

# Children's participation in music: connecting the cultural contexts – an Australian perspective

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*The cultural contexts of home, school and community all have important parts to play in the music education of children, but at present in Australia, these three entities are insufficiently connected on a number of fronts, not the least being an understanding about the purpose(s) of young people's engagement with music. This paper puts forward two specific proposals for action aimed to help build linkages among the three cultural contexts and ensure young people's on-going engagement with music. These proposals, which call on the education sector to assume leadership for action, have implications for policy makers, school personnel, as well as parents, individual artists and community arts organisations.*

## **Introduction**

Music education in Australia is in many respects at a significant crossroads. One of the contributing catalysts for renewed advocacy and action was the debate held in Australia's federal parliament at the beginning of 2003, about the significance of music education in advancing 'additional benefits' to the overall academic and educational development of children (Commonwealth of Australia, Hansard 10 Feb, 2003). It was in many ways the vehicle that launched the Commonwealth Department of Education, Science and Training's (DEST) call for a National Review of School Music Education. The review, due to present its report in mid 2005, is interested in investigating the current quality of teaching and learning of music in both primary (from ages 5 to 12) and secondary schools (from ages 12–18). It aims to provide examples of best practice both in Australia and overseas, along with a set of recommendations, key priorities and principles for the development of future approaches and directions to improve the quality of teaching and learning of music in Australian schools (DEST 2004: 2).

There has been much research on the less than ideal state of (especially primary) school education in Australia and elsewhere, and multiple reasons provided to explain the situation.<sup>1</sup> Explanations generally revolve around inadequate support mechanisms for music education and mention the insufficient time given to music education in undergraduate teacher education programmes, the lack of confidence of generalist classroom primary teachers to teach music and the lack of status/importance of music in the school curriculum, vis-à-vis the more 'useful' subjects of mathematics and language/literacy. (Refer for example to Australian-based studies such as: Gifford 1993, Jeannerret 1994, Russell Bowie 1993, Stevens 2003.) It would appear that the state of affairs described above is not unique to Australia. In a recent large-scale study that included almost 1,500 students in 21 schools in the United Kingdom, Lamont *et al.* (2003) also found that

despite the very positive attitude towards music by teachers, there still existed enormous resource and time pressures faced by school music programmes and these were exacerbated by the difficulty incurred in recruiting suitably qualified and skilled staff to teach music.

Proposals for change and improvement put forward by several of the Australian studies cited above, especially in the form of, for example, increased resources to prepare and employ music specialists at the primary school level have on the whole received a lacklustre response by governments and educational bureaucrats. The latter has been hardly surprising given the current educational environment which sees most discipline areas, not only music, presenting strong arguments to governments for increased class time and resources for their disciplines. For example, science education in Australia (which is experiencing a downturn in the number of students choosing to study the 'hard' sciences such as physics), has mounted vigorous claims for more science education in schools; those involved in social education continue to lobby for more curriculum time and resources to address the growing problems of drugs, bullying and other significant aspects of children's emotional and social well-being; and physical educators are calling for more funds to sponsor actions to combat childhood obesity. Within such an increasingly competitive environment, it becomes progressively more difficult for music to be able to argue its value in young people's education, especially in terms of its intrinsic merits (a sound argument nevertheless and one which should continue to be firmly put to the 'decision makers'). Governments and the community at large, influenced and informed by competency and outcomes-based approaches to curriculum development, tend to respond more favourably to extrinsic arguments for music education rather than those that espouse the intrinsic merit (Temmerman, 2003).

Music educators, increasingly aware of the political reality, would do well to continue to articulate the value and complementary nature of both rationales. The latter includes the long-recognised substantive contribution that music education can make to the development of unique aesthetic and intellectual abilities, as well as the acquisition of relevant life skills such as: working with others and in teams; time management; problem solving; decision making; goal setting; personal planning; oral and written communication; critical thinking; cultural awareness; self-directed learning; interpersonal skills, and self confidence to communicate in a range of settings.

The more immediate issue, however, is to ensure that today's young people have better access to and opportunity for participation in music activity. Even if significant changes in practice were to occur and the amount of time and resources devoted to the development of skills, understanding and knowledge of primary teacher education graduates in the teaching of classroom music were increased, and school music became an adequately resourced, mandated, stand-alone subject in all primary schools in Australia, the positive effects of such improvements would take some years to manifest themselves.

### **Children's participation in music**

The issue of young people's level of engagement with and commitment to music in and out of school has been the subject of a number of studies over recent time. Perhaps amongst the most comprehensive have been those undertaken by Hargreaves and colleagues at the University of Roehampton, Surrey, and O'Neill and colleagues from Keele University in

the United Kingdom. Hargreaves and Marshall (2003) examined approaches, attitudes, aspirations towards and levels of engagement with music, for primary and secondary teachers and students. O'Neill's (2002) longitudinal investigation with 684 school-aged children focused on factors likely to impact on young people's decisions to engage or disengage with musical activities. One broad theme to come out of this research, which very pleasingly shows that students' overall attitude towards school music, in the United Kingdom at least, is more positive than it was five or so years ago, is the distinction that continues to exist between the music that students encounter in school, compared with those experienced outside school. Students consider both types important, but perceive this distinction in terms of school music being 'serious', formal, principally teacher driven and based largely on the Western classical tradition, while outside school music is seen as more informal and confined mainly to pop/rock/dance styles and closely linked to young people's sense of developing personal identity.

The distinction between music at school and music outside school was found to be particularly discernable for secondary school students who, for example, 'associated home listening with enjoyment and positive emotional moods and school listening with learning and information' (Hargreaves & Marshall, 2003: 237). In an earlier study, North *et al.* (2000: 263) found that adolescents listen to and play pop rather than classical music for a whole host of reasons including: 'to enjoy the music; to be creative/use their imagination; to relieve boredom; to help get through difficult times; to be trendy/cool; to relieve tension/stress; to create an image for him/herself; to please friends; and to reduce loneliness'. On the other hand, reasons given for listening to and playing classical music were to please parents and teachers. A recent longitudinal study in Australia by McPherson and Renwick (2001), also reported similar findings in relation to young children's interest in instrumental tuition.

None of this is surprising, but as Hargreaves and Marshall (2003) found, young peoples' engagement with and level of motivation toward their music making depended to a substantial extent on the level of ownership they had over it. In simple terms, where the two types of music were integrated into the school music programme, it followed those students' levels of enjoyment and engagement with music was higher. O'Neill (2002) reached similar conclusions and her findings also point to the importance of students having a sense of choice and control over their music making. The latter was especially true in relation to choice of instruments, for which there was found to be a substantial mismatch between what children wanted to learn to play (piano and flute for girls, drums and electric guitar for boys), and what they actually played at school (recorder). In fact there was a disparity also between children's attitude toward their involvement in listening, dancing and singing activities in school, as opposed to their involvement in these activities out of school. Level of enjoyment and motivation associated with engaging in all these activities was substantially lower for school-based participation. O'Neill (2002: 14) points to 'the importance young people place on choosing their own musical instruments, music and musical activities'. She also found that one of the key determinants of young people continuing to play an instrument was the support they received from parents. Furthermore, her study discovered that opportunities for young people to play in musical groups out-of-school, impacted positively on their continued involvement in musical activities, especially in the crucial transition years from primary to secondary school (O'Neill, 2002: 15–16). The comprehensive report on *Australians and the Arts* (2000), prepared for the Australia

Council by Saatchi & Saatchi Australia, similarly found a strong relationship between individuals' on-going involvement in and value of artistic practice and the level of parental encouragement they were afforded as a child (Australia Council, 2000: 209–214). The report concludes that:

A supportive family that encourages children to be involved in the arts and finds ways to help them do this outside of school is more likely to have a positive effect on the attitude that person has towards the arts than whether they enjoyed the way the arts were taught at school. . . . While these findings certainly support the role of education in shaping attitudes towards the arts, they also suggest that the arts sector should help parents encourage and support their children in the arts from an early age. This means providing parents with both the incentive and the access . . . (Australia Council, 2000: 213).

### **The cultural contexts**

The debate about the function of music education in schools and the 'fit' between it and the musical lives of young people beyond the school was recently taken up by Sloboda, (2001). He contends that 'classroom music, as currently conceptualised and organised, may be an inappropriate vehicle for mass music education in 21<sup>st</sup> century Britain' (Sloboda, 2001: 252). Sloboda suggests that the diverse music provisions available beyond the school environment may in fact be able to provide a more effective source of music education. He proposes that although the school music curriculum has been broadened to include styles and activities beyond the classical artworks, it still prioritises the latter as representations of 'the pinnacle of musical value [and] deeper appreciation and understanding of such artworks is the most important (and universally applicable) aim of music education' (Sloboda, 2001: 249). He goes on to claim, however, that at present it would be difficult to amass stakeholder agreement around this dominant paradigm. Sloboda imagines a different role for the school in his proposed 'wider more inclusive view of music education'. He does not propose doing away with school music because, as he states, it 'is the one aspect of the provision that we can guarantee all children receive', rather he sees its central function to be the provision of an 'anchor-point where diverse experiences may be reflected upon, integrated and coordinated' (Sloboda 2001: 253).

In 2003, a project was commissioned by the Music Council of Australia to provide information about and determine trends in the provision of school music education in Australia (Stevens, 2003). Although available data proved to be either incomplete or ambiguous for a number of key questions posed, it nevertheless provided a broad-brush picture of trends. The following summarises some of the project's key findings as they relate to the primary school sector.

While some very good examples of music practice exist in primary schools in Australia, it is a fact that at this point in time, New South Wales is the only state that has mandated compulsory music education at the primary school level. There is an assumption that students in the other five states and two territories are recipients of music instruction of some type whether it be classroom, co-curricular in the form of instrumental lessons or extra-curricular such as choir, band, or school concert practice. The same variability of offering extends to the actual hours of instruction recommended, which ranges from

30 minutes to 1.5 hours per week and is (it would appear), determined to some degree by the availability of staff to teach music, meaning consistency and frequency of delivery can in some cases be erratic. Most states, however, do not provide prescribed time requirements.

Extra-curricular music-activities vary so widely that no discernable patterns emerge in terms of what is offered, by whom and how much. In relation to who teaches music at the primary level, again the situation is very diverse from state to state and even within a state, especially between metropolitan and rural, wealthy and less wealthy, government and non-government schools. In some schools, music specialists with formal qualifications in music and music education are employed. In others, the responsibility rests with the generalist classroom teacher, or with teachers who self-identify an interest in, willingness or ability to teach music. The arrangements for music activities beyond the classroom include paid tutors teaching small groups or individual instrument tuition. In some situations, there is heavy reliance on parents and community volunteers to assist in managing extra-curricular activities such as choir, bands and ensembles.

The trend toward integrated arts rather than music-specific syllabi has also translated in some schools to a combined arts education curriculum approach and examples of practice where music is not (one of the arts 'chosen' to be) studied.

All of this is to say, there is real room for improvement in the provision of music education at the primary school level in Australia. A recent quote provided to a teacher educator by one of his undergraduate generalist primary teacher education students expresses an unpleasant but recurrent reality, namely, 'nobody hates music but an awful lot of people hate school music!' (Dillon, 2004: 17). Research conducted by Temmerman (1993, 1995), with both young children in Australia and the United States and with university teacher education students, revealed that school music experiences certainly leave a lasting influence on people's lives, but not necessarily always for the better. Where dissatisfaction was expressed, it was most associated with lesson content that was perceived to be useless (for example filling out notation sheets); with activities that focused on passive (listening to 'classical' music), rather than active music making (in the form of playing instruments); and with teachers whose attitudes appeared to demonstrate lesser tolerance towards students who lacked in knowledge and understanding of traditional/classical music forms (Temmerman, 1993: 62–63). What this and a more recent research study by Rosevear (2003: 146–151) (albeit conducted with Australian secondary school students) reveals is that students have an inherent interest in practical music activities, especially those that incorporate opportunities for creativity and are conducted in social contexts.

The challenge for school music according to Lamont *et al.* (2003) is to develop the interest students may have in music beyond the classroom, by recognising the valuable contributions their experience with this makes to their overall participation in and enjoyment of music making. Where, for example, opportunities were presented for students to have contact with 'real', professional musicians and local community events such as music festivals, student attitudes towards in-school music were positively impacted. North *et al.* (2000) suggest that music educators would do well to expand their view of music education in relation to the needs it so ably appears to fulfil for young people out-of-school. 'This new broader view . . . may provide a direction in which music teachers can re-define the role of their subject' (North, *et al.* 2000: 270).

A national survey conducted by the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) in 2003, found that 29% of young people aged 5 to 14 years (of a sample of just over 780,000 children), were involved in at least one cultural activity out of school. The most popular activity was playing a musical instrument (17%), followed by dancing (12%). For boys the most popular activity was playing a musical instrument (13%), while dancing was the most popular activity for girls (24%). Children aged 9 to 11 had the highest overall participation rate in a cultural activity of 36%. Engagement with out-of-school music includes both music encountered in the home, which as already commented on, may be affected by parental influence, and music that occurs in what Heath (2001) describes as the 'third environment'. This is the learning environment provided by the diversity of community organisations that serve a real and complimentary role to classroom learning and achieve learning outcomes that schools often do not have the time to foster. Heath goes on to state that within the current context of concern over educational quality, there has been:

...an intensified attention to the multiple sites and ways of learning beyond schools. Recognising the incentive to learning that engagement in out of school activities in science, arts and community development projects provides, educators see these opportunities for practice as essential to improving academic motivation and achievement (Heath, 2001: 11).

The picture that emerges from the wealth of available data about the arts in Australia is that there is a very productive, diverse and creative population of practising artists. A substantial number of the latter already contribute to school music education programmes. (Refer for example to the multitude of Australia Council reports on public attitudes to the arts, the arts economy in Australia as well as arts industry statistics, at <http://www.ozco.gov.au/arts>). Amongst the more well known exemplars of such connections, are the established music education programmes featuring concerts as well as teaching kits/resources provided by the Sydney and Melbourne Symphony orchestras (especially through their 'Meet the Music' concerts and 'Close Encounter' workshops with musicians from the orchestra), Musica Viva in Schools (which presents over 2,000 concerts to over 370,000 children in regional and metropolitan schools), the Australian Opera and the Musician/Composer-in-Residence programmes. What is probably less known, especially at the primary school level and amongst teachers responsible for classroom music programmes, is the mass of community-based music making that occurs at the local level, and how to tap into these as a resource to complement and/or enhance what goes on in the classroom.

### **Connecting the contexts**

A central issue for all involved in the musical education of young people, is how to connect the three contexts of the school, home and community to enhance positive attitudes towards music making, to build on existing opportunities to engage in music making, and to bring together the wealth of music activity, resources and expertise. The question 'why connect?' is well answered by the fact that music plays an important role in young people's lives and that school, home and out-of-school musical experiences all contribute in important, differing ways. According to data collected by Saatchi & Saatchi Australia:

There is little evidence that relying solely on the school system will bring about positive change, even if more children are not only exposed to the arts in school, but also enjoy that exposure. . . . what is required is an integrated approach based on cooperation and information flow involving the arts sector (individuals and organizations), parents, students at school, the school system itself as well as extra-curricular activities that provide young people with opportunities to pursue their interests within and outside the school system. (Australia Council, 2000: 213)

Conceivably, what appears to be most lacking is an organisational structure or mechanism to bring together in a meaningful way the abundance of expertise, skills and good music practice that exists in the various sectors at the individual artists, arts organisations and school level. Two recent initiatives operating in Australia that could serve as models for the bridging and building of school–community music education partnerships, are the Australian Business Arts Foundation *Mentorship Program*, and the Young Artists Mentoring Program (YAMP). The first matches volunteers from the business sector with people working in the arts industry. This mutually advantageous arrangement has seen arts practitioners develop much needed (self identified) business skills, and business people develop greater understanding and awareness of the arts industry. Amongst the areas of business expertise shared have been aspects of: market research, team leadership, health and safety, intellectual property, budget and strategic planning. The second initiative sees talented young artists (most in their early 20s), receive a career ‘kick-start’ through participation in a formal mentoring transition from school to work programme. The latter allows emerging young ‘artists’ the opportunity to learn from established arts workers and develop their networks and career pathways in the arts industry, while connecting established arts practitioners with talented emerging artists.

The underlying tenets of these two mentoring programmes (and there are other such examples operating across Australia) could be used to inform collaborative ventures between in- and out-of-school music activities and would positively serve all participants. For school *students*, potential outcomes could include: widening and enriching their own musical experience, including performance opportunities, by working with musicians and composers; enhancing their understanding of the ‘professional’ world of musicians, including musicians’ work practices and learning about available employment opportunities. For *teachers*, such partnerships would augment their school music programmes; help complement their own skills base with that of practising musicians; allow a mutual sharing of expertise (and in some cases facilities); and provide teachers with professional development opportunities. The latter could include musicians mentoring teachers about the production, presentation and distribution of musical work, about the creative process, and about how to access and work with available community, industry and government resources. For *musicians*, the occasion to work in schools could provide them with opportunities to trial and receive critical evaluation about their musical ideas; receive guidance about the process of writing grant applications and/or media releases, and/or reports about their work; and not insignificantly provide them with in-kind support in the form of access to school library facilities, office space, equipment, materials and administrative support. Perhaps one of the key benefits for musicians, who often work in isolation for much of the time, would be engaging with and making a difference to a community that includes current and future arts audiences and arts practitioners. Finally,

it could be anticipated that for each of the participant groups, such partnerships would promote understanding and respect for the others, given that musicians and school music educators operate (by necessity) so differently. Colgrass, an American composer, recently commissioned by the American Composers Forum, to write a short piece for a middle school band in Toronto Canada, relayed a perfect example of this. His reflections on the experience of working with the students and their teachers, revealed the significant learning and understanding that occurred for all involved in the project. He consequently concluded that 'most of these children will not become professional musicians, but as music lovers and taxpayers, they will one day be asked whether the arts are worth paying for. Their taste for music could well be swayed by positive early personal experiences with a composer . . . what a wonderful notion' (Colgrass 2004: 23).

The first of two specific proposals for action to connect the cultural contexts, is for educational policy makers to consider the inclusion of a statement within the Australian curriculum frameworks along the lines of that found in the National Curriculum of England, accompanied by practical and useful examples of how to institute meaningful connections between in- and out-of-school music activities. In England, the National Curriculum has as part of its aim for music education the 'forging of important links between the home, school and wider world' (Qualifications and Curriculum Authority (QCA) 2002). In the Australian Arts frameworks documents, while reference is made to students participating in and critiquing a diversity of community music activities, no mention is made or acknowledgement given to the bringing together of in- and out-of-school music experiences.

An examination of the current (eight) Australian Arts syllabus documents published by each of the states and territory education authorities, revealed remarkably similar rationales and expected student learning outcomes. All contain three common broadly based 'purpose' themes, namely: recognition of both the aesthetic and functional purpose of the arts; the arts as significant aspects of everyday life; and the unique contribution of the arts to lifelong learning. There is an expectation that students will all achieve a range of Arts learning outcomes that involve them in: creating and presenting 'original' works to express and communicate a range of ideas and feelings; identify, interpret and transform artworks; use a range of skills, techniques and technologies; respond to, reflect on and evaluate the ways in which artworks are made and used; and understand the role of the arts in cultural and historical contexts. It would appear that although no specific reference is made to bridging in- and out-of-school music activity, none of the stated purposes or expected learning outcomes negate the expansion of a partnership amongst the locales of home, school and community in the delivery of music education for primary age children – a partnership which has the potential in fact to greatly enhance the achievement of the stated outcomes. While the inclusion of a statement alone, cannot guarantee that improved connections among school, home and community music making will occur, it does serve to both formally identify and endorse the forging of links amongst these three entities as an explicit goal.

The second proposal for action is the development of coordinated collective action to ensure effective planning, managing, implementing and reviewing of school–community/industry partnerships. This does not necessarily mean the establishment of a central entity to achieve the aforementioned, but rather clearer identification of

which stakeholders (including music organisations and associations, practitioners, schools, government, and those involved in teacher education) will assume responsibility for realisation of the various partnership components identified above. It does, however, rely on the setting up of a reliable communication network that links the stakeholders together. The main objective of this network would be to ensure that stakeholders effectively communicate about and share with each other relevant information and resources that provide tangible exemplars of how schools, families and the music community are working together to provide a stronger, shared, quality music curriculum. The successful achievement of this objective will be dependent on support from all individuals and groups within the sector.

The actual school–community partnerships could be forged through the classroom music programme and/or the various extra-curricular music activities already taking place in schools such as school orchestras, rock bands, brass bands, string groups, wind ensembles, vocal ensembles and chamber ensembles. In many respects, participating schools could and should assume a significant leadership role in the establishment and implementation of the partnership process. Three immediate ways in which they could do this are: first, through the integration from the outset of out-of-school music experiences and participants into the school curriculum planning process; second, by the identification/nomination of school-based personnel to ‘champion’ and coordinate the development of collaborative efforts; and third, via regular communication with all communities including students’ home environment, in order that all participants acquire and pass on a sense of commitment to and value of both in- and out-of-school music activities.

### **Some concluding comments**

One certainty made evident in recent research conducted with young people about their musical experiences, is that they especially enjoy participation in practical music-making activities with others, both in and especially out of school. It is also evident that present examples of music education practice across the Australian primary school sector are uneven in quality in terms of what is taught, by whom, for how long and with what resources. Like Hargreaves and Marshall (2003: 207), the author is of the opinion that:

It is in everyone’s interest for educators to capitalise on the massive importance that music can have in young people’s lives . . . this is best accomplished by encouraging them to think of music as something within the reach of all, rather than as a specialised activity: that everyone can be a ‘musician’ at some level.

This might mean a mind-shift for some involved in delivering music education, especially those who believe that to be able to value and appreciate music, one requires an understanding of the vocabulary, history and technical elements of the art form and this is best provided by formal school education processes that principally focus on certain musical genres and periods. There is no doubt that the latter is true if one’s ambition is to participate and contribute to the art-form as a ‘professional’ (educator, musician, composer . . .), but for most people, their level of engagement and involvement with music will be less formal and mainly serve the purpose of enjoying the creative activity of others as a consumer. To ignore, or to merely pay lip service then to the musical lives of the majority

of young people is elitist. This is not to imply that all children should not be provided with as comprehensive an array of music education opportunities as possible, which extend their music knowledge, understanding and skills.

The responsibility for effective music education and enhanced life-long value of artistic practice lies with the education and music sectors, in tandem with the home. As mentioned in this paper, there are already examples of school and community music links that are building bridges between young people's in- and out-of-school music experiences, but these need to be mainstreamed and supported, as well as more widely communicated.

In closing, it is anticipated that through widely communicated, shared and coordinated collective action, the ultimate objective of better ensuring young people's on-going engagement with music will be enhanced.

### Note

- 1 It is both recognised that there is inconsistency in provision of music education across Australia and acknowledged that there are many examples of good practice. (For further information about some specific examples, refer to [www.mca.org.au/music.playforlife.htm](http://www.mca.org.au/music.playforlife.htm) and *Music Forum* (2004), **10**, 55–56).

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