

Submission: Inquiry into Music Education in Victorian Schools

“Tic-toc: the primary school music teacher is a time release mechanism.”

In Grade Six of primary school, our teacher Mr Williamson set us the following question.

Should children learn to play a musical instrument? Here was my answer.

“I think it would be a good idea for boys and girls to learn how to play a musical instrument. However they shouldn’t be forced to. The great composer and pianist Beethoven was forced to play a violin when he was only ten (and) he became famous and renowned all over the world, but not everyone is a Beethoven. The world famous pop group the Beatles started playing music when they were only fifteen and now they are millionaires. But groups start now and put little effort into their work and become poor people who struggle for a place to eat and sleep.”

Norman Cottrell (The student), Whiteside Primary School 1968.

The Accidental Music Teacher

When I was really little The Beatles came to Australia. At home we ran round with pots and pans, pretending they were drum kits. Even at an early age I was fascinated with their harmonisations and musical energy, and although I had little music education, I knew that kind of music gave me pins and needles and reached a special part of my soul.

At school, our music consisted of broadcasts through the school P.A, singing *The Gypsy Rover*. I used to love singing that song. One day the principal decided out of the blue to buy a marching drum kit. I ended up on the bass drum and proudly led the band and the marching children into class. Unfortunately music and the arts took a back seat for me as I got older. I wanted to excel in the subjects which would get me somewhere to eat and sleep. I did end up with excellent marks but years of university and an unsatisfying post-University career led to a deep regret that I had not listened well enough to those beating drums of my childhood.

Norman Cottrell (The music teacher, 2013)

One day I became an accidental music teacher. Not many schools had music teachers, and learning to teach music in classes has not been a core-part of teacher-training programs in our post ‘sixties’ generation of educators. I had no formal music qualifications other than a general teaching degree, but I loved music, and fortunately this was an area of great need in the schooling system.

If you have not done teacher training as a music teacher you have to learn on the job quickly, or wilt under the noise of class percussion and varied musical interests of the classroom. So I taught myself on the job. First it was tin whistle, then recorder, then African drums, then class ukulele. I learnt to use music technology on an interactive screen and how to make these screens an instant songbook full of lyrics. I collected a trailer load of instruments. I studied clarinet and saxophone and did AMEB exams over several years. I found *The Gypsy Rover* in an old school book and collected thirty years of school *hits*. I learnt what songs children like to listen to and sing at home, and even to make 'judgement calls', about when and where these songs could be used in music classes. So the music teacher can end up becoming an important arbiter of social values. Where the state does not provide comprehensive music education populist media takes up the slack and provides plenty of lyrics and song meanings for children to absorb.

As a primary school music teacher I am sometimes asked by a sceptical Grade six student the question I was asked as a child; why should I learn music? I know this child. He was me, when I got obsessed as a child with 'real subjects' in school education. This boy says music doesn't get you anywhere and doesn't make you any money. You will end up with nowhere to eat and sleep. So how do I answer him? Do I prattle on about emotional and spiritual growth. About having a career in music. About enjoying singing and playing an instrument for its own pleasure?

In prep grade and through most of primary school, enjoying music is a heady, exciting experience and it is its own reward. You can be rich or poor and the pay-off is the same. Music is often removed from the monotony and rituals of classwork. You sit there and sing, or hit something, or play something. Older primary school children don't have quite the same "I don't care too much for money" attitude as the little kids, they take seriously the subjects that their parents or their schools tell them are important. ie Maths and English.

This mindset carries through much of our education system. Many schools throughout Victoria (and Australia) don't run music as a class subject, and where it is part of the school curriculum it comes under the category of what one teaching colleague described as a 'time release mechanism', allowing the real teachers to prepare their next classes. Some class teachers are happy to duet with the line, "I don't have a musical bone in my body" and allow music activity to be conducted often out of sight and out mind in the noisy music room.

In such classrooms, Music and the Arts, and Literacy and Mathematics are often seen as mutually exclusive activities. One subject area is 'time release' for the class teacher, the other is 'schoolwork'. Of course there are many, many classroom teachers who are inspired by music and make music an important part of their daily class routine. I love working with these teachers. We always have the most inspiring school concerts!

Music Revival in Schools

The attitude and enthusiasm of the school principal will often determine if a music program has legs, and whether he or she will seek out someone who can offer themselves up as a “Specialist”, and then whether the position is adequately funded. Often this is not the case. There may not be the money, or funds are directed towards the big ticket items of school life.

My Recommendations

- Professional education requirements of teachers should include a component of music education. Music education is not mutually exclusive to other forms of learning, and shouldn't be the preserve of people who 'do' have musical bones in their body/s. Music, literacy, mathematics, classroom management are all connected and are capable of being brought together as part of mandated professional development packages.
- Schools should attempt to provide a Specialist teacher, or at least an instrumental teacher who can provide tuition in popular instruments. Lesson times can be rotated so that 'real work' is not missed.
- The vibe though should be that music *is* school work, and that children are encouraged to attend music lessons in school time if they so desire. Schools should seek to identify those children who 'get pins and needles' from music, and provide music lessons for these children.
- Music specialists can be a link-person in the music food chain and help make these connections between teachers and the various music boxes of school curricula. The work of the specialist class should be regularly performed within schools, and schools should have regular whole-school singalongs so that the music-is-fun mantra becomes part of the school fabric. Popular songs, not necessarily *The Beatles*, should be part of this experience.
- Modern technology including interactive screens and widely available music software should be integrated into music education. Video conferencing technology now being rolled out across Australian schools (and in up to 28 overseas countries) allows schools the opportunity to put on mini-concerts (once per month, 15 minutes per session) to children in other regions, states or countries. Video Conferencing can

be used as a teaching resource for music, and not one limited to, for example the learning of foreign languages.

My Final Reflection –

“Oh Shenandoah, I long to see you...”

Last week I tried *Oh Shenandoah*, with the little children and was amazed to find right there in front of me a little boy with tears welling up in his eyes. He said the song made him sad.

I consider myself lucky that I could finally find a day job that meant something to me. The real pay-off though, has been my realisation that there are many more children out there - not unlike the child I once was – who yearn for the deep emotional enrichment of music in their lives. They will sleep well.

Writing this submission has been a rewarding experience for me and I trust that my thoughts and reflections will be of assistance to the parliamentary inquiry into music education in Victoria.

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