

Dear Parliamentary Enquiry into Instrumental Music,

I am writing to share my views and experiences in regards to the value and benefits of Instrumental Music in education.

As an instrumental music teacher for over ten years, a professional musician, and through my own involvement as a child learning instruments, I have seen and experienced the countless valuable outcomes that music has to offer. There is an abundance of evidence through scientific and social studies that involvement in instrumental music enhances students ability in mathematics, languages, problem solving, time management, emotional health and social engagement, which I'm sure you have read and reviewed. Music crosses into almost every area of learning, and does so in a tactile way. In any given lesson or band rehearsal, students are learning about other cultures, maths, physics, anatomy, history, languages other than English, geography etc... When in lessons and rehearsals, students are actively engaged and usually enjoying the learning close to 100% of the time. In other subjects, I have read that many students are engaged as little as 30% of the time.

I have heard of a school that wanted to improve students' numeracy, as is the priority in almost every school. They split the students into two groups; one group studied maths, the other music. The results showed that the latter group improved their numeracy to a far greater extent.

In my time, I have seen so many students who are disengaged in all areas of their schooling, but instrumental music is the one subject that they enjoy and often excel in. Music is a physical and emotional outlet for many. I have heard from one student, years after they finished school, say "If it weren't for music, I would be dead now". This person went on to describe how they were feeling suicidal during parts of their teenage years, and music was the one subject that kept bringing meaning back into their life.

I have taught many students with ADHD, ODD, Aspergers, hearing impairment, and a varied degree of physical and cognitive conditions. So many have excelled (or more importantly, gained self esteem and enjoyment from) learning music. I have had other teachers comment on how they believe that through music, some students seem to have "repaired brain function". I refer in particular to one drumming student of mine. This student had an acquired brain injury (as did his twin brother) from his early years of abuse. As foster kids, they moved between foster families over a dozen times before they settled at my school. Both students had been constantly in trouble over their behaviour throughout primary school. In year 7, one brother took up the drums. He became heavily involved in several bands and performances. His behaviour began to improve, and all his teachers noticed improvement. Eventually (beyond the expectations of all) he completed year 12 and has been working various jobs locally. He still has traits that he has displayed for most of his life, but he is in control and confident. His twin brother continued down the path of anti-social behaviour, developed a drug problem, and has been in trouble with the law on several occasions.

Conversely, music gives high achieving students an opportunity to shine. In most subjects, a teacher is trying to cater for around 25 students with perhaps a learning range of four years either side of what is expected. Whilst most teachers will do everything they can within their power and time to help all students succeed, often the high achievers are working below their ability. In music, we teach students in small groups or individually according to their ability. This gives us a chance to challenge them. It is these students year in year out that grace the stage at presentation nights, accepting awards and dux for achievement in so many areas. A few years down the track, many are the doctors, lawyers, engineers and leaders in many areas in our society.

I have not provided any bibliographical references to specific studies that have been conducted, but I'm sure you will be reviewing the evidence and hearing from many other supporters of music. It is a shame that I have to constantly be advocating for the benefits of learning music, that almost anyone who is in the industry, or has learnt for a substantial period of time will testify too. We feel this benefit to our core. I find myself testifying to prospective parent of music students, principals in schools and prospective students, yet many don't seem to believe that the benefits are real without empirical evidence. I say each year at our music recruitment evening, "Despite the fact that your child will miss a couple of regular timetabled classes each week for music lessons, your child will most likely improve in their other subjects. They gain knowledge in most subject areas and learn to organise their time better". Nevertheless, I still have parents and teachers unable to accept this idea.

I constantly hear politicians making illinformed statements about teaching, with a naïve knowledge of how students learn, and how teachers teach. Perhaps some of these politicians would benefit from a few weeks in front of a class. Many, it would seem, believe schools are simply about recruiting people to fill jobs and stimulate and propagate an economy that cannot continue to grow forever. Schools are also about pastoral care and health. I believe that music and the arts helps people communicate successfully with other people. I believe, in many situations, these "cultured" people observe and care for their environment, resolve conflicts, refrain from crime and destructive behaviour and understand, reflect on actively improve their world.

I feel it somewhat ridiculous and insulting that I should be in this position to feel that I need to write this letter, as the value of music to me seems so incredibly important. Nevertheless, I implore you to fund instrumental music at a degree that is at least equal to its current level, or hopefully, at a much greater level. Furthermore, music should be funded in schools based on the strength of the music program, as the current model allows. Otherwise it allows principals to allocate the funding elsewhere at the loss of music programs. Also, teachers who have worked hard to build music programs and employ more music staff, will be forced to retrench these staff if the funding is allocated on a per school/per school population model.

Yours Sincerely,

Nick Lester

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