range of individual abilities and provides them with means to extend themselves in both musical and non-musical ways.

In addition to the specific technical skills of the instruments, Instrumental Music affords students opportunities to develop self-expression, creativity and innovation through personal interpretation, improvisation and composition. Music performance also develops many more general skills which crossover to other subjects and other aspects of life. Skills in presenting, critical listening, thinking and problem solving, communication, creativity and innovation, social and cross-cultural skills, leadership, flexibility and adaptability, productivity and accountability, collaboration, ICT, in fact all the 21st century skills are routinely employed in Instrumental Music, especially in ensembles.

In a typical ensemble rehearsal, we will cover many aspects musical and non-musical. The students work collaboratively to set up the rehearsal and get tuned, with more advanced students assisting the less advanced. They assume responsibilities for such tasks as looking after the music folders, others regularly assist the double bass players who need more help with setting up. One of the works one of my ensembles is currently learning is a piece called "Ascendit Deus". Some of the normal musical aspects students engage in include learning the notes which require specific technical drills to further improve fine motor skills; problem solving rhythmic difficulties through mathematical subdivision of the beat and clapping the rhythm to establish a kinaesthetic understanding of the rhythm; listening critically and making fine adjustments to tuning and to balance the parts across the ensemble, experimenting as an ensemble with interpretation to find out what works and why; understanding the structure and working as a group to achieve effective phrasing; understanding the tonality so that the students can understand which notes need to be brought out more etc. We have discussed the original work – a vocal motet and discussed the context of the work and form of the work in history. We have looked at the Latin text and the English translation, comparing the different forms of the words – literacy skills, and how the words are depicted in the music – a feature of the music of this period in time. We have listened to recordings of the two versions of the piece and compared them - critical listening. We do this with every piece that we do. Students also are involved in discussions re programming decisions for concerts; they work together in small teams to run their own sectional rehearsals.

As you can see from the above description, Instrumental Music involves learning much more than performance skills on an instrument; it is a multi-faceted subject which branches out into many other areas.

At my school, another vital aspect of the Music Program is the Music Leaders' group who work to assist with the presentation of all the concerts, including compering, stage management, publicity, front of house ticket selling and greeting of the audience. They seek out performance opportunities in the wider community, liaising between the wider community and the school administration and organise social events for the music students. The Music Leaders act as ambassadors for Music in the school, giving speeches at school assemblies promoting all the events the Music faculty is involved in.

Instrumental music performance is a very demanding discipline. It requires great accuracy and attention to detail, as well as commanding performance and presentation skills for a performance to be perceived as very good. A performance in which 1 in every 10 notes is incorrect will not be perceived to be an excellent performance, but only mediocre, yet 90% is awarded an “excellent” grading in most disciplines.

Music is a most complex and rigorous subject. It teaches the habit of excellence and has wide-reaching benefits. What is the worth of music? I say it is incalculable. Music makes an invaluable contribution to students’ education and to society in general. Music deserves to be funded adequately, so that all students at all levels can reap the benefits. How can any fully effective curriculum be complete without an extensive music program? How can we as a community afford to not adequately fund and support music as a subject within all our schools?

Current provision of music education in Victoria

Currently, music tends to be thought of in one of two ways – not important enough to have in the school at all, or as a highly specialised, niche subject. Some schools have well-established and well-supported programs, other schools have very little, if any Music. We need to stop thinking about Music this way and treat it as a standard core curriculum subject. As a consequence of this inconsistency, the facilities for music and way music is funded vary widely.

Facilities

Facilities for music in schools are generally rather poor, and are often an ad hoc collection of rooms scatted all over the school, rather than in a centralised, subject based area. There have, however, been some improvements in recent years, with some schools recognising the importance of the Music program in their school and building more appropriate facilities. Over the years, I have taught in gardener’s sheds, storage cupboards, toilets and first aid rooms, a hall attic and am still currently teaching in an old Phys. Ed. Change room/toilet, which has had some slight modifications such as carpet and removal of fixtures to make it usable as an instrumental teaching room. In only one school, a once designated “music school”, have I taught in a specifically designed room for instrumental music. This lack of basic facilities in many schools is demoralising to staff and students alike and is not conducive to producing the best possible results. Many instrumental music teachers suffer from hearing problems and asthma difficulties because of the poor facilities in which they are constantly being required to work. This is a situation which would not be tolerated elsewhere; many instrumental teaching spaces are often not even cleaned by cleaners, as they are “off the plan”. This lack of basic facilities reflects a lack of respect for the subject, students and staff, yet when it comes to promoting the schools, Music ensembles are usually the first people called on!

Funding

Funding levels for Music Programs have not changed for several years and have been inequable, with different formulas being used across the different regions. From my observations, the demand for Instrumental Music lessons in school is increasing. Schools are increasingly finding it hard to make ends meet and many are turning to a user pays situation. This is pushing up the cost of music lessons in schools. Many parents simply cannot afford the cost of private lessons outside of school. With most schools charging lower rates than private teachers, parents have been prepared to allow their child to have lessons at school, even though that usually means the child is withdrawn from a regular class. As more schools engage private teachers who charge private rates within the school, fewer parents are going to be able to afford instrumental lessons and fewer parents are going to be prepared to allow their child to miss a “normal” class, consequently enrolments in Instrumental Music will decline and students are going to be deprived of the opportunity to participate in the wealth of experiences and learning that music can offer. The government must increase and continue to fund music education. Schools need to be made more aware of any available philanthropic possibilities for special “one-off” purchases/ activities etc. Schools need guidance on how to reach out to industry and the wider community and seek out Public Private Partnerships funds. Philanthropy and PPP arrangements cannot, however, replace proper, adequate government funding.

Employment and qualifications

With recent changes to the registration process with the Victorian Institute of Teaching, in schools that do offer Instrumental Music as a subject, it is up to the principal of the school to decide whether it is a core curriculum subject or not. The principal’s decision has ramifications for the status of the staff – if the subject is not considered core curriculum, then those that teach it are not “teachers”, even if they are fully qualified, they are merely “instructors” and theoretically don’t need “Permission to Teach”, yet they are still required to pay full Victorian Institute of Teaching fees. If the principal decides that Instrumental Music is part of the core curriculum, then the qualified staff are indeed deemed to be “teachers” and do need “Permission to Teach”.

“1.1.3 Sports Coaches, Instrumental Music Instructors, and other instructors whose duties relate to co-curricular or extra-curricular programs are not considered to be undertaking the duties of a teacher.” (Permission to Teach Policy 2011, VIT)

From the same policy document:

“Under Section (2.6.1) of the Act, a “teacher”:

(a) means a person who in a school, undertakes duties that include the delivery of an educational program or the assessment of student participation in an educational program”

The implication is, that I even though I am teaching several instruments and directing numerous ensembles and am providing assessments and feedback to students and parents

on all these activities, I am not a teacher, because Instrumental Music is seen as extra-curricular. This leaves me feeling demoralised and devalued.

I find myself in the ludicrous situation where after 28 years of teaching full time, as a fully qualified teacher, I am now no longer considered a “teacher”, because the principal at my current school has not declared Instrumental Music is a core curriculum subject. This is another example reflecting the lack of consistency in Music’s status across our state.

Currently, not all instrumental music staff are required to have formal education qualifications; many are employed on the basis of their knowledge of their instrument and performance skill. These skills, however, do not necessarily mean that the person has the knowledge of learning styles, a range of teaching strategies, learning difficulties etc. that a qualified teacher would be required to have. I strongly believe that all instrumental staff in schools, whether they are employed by the DEECD or privately contracted should be qualified as teachers with an education qualification.

With the rise in contract Instrumental teaching, teachers are finding it next to impossible to achieve ongoing status in schools, leading to continuous uncertainty about their jobs and all the stress that uncertainty brings. Teachers are meant to be made ongoing after a maximum of 3 years in a school, but this is simply not happening. This is yet another example of Instrumental Teachers being treated as second-class citizens.

Future optimum provision of music education in Victorian schools

Government funding needs to be increased so that all schools have access to Music. All Primary schools should at least have a specialist music teacher and basic sound system, piano, percussion equipment, computer and software so that a basic classroom program can be offered. Both Classroom and Instrumental Music should be offered in all secondary schools. Classroom music should be mandatory in all years at primary school and years 7, 8 & 9 in secondary schools, with Instrumental music being an optional opportunity if the student wishes. Music Teacher training needs to be increased and extra specialist teachers employed.

Facilities for Instrumental lessons need to be improved and a minimum suitable standard set. All rooms used for Instrumental music should meet basic acoustic and other OHS standards.

I believe the Regional Instrumental Music Co-ordinators should be maintained, but their role needs to be revised and redefined as they have had all their advisory and decision-making powers stripped from them in recent years.

To quote Jeanette Bicknell from p. 149 of her book “Why Music Moves Us”:

“Music is part of our humanity: it is connected to our emotional repertoire, to our cognitive skills, and in it we give expression to that urge to transcend that gives birth to the most sublime art.”

On my very first day as a teacher, the Acting Principal of the school I attended on that day told me that he thought Instrumental Teachers were the “dregs of the teaching profession”, which was a very gut-wrenching start to the job. Sometimes, when I look at the facilities many of us continue to teach in; when I think about the situation with the subject not being regarded as a real subject in many schools and experienced, qualified teachers not being considered as real teachers, I wonder how many administrators still think this way. It is time Music and all Music teachers were given the appropriate credibility and status and treated with the respect they deserve.

Music is a central part of our very being. It now pervades all aspects of our life. We need to be able to understand it, to appreciate it, to perform it. Add to this all the proven benefits for brain development, musical intelligence and learning styles, 21st century skills etc. that Music embodies and develops. We need to embed Music and Instrumental Music into the curriculum. Music needs to become a priority rather than an add-on. How can we afford to not have Music (both classroom and Instrumental aspects) as a fundamental part of the curriculum in every school, at every level? It is a subject that offers so many life-long benefits and opportunities to students, schools and the wider community. If we continue to ignore it, we do so to our students’ and communities’ detriments.

Recommendations.

1. I recommend that classroom Music be embedded into the curriculum at all schools, with Instrumental Music embedded into every secondary school.
2. I recommend that the Government increase funding and commit to providing ongoing funding for Music and Instrumental Music in particular.
3. I recommend that minimum requirements be set for the provision of Classroom and Instrumental Music. Both Classroom and Instrumental Music should be offered in all secondary schools. Classroom music should be mandatory in all years at primary school and years 7, 8 & 9 in secondary schools, with Instrumental music being an optional opportunity if the student wishes. Music Teacher training needs to be increased and extra specialist teachers employed.
4. I recommend that minimum standards be set for the provision of Instrumental Music facilities.

5. I recommend that all Instrumental Music Teachers must have an education qualification and that the number of specialist Music Teacher training positions is increased.

6. I recommend that changes be made to the teacher registration process so that all fully qualified teachers are recognised as such.

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Thanking you for your efforts,

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