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Title:
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Date:
2019

Citation:
de Bruin, L. (2019). Music ed isn't a luxury. All of our children should be learning music..
Australian Association for Researcher in Education.

Persistent Link:
<https://hdl.handle.net/11343/311648>



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CATEGORIES

Music education, Nurturing creative and critical skills in schools, teaching creativity in schools

TAGS

Leon R de Bruin, music education, music education policy

October.21.2019

Music ed isn't a luxury. All of our children should be learning music

By Leon R de Bruin

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Learning music can increase thinking skills, enrich strategies for learning and creativity, and enhance connections across subjects. We keep discovering more reasons to foreground music education in our schools. So why haven't state governments acted to support music education and reform?

As I see it, music education has now been in the 'too hard basket' for at least a generation of Australian students. We continue to suffer a malaise in long-term governmental policy direction.



Lack of funding – heads in the sand

It's been 14 years since the *2005 National review of school music education* "recommended placing a priority on improving and sustaining the quality and status of music education in schools and providing sufficient funding to support effective music education".

The *2013 Parliamentary Inquiry into the extent, benefits and potential of music education in Victorian schools* made 17 recommendations to improve music education in Victoria. A future direction of the inquiry was for the "Victorian Government needing to develop a music education strategy to ensure that all Victorian students can have the opportunity to experience a quality school music education program." This too remains patently neglected.

The South Australian government is acting on compelling benefits by committing to a four-year strategy of investment and impact for long-term outcomes to lift music education in early-years classes, teacher upskilling and resource development in that state.

Yet, most states endure cuts to music education, and in Victoria government funding of instrumental music education has not improved in over 20 years. The number of schools and students in Australia with no instrumental music tuition available continues to increase.

Many Victorian students in government schools, along with students in other government schools around the country, do not receive a continuous, sequential and developmental music education.

When it comes to music education, there are stark differences in equity between public and private schools, and urban and rural centres nationally.

How music impacts wider domain learning

A growing body of evidence supports the developmental benefits of music learning. Findings from recent neuroscientific [research](#) have highlighted the benefits music making has on learners' brains. It helps develop:

- their capacity to work faster and more efficiently
- ability to tap into [multiple skill sets](#),
- [creativity](#), as well as
- [linguistic neural connections](#) between language and music that prime neural networks for learning.

A recent 2019 [Canadian study](#) of over 112,000 secondary students found that students who participate in music-related activities – particularly instrumental music between years 7-12 achieved significantly higher scores on science, math, and English exams in high school than non-musical classmates.



So parents' growing concern with maths and science education, instead of music, may be an ill-considered approach to their child's schooling. Responding to parental urge to encourage a maths/science *or* music learning, the study asserted:

the irony that music education—multiple years of high-quality instrumental learning and playing in a band or orchestra or singing in a choir at an advanced level—can be the very thing that improves all-around academic achievement and an ideal way to have students learn more holistically in schools.

How does music enhance learning?

- Learning an instrument and playing in a band enhances diverse modes of thinking and cognition. Music tuition is replete with **formative** feedback and assessment, where teachers continually assess and give feedback during the learning process. Consistent expert demonstration, feedback and dialogue develops a powerful learning relationship that promotes self-efficacy and motivation to learn. Research behind the Australian Teachers Toolkit asserts **formative assessment** can advance a students' learning by 8 months over their high school life.
- The learning environment and teacher dynamic greatly support **metacognition**, where students 'learn how to learn'. They develop reflective skills (thinking about what they have learned) and reflexive skills (responding immediately to feedback), behaviours and specific strategies for planning, monitoring and evaluating their learning *to get better*. Additionally, this cultivation of personal impulses and self-regulation of learning nuanced socially by band/ensemble activity can additionally **advance** learning by 7 months.
- It immerses learners in authentic interdisciplinary learning by integrating languages, maths, science and other arts in a sequential, creative, reflective and purposeful learning **adventure**.
- Music tuition offers a way for students to grapple with emotions and learn how to express them as they mature. They experience teamwork and an understanding of collective good and how to develop it, including goal-setting, motivation and ambition and how to attain it, and artistic creation for its intrinsic value.
- The "neurological benefits of music education and its contribution to personal and skills development" were showcased in the ABC TV series '**Don't Stop the Music**'. The support and development of this production was assisted by the Australian Society for Music Education (ASME), the peak body supporting music education and advocacy nationwide.
- Further, my **research** on the learning processes involved in acquiring improvisational musical skills shows how effective music education develops layered metacognitive capacities for learning and creativities across individual, teacher-to-student and group/ensemble activities.



Start purposefully and early

The late Richard Gill, renowned artistic director of the Sydney Symphony education program, asserted that music holds the key to providing a quality education system. General education can be greatly enhanced by music education, but impactful and habitual learning of music needs to start early.

Most Australian primary school Initial Teacher Education (ITE) courses include an average of 28 hours of music learning - this pales in comparison to training in music education in South Korea with 160 hours and Finland with 270 hours. In Finland music learning starts in kindergarten as an essential part of early childhood learning.

An increased allocation of funding together with a more equitable outreach to primary and secondary schools for instrumental music can start to turn the tide in government/private school inequity. The significance of music departments in private schools highlights their awareness to the benefits. Yet government attitudes seem to be that music, and the arts in general, are a luxury for the financially able – perpetuating a societal cognitive poverty.

Considerable research now asserts that a significant factor in improving student academic outcomes is a holistic approach to schooling where students are engaged and enjoying their learning. Music and the arts are central to such improvement and engagement with school and in wider society.

Much work needs to be done in developing innovative teaching skills and strategies in Initial Teacher Education, supporting teacher professional development, providing time in the curriculum and funding public school music programs towards sustainable and impactful music education.

Two decades of government inaction must end. Our students – the workforces of the future deserve better.



Leon R. de Bruin is an educator, performer and researcher in music education, creativity, cognition, collaborative learning, creative pedagogies, and improvisation, and works in the Faculty of Education, Monash University. He is ASME National Vice-President and co-editor of the Brill Publication: Creativities in Arts Education, Research and Practice: International Perspectives for the Future of Learning and Teaching, and co-author of Creativity in Education in the Oxford Research Encyclopaedia of Education

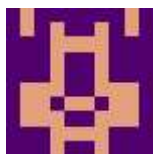
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12 thoughts on "Music ed isn't a luxury. All of our children should be learning music"



Brian Cambourne

October 21, 2019 at 7:30 am

Hear! Hear!. I hope you you can convince the policy wonks and politicians that learning music is as important a medium of meaning- making , critical thinking, and problem-solving as reading, writing, and maths.



Leon de Bruin

October 21, 2019 at 10:09 am

Thank you Brian,

Indeed our work as educators is to equip ourselves with the increasingly compelling research and educate not only our students, but parents, school councils, Principals, local, state and federal governments that music education needs improved funding and support.



Les Treichel

October 21, 2019 at 9:44 am

A great post that clearly enunciates the benefits to be derived from providing music education as an integral component of the school curriculum. Having witnessed the positive outcomes resulting from the South Western Queensland's Priority Country Area Program's (PCAP's) Instrumental Music initiative many years ago, I am unreservedly sold on the concept. Instrumental Music Instructors, the likes of Shaun Dorney, played invaluable roles in providing "country kids" living in rural and remote areas of the State, with opportunities to engage and through the cultivation of a "love of music", to further enhance their overall educational growth and development.



Leon de Bruin

October 21, 2019 at 10:12 am

Hi Les,

thanks, I am aware of the great work being done in regional Australia- and again, it needs sustained and rigorous support. Music making is a significant part of the cultural fabric that brings people together in rural communities.





Peter October 23, 2019 at 6:57 am

As a music business owner and fully trained music teacher (B.Mus.Ed) I try to support schools in starting music programs in cost effective ways. Yes, of course that means a way to make money for my business, but there is more at stake. Having taught music for a decade, I know what it does to students and how important it is. As such, the primary goal of my business is to support schools and parents in seeking out opportunities for music making for their students/children.

However, I find it incredibly difficult to convince principals of schools with no existing music programs to start one. Any thoughts on how more can be done to convince these good people to give it a shot? The research is there, but they obviously don't listen to it and care about it enough to make changes... I'm in NSW Australia.



leon de Bruin

October 27, 2019 at 10:43 am

Hi Peter,

the research is certainly becoming more compelling now, especially pertaining to literacy, meta-cognitive and self-regulatory benefits. Schools with successful music programs usually find it contributes greatly to the social and cultural wellbeing as well as connection to the wider community- They really are the heart and soul of a school community.

principals are quite data and research savvy – and some think they need a 'war-chest' to initiate a program. Positive and sustained commitment from Administration, teachers and supportive parents helps create the 'musical village' within schools that promotes ongoing success and impact..

Of course, financial commitment helps- but with falling NAPLAN results nationally we need to look at educational change that promotes critical and creative thinking in learners , as well as providing authentic experiences like learning a musical instrument that fosters emotional expression, resilience and more efficient thinking.

Finding schools that do have music departments and using them as exemplars may be a good way to start. Principals are quite sensitive as to making sure they cater to potential families by providing a thoughtful, holistic education.

Best wishes



Leigh Lazarus

October 26, 2019 at 1:55 pm

Down here in Tasmania, the public sector union is working to give primary teachers the same student release time as secondary, meaning primary teachers will be receiving more specialist time in near future. The problem is, our only university (UTas) no longer offers a course for those wishing to be primary music specialists. Apparently universities across Australia are also cutting courses and the number of qualified music specialists is decreasing every year as older teachers retire. Those stepping into primary music roles ("having a go") mean well but struggle without the scaffolding required in such a



demanding role, resulting in a less effective music education for the children and huge stress on the teacher.

**Gerrienne Brizan**

October 29, 2019 at 6:19 pm

Thank you so much for creating this compelling read that demonstrates the need for greater funding in music education. As a retired music teacher from New York I can tell you firsthand how important this is. I taught my first and second grade students all about the various genres of music with emphasis on jazz and blues. I taught them to scathing. We studied many famous composers and my chorus performed many pieces of music that ran the gamut in terms of genre and style. There is most definitely a correlation between learning music and meta cognition. Thank you for illuminating this subject. This was invaluable!

**Leon de Bruin**

October 30, 2019 at 10:28 am

Thanks for your response Gerrienne,
Just as there are many styles of music, effective music learning can look like many things! instrumental lessons, band, choir, improvising groups, Orff, Kodaly, creative soundscapes- it all has the capability to improve specific learning procedures, motivation, and the joy of making and creating something interesting!

**Debra Thompson**

October 29, 2019 at 9:55 pm

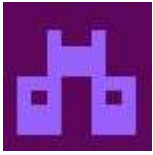
I totally agree,as an artist I feel it improves all skills related to being able to connect with the world around them. We need more art, music and other performance art. I volunteer to make this happen and see the joy in each child as we work to create. The way the Education systems are going it's like they want to produce robots, not productive human beings.

**Leon de Bruin**

October 30, 2019 at 10:31 am

Thanks for your comment Debra,
There certainly are elements of music learning that connect us with each other, with peers, teachers, community, with being artful, creative and responsive and empathic humans- a most valuable human quality!
keep spreading the love!

October 31, 2019 at 8:05 am



Mary Nelson Thompson had music all through twelve grades of school, and I took piano lessons for years!! I sang in the Church choir for sixty years!! I really still enjoy music even though I never became an expert!! I feel everyone needs to be exposed to music, especially in grade school!! I met my Husband when he came to direct the Church choir, and we were married sixty nine years until his death!!I will turn ninety in two months!!

Comments are closed.

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