

From:

[REDACTED]

Dear administrator,  
please find attached my submission for the 2013 parliamentary review into music education.

Regards

Cheryl Morrow

[REDACTED]

FEBRUARY 14, 2013

SUBMISSION TO:

THE 2013 AUSTRALIAN PARLIAMENTARY REVIEW OF  
MUSIC EDUCATION

FROM:

CHERYL MORROW: INSTRUMENTAL MUSIC TEACHER AND  
REGIONAL COORDINATOR

B.ED. (MUSIC), M.ED. (LEADERSHIP, POLICY AND CHANGE)

---

**MUSIC EDUCATION: THE POWERFUL POSITIVE IMPACT ON YOUTH MENTAL HEALTH**

## **Introduction**

Some years ago when my daughters were still in primary school (a Victorian Government primary school in Australia) we received a letter home seeking feedback regarding the swimming program that every child in the school participated in throughout the year. It was being proposed that this program be terminated due to the fact that it disrupted time that could perhaps be better spent on extra Maths and English classes. I sent back a one sentence response to this proposal: 'I do not think anything can compare with the potential life saving benefits of learning to swim'.

This paper is not going to explore the benefits of learning to swim, but the benefits of a child learning a musical instrument and being involved in the wonderful world of music making as part of their mainstream education. It will be argued that learning a musical instrument and being involved in a school based instrumental music program that is well resourced and implemented has enormous benefits in terms of the mental health, well-being, and social connectedness it can bring to students in a way with which no other subject can compare. It will be shown that the effects of an instrumental music program can be potentially lifesaving to a countless number of young people, helping them to gain the confidence to move forward and achieve their potential as competent and valued individuals in society. Observations and hypothetical case studies based on my experience of over thirty years in music education will be referenced as supporting evidence. The status of instrumental music education in Victorian Government schools in Australia will be discussed, including issues affecting its effective implementation and documented research by highly regarded music education professionals. The mental health and well-being of our youth today will be examined, highlighting the enormous need for societal support in this area. It will be demonstrated that instrumental music education and music education in general can bring a hugely beneficial dimension to this arena, and as such is deserving of vastly increased funding and significantly higher status in our schools.

## **The Value of Music Education: Academic Literature and Research**

Philosophical views on the importance of music education in schooling date back to the Egyptians and Ancient Greeks (Heimonen, 2008). Aristotle saw music education 'as a means of learning about anger, temperance, and other emotions and virtues since it was the only subject in which emotions were directly represented. The educational role of music was primarily ethical, since it was regarded as having the power to shape the character of children and adolescents' (Heimonen, 2008, p. 65).

Throughout time there have been some educationalists who have deemed music to have no educational value whatsoever (Heimonen, 2008). The value of music education has hence been widely debated and justifying the subject in school curriculums has encompassed arguments pertaining to both its intrinsic and extrinsic educational value (Heimonen, 2008; Southcott, 2006; Temmerman, 2006; Westerlund, 2008; Crncec, Wilson & Prior, 2006). The intrinsic value of music education is viewed in terms of its aesthetics. In this view, the study of music has value for its own sake. The extrinsic value of music education is viewed in terms of other things that may be learned through the study of music such as discipline, concentration, teamwork, socialisation, and motor skills.

In recent times there has been a particular focus on scientific findings of the benefits of music education which confer that the study of music enhances reading and mathematical ability and heightens IQ (Crncec, Wilson & Prior, 2006). However Crncec et al (2006) caution that apart from a short - lived developmental advantage associated with improvements in spatiotemporal ability these findings are limited in their reliability. They argue that despite this being the case, the value of music education is not diminished and should be regarded for its intrinsic value as 'a great cultural invention' and for its ability to nurture extrinsic benefits such as 'emotional expression', 'communication' and 'self esteem' (Crncec et al, 2006, p. 588).

It is important to see music in terms of its intrinsic value. The intrinsic value of music is highlighted by research which reveals that students have an inherent interest in practical music activities, especially those that incorporate opportunities for creativity in social contexts (Temmerman 2006, Westerlund 2008). However it is widely agreed that the study of music has many non- musical educational benefits. Stevens (2005, p.258) refers to music as having a 'unique role' in the 'cognitive, physical, social, emotional, moral/ethical and aesthetic development of Australian students'. Southcott (2006) discusses how the Victorian Essential Learning Standards (VELS) Frameworks emphasises 'essential learnings in which students gain deep understanding of key areas of human experience' (Southcott, 2006, p.1). She quite validly argues that within this framework, the

experiential nature of learning music gives music educators further momentum in justifying its value in the school curriculum.

Although there has been a substantial amount of research done in the area of music and music education there appears to be a dearth of research specific to instrumental music teaching and the professional practice of instrumental music teachers. The work of Dr. Sharon Lierse appears to give the most comprehensive account of instrumental teaching to date in Victorian government schools in Australia.

In Lierse (2005a), Lierse discusses her research on the development of instrumental music programs in Victoria Australia since their inception. Her documented findings highlight major factors in the success of instrumental music programs in schools such as strong leadership support, purpose built facilities and curriculum policy. The documented findings on factors that hinder the development of instrumental music programs were overwhelmingly found to be lack of financial and leadership support, and inadequate teaching facilities. Discussed in Lierse's research findings also is the professional attributes of instrumental music teachers and their perceptions of how instrumental music fits into the curriculum.

Much fervent discussion in recent times regarding the state of music education in the government school system and its place and value as a subject in the school curriculum has emanated out of the National Review of School Music Education (NRSME) released in November 2005. 'The report found that there was a great variability in the quality of music education in schools. It was acknowledged that although there are some excellent music programs in schools, there is "cycles of neglect and inequity" and greater support is required for teachers and the subject itself' (Lierse, 2006b, p.1). Moreover, 'the low status of music in schools was believed to be hindering the quality of music education' (Lierse, 2006b, p.3).

In her discussion of the NRSME (Lierse, 2006b) Lierse highlights the report's findings on the low status of music as a subject in many schools, the decline in music education in the last two decades, and the work that is specific to music teachers, including out of hours rehearsals and performances. A major emphasis is placed on the report's illumination of the need for reform in music education in Australian schools. She states that the report 'painted a bleak picture on the state of music in Australian schools' (Lierse, 2006b, p.4).

Despite the dismal findings of the NRSME, the enormous input into the review and the wealth of discussion generated demonstrates that there is substantial support for music education both in educational circles and the general community. However whilst ostensibly enjoying significant success in many schools, music education in Victoria continues to struggle to find its meaningful place in the government school setting to date in 2013. Moreover, instrumental music, and instrumental music teachers, seemingly exist on the fringes of the education system.

### **Youth Mental health and well-being: 21<sup>st</sup> Century Australia**

The youth of today is growing up in a rapidly changing environment where everything is fast paced and information and communication technologies form a significant part of life. Adolescents in the twenty first century not only have to deal with the general pressures and anxieties associated with the transition to adulthood, but are confronted with a whole new array of pressures brought about by instant non- verbal communication and constant visual media bombardment. Whilst the technological age has brought many benefits it has been recognised that in embracing it there has been an emergence of aspects that are potentially psychologically harmful to our youth. Information which is available at the touch of a button and the overwhelming popularity of computer games means more prevalent instant gratification, leading to more limited development of patience and persistence in learning and recreational activities. The advent of social media such as facebook and twitter, whilst seen on the positive side to promote connectedness among friends, has also seen the emergence of a new and sinister type of bullying now known as 'cyber bullying' and a new type of 'stranger' danger in the form of 'cyber predators'. It can also be seen to have brought about a new type of loneliness, one that may be masked or even exacerbated, which has been made evident for example where it has been noted that some users pleas for help amongst hundreds of 'friends' on facebook pages have gone unnoticed. In society in general, a pervasive obsession with image and competitiveness has emerged where it has become all important not to be seen as a 'loser' and the portion of humanity that recognises the value and uniqueness in each and every person has been blurred.

It is hardly surprising then that in this environment the mental health and well-being of young people is going to be significantly challenged. Statistics show that in Australia today this is indeed the case. The fourth 2011 national statistical report on young people aged 12-24 years produced by the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare has shown that while most young people are achieving national minimum standards for reading, writing, and numeracy, are fully engaged in study or work, and have strong support networks, the rate of mental disorders among them is high. The most common mental disorders among young people in Australia are depression and anxiety with around 160,000 affected by depression each year and up to 1 in 10 young people affected by anxiety. The possible flow on effect of this to society is social instability in the form of high levels of stress, poverty, reduced productivity and crime. Indeed, recent media reports indicate that the rate of adolescent aggressive and violent behaviour has nearly doubled in the last five years. Clearly young people are in need of greater emotional support and guidance, and it is my belief that music education can contribute significantly.

### **Personal Orientation**

I approach this topic as a music educator in the area of both classroom and instrumental music with in excess of thirty years of experience predominantly in the government education system in Victoria. I have taught in a wide range of school settings in the eastern, southern and city metropolitan areas. During this time I have witnessed countless examples of the positive impact that musical involvement has had on young people, particularly in the practical area of instrumental music. Whilst I am not suggesting that music education can be offered as a panacea for good mental health and well-being, nor prevent mental health problems, I feel that in its unique way it can offer young people a significant level of support by nurturing self-esteem, self-efficacy and social connectedness. It can also play a major role in the development of important community skills such as leadership, teamwork, patience, persistence and responsibility. At this stage I base this not on scientifically collected data, but on experiential evidence gathered during my teaching life. Here I will present some of my observations.

### **Instrumental Music Education: Well-Being Benefits to all Students**

My observation of students who are actively involved in instrumental music programs during their school life is that their overall learning is significantly enhanced by the complex thinking skills and motor skills that are involved in learning music and playing a musical instrument. Importantly whilst enhancing learning skills, I have observed that learning a unique skill such as this also helps to build a student's individual confidence in their learning, particularly if the student has struggled to have success in other subject areas. In playing a musical instrument not only does a student need to master the physical and technical aspects of learning the instrument, they also need to learn specific listening skills and optimally learn to read musical notation. The aural aspects of learning a musical instrument mirror learning a second language in terms of the listening skills that need to be developed to play stylistically and with appropriate interpretation. Learning to read musical notation is also akin to learning a second language. The black notes and signs on the page need to be intellectually interpreted and communicated to the body in order for the instrument to be physically played, resulting in the production of a recognisable tune. The teaching and learning process in learning a musical instrument therefore is highly differentiated, necessitating a significant level of personal interaction with the teacher.

As instrumental music students participate in musical ensembles and perform at various events both in the school setting and in the community students develop a great sense of teamwork and community contribution, particularly for example at performances such as the Anzac Day March. They also develop a heightened sense of community and social responsibility as they commit to rehearsals and performances outside of the regular school day, are responsible for setting up and packing up equipment, and are given leadership responsibilities such as being in charge of band music folders or backstage work at performances. My observations of these aspects of student involvement in practical music making activities in terms of student mental health and well-being are that students develop a greater confidence in social situations and an increased feeling of connectedness and belonging both in the school environment and in the wider community.

### **Instrumental Music Education: Benefits to Students with Special Needs**

Here I will present five hypothetical student case studies based on factual experiences with students who fall into special need categories, highlighting particular individual benefits to their mental health and well-being that

I have observed during their involvement in school instrumental music programs. Names used are fictitious and individual student scenarios essentially represent a number of students observed over a long period of time.

### 1. **Jodie: Disengaged**

Disengaged students in schools are those who have trouble involving themselves with everyday learning and social activities. They often refuse to do any class work, and can become withdrawn and/or aggressive. These students often disrupt the learning of others and find themselves frequently in trouble with school authority. They are often from unstable backgrounds and may feel lost and unable to connect socially. They struggle to find school meaningful. Jodie was one such student who joined the instrumental music program where I was teaching early in my career. She loved music and decided to embark on learning a woodwind instrument. Jodie had a very troubled home life and was frequently in trouble at school, sometimes displaying temper outbursts and walking out of classes. However she found a connection at school through her love of music and the fact that she was able to learn a musical instrument and be part of the school band. Although her behaviour was sometimes also problematic in this environment, its informal and personal orientation afforded her more space and she was able to develop a sense of some success and belonging. Jodie was a very intelligent and sensitive girl who demonstrated much success in her woodwind playing. Initially she had struggled to find a meaningful place at school. Instrumental music provided her with a sense of connectedness and she persevered at school through to VCE level.

### 2. **Sam: High Achieving**

High achieving or gifted students can sometimes be overlooked in schools as they easily complete all set tasks and rarely cause any trouble. However they are sometimes left feeling unchallenged and because of their superior intellect do not always connect well with their peers, leading to a feeling of social isolation. For interested students instrumental music programs can provide an area of study where they can extend themselves in many different ways as well as providing them with a diverse social network beyond their immediate peer group. I have come into contact with many high achieving students who have found new challenges and developed increased social connectedness by being involved in instrumental music. Sam was one such student who found school work in general in his year level to be easy and lacking real challenge for him. Sam joined the music program initially learning one instrument. It was not long before Sam was learning three more instruments. He participated in a number of ensembles and enthusiastically performed at concerts within and outside the school. Sam became a mentor for other students and took on a number of leadership roles within the program. Through the instrumental music program he not only extended himself through taking on new challenges, but developed friendships across all year levels, making lasting bonds that transcended his school years.

### 3. **Krystal: Multicultural Background**

Students from multicultural backgrounds form a large proportion of the population landscape in schools today. Apart from cultural differences these students often have to deal with language barriers as they continue to learn the English language in order to communicate with those around them. Krystal, a highly intelligent Asian student came to one of the schools I was teaching at as a shy and withdrawn student. She was finding it hard to fit into the school environment and was struggling with the language. Krystal had a musical background as an accomplished pianist so was encouraged to join our stage band as we needed a piano player at the time. She also started to learn a woodwind instrument. Krystal struggled initially to fit into the music program environment but she was among students who had a common language with her in music, and her evident skills engendered a lot of respect from them. Due to the smaller and more informal learning music program environment Krystal began to gradually form friendships whilst she had struggled in the wider school community. At the conclusion of her first school year she was laughing and joking around with students in the band and had developed some strong connections. Her social confidence blossomed in the music environment and according to feedback from colleagues; the effects flowed across into all other areas of her school life.

#### **4. Tom: Intellectually Disabled**

A significant number of students with physical and mental disabilities ranging from mild to severe are now integrated into mainstream schools. I have come into contact with a number of these students who have decided to become part of the instrumental program in a given school and have found that the emotional benefits for these students have been enormous. Whilst not all of them have been able to participate in the full range of musical activities offered, depending on their disability, they have been able to learn a musical instrument and be engaged with others making music in some capacity. Tom entered one of the instrumental music programs I was involved with quite by chance. Tom has a severe intellectual disability and in his time at school had an aid with him during every class. During lunch breaks he would often wander by the music department and show a lot of interest in the drums where he sometimes would stop and have a bit of a play after being invited by the percussion teacher. His interest became so great that it was suggested to his parents that he join the program, which he did. Tom succeeded in learning many skills and was able to perform with an impressive level of improvisation within a small group. His level of enthusiasm for school was heightened and his love of playing so passionate that his parents quickly purchased him his own drum-kit. Tom involved himself in concerts at the school and after performing an interactive duet one evening received a standing ovation from the audience. Instrumental music provided Tom with a sense of belonging at school in a way that no other subject could.

#### **5. Amber: Socially Excluded/Bullied**

It is interesting with all of the awareness of social exclusion and bullying in schools and the number of programs that have been put into place to combat and prevent it, that sadly it is alive and well to this day. Experience has demonstrated to me that this type of behaviour in schools primarily occurs in the student's immediate peer group environment. Involvement in instrumental music programs where students often socialise with a wide range of students across different year levels can provide a haven for students who are being socially excluded or bullied. Again I could cite many examples of this type of student and how being involved in their school music program has benefited them. Here I will talk about Amber. Amber joined the instrumental music program and quickly progressed on her instrument. She was enthusiastic and loved being part of the band at school. However in her immediate peer group she was being ostracized and sometimes bullied for unknown reasons. Although this was being addressed by the school Amber was often miserable and lonely, particularly during lunch breaks. As Amber became more integrated into the instrumental music program she began to form new friendships with other students in the program. During lunch breaks she would often visit the music department with her new friends and they would book a music room to practice together. Amber began to take on a new cheerful disposition and her work in other subjects began to improve. Being involved in the instrumental music program at school helped Amber to not only to survive a painful social period in her school life, but also to feel more connected at school and improve in her schoolwork in general.

### **Conclusion**

It is clear that involvement in instrumental music at school can be of enormous benefit to young people, not only in terms of its intellectual and aesthetic value, but importantly in terms of its positive impact on mental health and well-being. It has been seen that the mental health and well-being of young people in Australia in the twenty first century is cause for concern, and that involvement in music programs at school can offer a unique level of support to students that can lead to greater feelings of self-confidence, capability and social connectedness. It is also evident that both the standard and status of music programs in Victorian schools in Australia varies widely and is in need of attention ostensibly in the areas of funding, staffing, and curriculum implementation.

### **References**

AIHW 2011. Young Australians: their health and wellbeing 2011. Cat.no.PHE140. Canberra: AIHW

Australian Institute of Health and Welfare: Australia's Health 2010, the 12<sup>th</sup> biennial report.

Crncec, R; Wilson, s.J; & Prior, M. The Cognitive and Academic Benefits of music to Children in *Educational Psychology* Vol. 26, No. 4, August 2006, pp. 579-594.

Heimonen, Marja. (2008) Nurturing towards Wisdom: Justifying Music in the Curriculum in Philosophy of Music Education Review; v16 n1 p61-78 Spr 2008

Larson, R. and Brown, J. (2007) Emotional development in adolescence: what can be learned from a high school theatre program? *Child Development*, 78(4), p. 1083-1099.

Lierse, Sharon. (2005, a) Factors which influence the development of instrumental music programs in Victorian government secondary schools. in 'A celebration of voices: ASME XV national conference proceedings' edited by D Forrest, pages 164-168. Parkville Vic: Australian Society for Music Education, 2005.

Lierse, Sharon. (2005, b) What Is the Place of Instrumental Music in Schools? Reviewing the Future of Instrumental Music Programs in *Australian Association for Research in Music Education Annual Conference (27th: 2005: Sydney, N.S.W.)*

Lierse, S. (2006, a) Instrumental Music Programs in Victorian Government Secondary Schools in *Victorian Journal of Music Education*; Issue 2004/2006; 2006; 62-6.

Lierse, Sharon. (2006, b) The National Review of School Music Education: what is the present state of music education in schools? In 'AARE 2006 International education research conference: Adelaide: papers collection': [Conference of the Australian Association for Research in Education, 27-30 November 2006] compiled by P L Jeffrey. Melbourne: Australian Association for Research in Education, 2007

Southcott, J.E. (2006) 'Putting on a show': engaging and authentic learning in experiential music education. In 'AARE 2006 International education research conference: Adelaide: papers collection': [Conference of the Australian Association for Research in Education, 27-30 November 2006] compiled by P L Jeffrey. Melbourne: Australian Association for Research in Education, 2007

Stevens, Robin S. (2005) Taking Stock of School Music Education in Victoria: The Lessons of History in the Present Context of the National Review [online]. In: *Celebration of Voices: XV National Conference Proceedings, A*; pages: 253-258. Forrest, David (Editor). Parkville, Vic.: Australian Society for Music Education, 2005. Availability : ≤  
<http://search.informit.com.au.ezproxy.lib.monash.edu.au/documentSummary;dn=804272978136449;res=IELHSS>  
S> ISBN: 0957741359. [cited 17 Oct 08].

Temmerman, N. (2006) Improving school music education: we all have a part to play. In *Professional Educator*; v.5 n.1 p.34-39; March 2006

Westerlund, Heidi. (2008) Justifying Music Education: A View from Here-and-Now Value Experience in *Philosophy of Music Education Review*; v16 n1 p79-95 Spr 2008.

[www.youthbeyondblue.com](http://www.youthbeyondblue.com) Fact Sheets