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Author/s:
de Bruin, L

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Music education in Australian schools: An essential place for all students.

Leon de Bruin

Teaching in 2020 confronted schools with unique adjustments as they organised to engage students through COVID-19. These circumstances compelled all teachers to re-align their teaching, and instrumental music teachers utilised extensive creative and adaptive capacities to engage students in online learning for much of the year. Many schools maintained their musical learning communities and commitment to music education by trusting the creative and resilient capacities of music teachers, who continued to support weekly lessons, ensembles, performances and their community. Instrumental music teachers in Victoria reported operating on more relational levels, engaging in terms of insightfulness, empathy and responsiveness that maintained enriching student connection and well-being where many students felt isolated and disconnected (de Bruin, 2021).

Principals in Victoria, perhaps reflective of a national trend, found school events fostering school community and social cohesion had a significant impact on student learning (Wilkinson et al., 2020). Music, and indeed the arts, played a significant and vital role in maintaining connection, dialogue and communication with students despite remote learning. Music education provided an avenue for engagement, well-being and connection between students, peers, teachers and families at a time when the arts, and in particular music, existed precariously, as teachers traversed teaching remotely, at school, then after school, and then outside of classrooms to meet various state government requirements.

The role of music education in the school curriculum reflects the evolving and contested nature of music's place within state and national curricula. Instigated in Victorian government secondary schools in the 1960's, instrumental music in Australia has become an intriguing aspect of the creative /performing arts subjects. For many years designated as a specific standalone subject, it now resides within the arts 'collection' of subjects (ACARA, 2015). The 'arts' curriculum today is designed to induct students through practitioner lenses of inquiry that allow learning, teaching, and assessment to be authentic, dynamic and creative. A unique aspect of instrumental music is that students can access this subject via solo, ensemble or special investigation streams. Despite this well-conceived arrangement, music remains an underfunded aspect of educational opportunity able to be accessed by far too few students in Australia.

Music makes you smarter in music

We know playing music for its own sake can bring lifelong wellbeing, pride, identity and accomplishment. Music is a rigorous discipline and a joyous form of expression that enriches us through personal endeavour. Music promotes a complex knowledge system that synthesises language, mathematics, physics, history, aesthetics, ethical responsibility, artistry, and creativity. Our current educational landscape is littered with aims and outcomes assuming critical thinking that require neither criticism nor depth of thought. The cognitive and sensory perception it takes to drive an

instrument and make music with others, places critical thinking as an essential and constant skill required for enduring success in learners. All students deserve an education rich with these experiences.

First and foremost, learning music makes you smarter at *music*. However, the spin-offs of this contribute to students' cognitive, regulative, emotional and expressive capacities. They enrich not only music learning, but students' capacities to focus and learn and accomplish more deeply and effectively in other subjects.

Greater benefits of learning music

Learning an instrument and playing in any form of ensemble (band, orchestra, and all possibilities) supports students to become better learners. The time that they spend with an expert, skilled professional teacher supports students' capacity for goal-setting, self-evaluation, and planning of process and procedures - 'learning how to learn'. Notably, both the instrumental music method and environment contribute to hot-housing specific strategies and behaviour for planning, monitoring and self-evaluation of learning *to get better* (McPherson, 2012). This promotes developing maturity of cognitive and personal impulses in primary and secondary school students.

Engaging in instrumental music lessons also supports students' capacity to concentrate deeply and with focused attention. Whether accomplishing a simple melody, or creating spontaneously through improvising, music develops concentration because students work through learning processes with a music teacher who provides an interpersonally and cognitively turbocharged learning environment. Formative assessment is a national 'go to' for school professional development and student learning (Wiliam, 2010). While it may happen to a student in a class of 26 two or three times in a 40-minute lesson, recent research in Victorian instrumental music lessons suggests it may happen three to four times *a minute* in an instrumental music lesson (de Bruin, 2021).

Habits of mind

Consistent involvement in music contributes to learners sustaining the benefits outlined above. They cultivate '*habits of mind*' - dispositions that include persistence, critical thinking and communicating with clarity and precision, listening with understanding and empathy, creating, thinking flexibly and interdependently (Costa & Kallick, 2008). The importance of fostering adaptivity, creativity and practising habits like persistence and being open to processual learning is not new to educators. Sequential years of music learning immerses learners in such cognitively charged environments.

Compelling evidence

Sustained music learning develops students' capacity to be aware of their own concentration, resilience and focus and draw upon these cognitive tools across other subject areas (Corrigall, Schellenberg & Misura, 2013). Research has demonstrated that musical training leads to noted transfer effects in other areas like mathematical skills, creativity and interdisciplinary awareness, and languages via phonemic awareness (Forgeard et al., 2008). A recent 2019 Canadian study published in the *Journal of Educational Psychology* of over 112,000 secondary students found

that students who participate in instrumental music between years 7-12 achieved significantly higher scores on science, maths, and English exams in high school than non-musical classmates. So, school administration processes and parental choice which lead to a selection between maths and science education and music, may be an ill-considered approach to children's schooling. The researchers 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.* (Guhn, Emerson & Gouzouasis, 2020).

Music tuition provides powerful learning relationships and learning

Learning instrumental music from a qualified teacher and practitioner provides learning that is both unique and powerful. Music students grow accustomed to connecting with an adult expert in a culture of scaffolded learning that fosters goalsetting, problem solving and achievable successes. Instrumental lessons are one-to-one, or small group, in which the teacher models, scaffolds, coaches and formatively primes the student to think clearly and with purpose.

The instrumental lesson is one in which expert teaching is central to a relationship that may exist over the full 6 years of secondary school life. Education scholars' current emphasis on 'spaced practice' – the structuring of learning experiences so that students have the opportunity to receive instruction, perform a task, receive immediate feedback to improve their performance and then complete the task again is an endemic and enduring quality of instrumental music education (de Bruin, 2018; Dunlosky & Rawson, 2015). The music learning environment here is unique - both in lessons and ensembles. Reeves notes that:

Research shows the value of deliberate practice across fields such as music: ... children and adults need deliberate practice in order to achieve their objectives ... The components of deliberate practice include performance that is based on a particular element of the task, expert coaching, feedback, careful and accurate self-assessment, and – this is the key – the opportunity to apply feedback immediately for improved performance. (Reeves, 2010)

In fact, instrumental music tuition applies much more than feedback. It fosters refinement of students' capacity for accurate *re-calibration* of thinking that is more educationally effective than mere repetition – the prevailing method of learning engineered in classes of 20 or more students. Further, music immerses learners in authentic interdisciplinary learning by integrating languages, maths, science and other arts in a sequential, creative, reflective and purposeful arrangement of learning. The unique learning environment found in instrumental music tuition aligns with recommendations about excellent teaching that :

makes the learning intentions and success criteria transparent, having high, but appropriate, expectations, and providing feedback at the appropriate levels ... is critical to building confidence in successfully taking on challenging tasks. Educating students to have high, challenging, appropriate expectations is among the most powerful influences in enhancing student achievement. (Hattie, 2011, p.53).

Music teaches students to think in interdisciplinary and collaborative ways

Music brings together the individual with the collaborative; experiencing teamwork and an understanding of collective good and how to develop it, shared goal-setting, motivation and ambition and how to attain it, and artistic creation for its intrinsic value. Learning is further enhanced through music ensembles that allow cross-age and peer to peer learning, and concomitant belonging and identity within a musical community striving to create art together.

Music offers rich connections and supports students' capacities for 'syntegrating' deductive, hypothetical, expressive, embodied and aesthetic/affective abilities and dispositions. Learning music threads together mathematical possibility, probability, languages, art, aesthetics, emotion and creativity in the one lesson (Dewey, 2006; Viladot & Cslovjceksek, 2015). Music's capacity to enhance STEM/STEAM initiatives activates students' logical thinking with creative and conceptual thinking (Burnard, 2012) that enriches a school's sophistication of interconnection and whole-school creative ecology (de Bruin & Harris, 2017).

Eisner (2002) argued that a curriculum with music in it provides connection, meaning and sense-making of our place in the world. Music promotes this transformability of skills and knowledge. The educational benefits lie not just in musical performance, but in the processes of synthesising knowledge and cultivating learning skills and dispositions. The benefits are not just for 'in-school' learning, but apparent and effective in the development of a person over their lifespan.

Critical times for music education

Despite compelling research asserting these benefits, instrumental music in schools has become increasingly impoverished, with both Australia's 2005 *National Review of School Music Education in Australia* (Pascoe et al., 2005), and the 2013 *Victorian Parliamentary Inquiry into the Extent, Benefits and Potential of School Music Education* (Parliament of Victoria, 2013) both remaining patently ignored. The numerous recommendations to improve music education, including a development strategy to ensure greater access, equity, and organisation for students allowing students the opportunity to experience a quality school music education program, remain abandoned. Instrumental music funding has remained static for over 20 years leading to a decline in the number of schools offering any instrumental music tuition at all. Regional network hubs are now defunded and disbanded.

Many Australian students are unable to access a quality and sustained music education, particularly those emphasised as vulnerable or disadvantaged in national educational goals (Mpartnwe declaration, 2019). For example, such inequity in access is visible in the stark differences between music education offerings within public and private schools, or within urban and rural locations. Given the overwhelming evidence for the academic, cognitive, emotional and social impact and benefits of music education for students, the urgency for redressing this inequity is clear.

Once a vibrant aspect of many school cultures, government indecision and misunderstanding of music education and how it works is reflected in the ad-hoc and 'low-rent' approaches to music education. Longstanding visionary droughts have reduced primary and secondary teacher education programs to barely minimal capacity. Lack of implementation and support knowledge for principals within an

increasingly self-autonomous landscape means administrators – who already have a tough job – make short-term economic choices that do neither music education nor their school culture any good. The prominence of music departments in private schools highlights their clients' academic, cultural, and community awareness of music education benefits, yet even these are under threat in this current climate. Government attitudes seem to be that music, and the arts in general, are a luxury for the financially able – perpetuating a societal cognitive poverty. This is exacerbated by myopic policy decisions that allow schools to employ unqualified music staff perpetuating a systematic devaluation of music - and the school. It is time to end the malaise in long-term governmental policy direction and inaction toward music education reform, and to ensure that music is seen as central to core teaching and learning. The cultural imperative of developing and recruiting specifically trained instrumental music teachers as part of an expansionist and wide-scale access to instrumental music and regional infrastructure needs to be addressed, understood and acknowledged. The proven benefits of access to an instrumental music education need to be acted on. If we are to develop adaptable, innovative and dynamic thinkers in our schools, instrumental music is a central and significant catalyst. Education for only the chosen few should be relegated to the past. All our students should have a right to the opportunity for a quality music education.

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Dr Leon de Bruin is Lecturer in Music at the University of Melbourne, Conservatorium of Music, where he teaches preservice instrumental music teachers. An educator in secondary schools for over 20 years, his research work spans music education, pedagogy, cognition and creativity in education. He is a staunch advocate for quality music education in Australia, particularly teacher and principal education in music and the arts. 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. This article appears in *Professional Voice 13.3 The new basics*.