

## Editorial

As we rapidly approach the end of another year, and think about Christmas and being with family members, we often remember the people and events that have had an impact on our development. One of the things that I remember most strongly is the routine established in our household which entailed an early start in the morning to practise music. I played the piano and my brother the violin. With our mother a professional musician, learning to play an instrument was an imperative and practice likewise. For us this meant rising by 6 each morning and doing an hour of practice before a quick breakfast and the usual rush to be ready for school. One of the enduring impacts for me has been the impossibility of sleeping in beyond about 7.30am, but there are others of much greater importance. I will refer to these as this editorial unfolds. The topic, as you might have guessed, is music and arts for children and young people.

There is an intuitive sense that engagement with music, drama, art and other creative activities is beneficial for the development of children and young people (Australia Council for the Arts, 2010). Indeed, the report of the Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority (ACARA) entitled *Shape of the Australian Curriculum: The Arts*, released in August 2011, highlights the importance of engaging children and young people in arts activities, listing music, drama, dance, visual arts and media arts as the five core areas required in the school curriculum. The authors recommend the number of hours of arts engagement and teaching that children and young people at each stage of their education should receive. However, it is likely that the time awarded to arts activities at individual schools, together with the nature of activities and quality of teaching, varies considerably despite the ACARA guidelines. This is due to a range of factors including availability of teaching staff, facilities and resources. Worryingly, the Music Council of Australia (2009) indicates that a lack of confidence and knowledge of the arts among teaching staff is hindering the breadth and depth of learning from early childhood right through the school years.

An intergenerational ignorance is present in Australia with a tendency to consider arts, particularly classical forms of music, opera and dance, as elite and almost 'sneer-worthy'. This probably underlies the findings of the Australia Council for the Arts (2010, p. 28) which found that 34% of Australians agreed with the statement 'The arts tend to attract

people who are somewhat elitist or pretentious', 35% agreed with the statement 'The arts are OK, they are just not relevant to me', and 20% agreed with the statement 'The arts are not really for people like me'. Some 39% of people also thought the arts were too expensive, which is ironic given that the cost of participating in arts activities is considerably less than engagement in elite sport or even attending some sporting events!

I haven't had children at school for quite some time now, and so don't have first-hand knowledge to speak from, but I have lived in close proximity to a large school for 14 years and observed the students coming and going, and heard the nature of activities that take place during and after school hours. Exposure of school students to classical music appears limited, with just the occasional student seen carrying a musical instrument. Activities like folk dancing and marching bands are largely absent from government schools, though children in private schools may fare much better in this regard. And while I wouldn't wish on children hours of solitary practice on an instrument not of their choosing, I'm certainly concerned that we have generations of children and adults who are largely uninformed and unaware of the arts and are missing out on the range of benefits they offer.

This is of concern because what is offered to children by way of exposure to the arts is very constrained by the expertise and preferences of adults. The Australia Council for the Arts (2010, p. 66) studied patterns of influence and found that parents/child carers constituted only 20% of those who encouraged or influenced participation in the arts, with teachers constituting 11%. I have, on a number



of occasions, heard teachers say that the kids aren't interested in classical music, or singing or dancing – they want to listen to pop music (for want of a better description), but I suspect it is us adults – as parents, teachers and business owners—who are to blame. It is adults who stand to gain financially from the sale of popular music, and adults who make decisions about the music played in supermarkets, shops and in public spaces such as malls. It is parents who are responsible for the nature of their children's experiences of the arts at home, and teachers who miss opportunities to expose children to the broad range of music and arts activities at school. It is adults who, subtly or otherwise, engender negative attitudes to the arts and fail to make arts activities engaging, fun and valued. This has two effects: it denies artistically gifted children access to arts education and it makes children who are able to demonstrate they are gifted in the arts stand out as different to their peers. But I digress into one of the enduring impacts of my early life – that of being increasingly the odd one out amongst my peers because I preferred harmony and melody to discordant crashing and thumping (my biases are already showing!) and was able to tolerate silence – another issue to which I will return in due course.

Turning to the research that supports the idea of exposing children to a broad range of arts, one only has to check the internet for sites on early childhood development to find references to studies that demonstrate a positive correlation between arts and cognitive, emotional and social development. For example, the Early Childhood Music and Movement Association ([www.ecmma.org](http://www.ecmma.org)) and Play for Life Music ([www.musicplayforlife.org/index.php/research/music-early](http://www.musicplayforlife.org/index.php/research/music-early)) quote studies on their websites. Further, a submission by the Music Council of Australia (2009) supports the inclusion of music in education, citing research linking experience with music to language development. The submission notes that studies carried out as long ago as 1941 have described the benefits of music in children's lives.

My intuitive sense, along with that of others, that children and young people benefit from engaging in arts activities, music being one of these, is supported by a number of studies which, in recent times, have included perspectives from neuroscience. It is suggested that humans are 'hardwired' to music and "that musicality is a natural ability of the human brain (Koelsch, 2012, p. 245). Koelsch argues that there is little difference in the perceptions of infants between music and spoken language, and that speech development and language rely on the perception of pitch, tone, melody, metre, rhythm and timbre. Thus the rhymes and rhythms of traditional chants, songs and poetry have not been used without reason across both generations and cultures, and have the effect of creating a repertoire that may become part of important cultural rituals such as greetings, farewells or prayers.

Also important in speech development is learning to give emphasis, for instance to syllables or to make a point, and to convey emotions through changes of voice tone: soft/slow

or loud/fast. Listening and experiencing classical and jazz music provides children with such variations, as does group and interactive singing. Kohl (1997–2012) states that the process of creating art is important as it 'expands a child's ability to interact with the world around them, and provides a new set of skills for self-expression and communication' (para. 2). She describes engagement in arts activities as promoting problem-solving skills because the child must learn to use the medium of music, dance, drama or colour, for example, to make meaning. This may be shared with others or be meaningful only to the child; either way, the capacity to make meaning is essential for communication, the development of language skills and for social relationships. Kohl also comments on the development of fine motor skills, and learning social and emotional control.

The issue of self control loomed large in my childhood experiences of learning to play the piano, playing for my teacher and later for an audience. There was the anxiety associated with presenting oneself on stage, and later the anxiety about remembering the music as I was expected to play from memory unless in an ensemble or accompanying a soloist. The anxiety had to be managed and I remember the build-up to concerts followed by the elation of having played the best I could and then the 'letting loose' at the party afterwards. The skills inherent in performance are much the same regardless of which art form is being practised, and each has its specific expertise which is displayed to others. In this process children also learn about the giving and receiving feedback.

There is a further issue – that of silence – to which I promised to return. There are now professionals in early childhood development who decry the use of constant background music and I would add to the critics of background music that prevents conversation and/or is discordant and aggressive. We live in a noisy world in which many of us expect to be constantly entertained. Silence appears to have become threatening to many people who are uncomfortable with more than a few seconds of quiet. This is evident in classrooms and in the early interviewing practice of students learning to counsel. There seems to be a need to break the silence rather than relax and use the moment for contemplation. In music, silence is part of the music itself; it has meaning as part of the whole. A phrase comes to an end, a very soft melody drifts into silence expressing loss, or perhaps a resounding chord at the end of a work has created drama. Whatever the instance, the accompanying silence is essential to hold the moment and the meaning. In dance, music and drama children learn the skill of using silence and stillness to make meaning and this is likely to have long-term effects on meaning-making and understanding, and being able to use sound and voice skillfully.

I referred earlier to feeling different to my peers and this leads me to comment on the difficulties faced by children and young people in care. Most children in care sense they are different because of their background and their immediate context, but do we offer them opportunities to express

this in a variety of ways? We usually expect children to talk about their difficulties, but singing, playing, dancing and art are also ways of expressing feelings. As Koelsch (2012, p. 247) states: ‘Music can communicate states of the *intra-individual world*’ (italics in the original) which doesn’t rely on the use of words. Even if we don’t place value on the use of arts for expression of emotions for those in our care, we should at least give regard to the findings of research that has found:

- a significant link between early music instruction and cognitive growth, particularly measurements of abstract reasoning ability related to visual imagery and sequencing strategies as shown by the SB Bead Memory subtest (Billhartz, Bruhn, & Olson, 1999);
- a positive correlation between engagement in music lessons and intelligence, with ‘longer duration of musical training predictive of better intellectual functioning’ (Schellenberg, 2006, p. 464) and drama lessons that ‘facilitate adaptive social behaviours’ (p. 465);
- that music can be pacifying or consoling and people are able to locate suffering or pain in larger cognitive or spiritual perspectives through using the medium of music (Carr, 2008); it may also be conducive to order or balance due to the effect of harmony and proportion – a reflection of rational order (p. 22), as well as providing a pathway to religious experience;
- that homeless youth (Nyamathi, Slagle, Thomas, & Hudson, 2011), children with disability, young people with mental health issues and people with disability and disadvantage generally have been found to benefit from engagement in the arts; the Choir of Hard Knocks (Choir of Hope and Inspiration: [http://www.choirofhopeandinspiration.com/?page\\_id=3](http://www.choirofhopeandinspiration.com/?page_id=3)) is one of many programs that have resulted in extraordinary outcomes; and
- that dance provides the opportunity for ‘artistic expression, recreation, and exercise’ as well as serving to pass on ‘the traditions and values of a community’ (Dale, Hyatt, & Hollerman, 2007, p. 107).

Some of the early findings about exposure to classical music and cognitive development, such as the alleged ‘Mozart effect’ described by Rauscher and Shaw (1998, cited in Ćrnĕc, Wilson, & Prior, 2006), have proved unreliable when further scrutinised. Nevertheless, Ćrnĕc et al. (2006), in their review of the research, conclude that exposure to a musical environment in infancy may be crucial in helping children to ‘explore movement, emotions and thoughts with others or alone using music’ and that ‘the core value and importance of music [lies] in musical ends’ (p. 589).

I suggest we need to go much further in Australia, both through school education and in our attention to children and young people in out-of-home care. We need actively to offer activities that engage disadvantaged children in lis-

tening to a range of music from ancient to modern, and opportunities to participate in a range of other arts from the drama of puppetry at home to understanding art in galleries and museums. We need to assess children’s potential in the arts and ensure they receive the tuition and opportunities required to learn such things as playing an instrument or singing in a choir. As Fredricks, Alfeld-Liro, Hruda, Eccles, Patrick, & Ryan (2002) suggest, by the time children reach adolescence they are able to articulate the social and individual benefits of involvement in the arts. However, it is usually too late for those who were not given the opportunity and access to tuition in childhood. We also need to rethink the nature of the ‘arts diet’ being offered to ensure that traditional arts receive more than lip service and are considered from the point of view of the developmental and health benefits they offer.

On a different note, but one that acknowledges the importance of mental health and well-being of children, there was considerable adverse, inaccurate and sensational publicity in the Fairfax press earlier this year concerning the multidisciplinary ‘expert working group’ whose task was to provide recommendations for a ‘3-year-old check’. Professor Frank Oberklaid, who chairs this group, will provide a full commentary early in 2013 when the final report of the group has been published. However, he generously provided the following information to *Children Australia* to ensure that professional staff are not misled by reports in the media. Frank writes:

The aim was to take the existing 4-year-old health check, which has been widely criticised, and replace it with an evidence-based expanded check which in addition to physical health would include aspects of a child’s development and social-emotional functioning (behaviour). It is actually not anything really new – rather a formalisation, scientifically considered, of what should be offered routinely to all pre-schoolers so parents can be given support and guidance in a timely way if and when issues are beginning to emerge. The existing Medicare item number will be transferred to the new check, which will not be compulsory, though parents will be encouraged to avail themselves of it.

The expert group are aware of all of the issues in relation to screening, including labelling, resource implications etc that have been raised by colleagues. This is NOT a mental health screening process, is NOT designed to make psychiatric diagnoses, and has no danger of increasing the number of children on drugs! Unfortunately the media, being what it is, has given what we believe to be undue prominence to the views of a visiting American psychiatrist.

The Expert Advisory Committee is yet to complete its recommendations – but will be considering all aspects as part of this process, including what components need to be put in place to support the recommendations, e.g. consultation with stakeholders, training, implementation issues, providing parents with appropriate information, referral pathways, communication strategies, etc.

As I have mentioned, we are not naïve to the ‘risks’ of such a process. However, we do know that the early years are important in setting longer term trajectories (including later mental health problems), that prevention and early intervention is the way to go, that many parents of preschool children have concerns, and that many of these concerns can be addressed in a timely manner in primary (and secondary) care setting before they become entrenched and so much harder to manage.

We will be making recommendations to government in the next couple of months, with anticipated introduction in early 2013.

It is unfortunate that, yet again, the media chose to take important issues for children and young people and make mileage out of them for their own purposes; we will look forward to hearing directly from Frank about the next steps to be recommended and acted upon.

And now to consider the papers in this issue of the Journal, which are drawn from very different fields of endeavour. First, we present a paper written by Carmen Tetley which concerns the Hague Convention of 25 October 1980 on the Civil Aspects of International Child Abduction. This is a multilateral treaty, which seeks to protect children from the harmful effects of abduction and retention across international boundaries by providing a procedure to bring about their prompt return. However, as Carmen demonstrates, there are some concerning issues about the application of the Treaty and outcomes for the children concerned. This is followed by an opinion piece written by Pam Schultz who has an interest in the analysis of discourses, particularly headlines in the media. She examines media discourses related to family and criminal court proceedings, suggesting that contested spaces are evident in the ways that the media use information, including concepts of time. In particular, when parenting and custody issues are under scrutiny in the family court, time is used in ways that tend to simplify the complexity of debates, affecting people’s perceptions at both community and political levels and acting as a simplifying mechanism that does not translate to achieving the best interests of children.

Danielle Tyson and Thea Brown address the topic of filicide in the third article presented in this issue. This is a confronting subject for many people and there is little research to draw upon when dealing with the aftermath of filicide. The authors discuss the issues relating to the definition of filicide and the dearth of research available to assist practitioners. While it can be argued that the numbers of filicide deaths each year in Australia are relatively small, this article concludes that the problem should be addressed urgently as there is evidence that some 25 children are killed by one or other parent every year in Australia and as yet we do not know why or how to prevent these deaths.

The fourth paper in this issue has been written by Kate Alessia and Louise Roufeil on the subject of inter-country adoption. Their study suggests that parents who adopt chil-

dren from overseas face complex issues, but concerns about behaviour might dissipate over time, and that additional preparation and supports might prove helpful to these families.

Finally, an article by Janette Kostos and Catherine Flynn describes a qualitative study sharing the views of four young people who experienced father absence in their formative years. The participants of this study have revealed some of the difficulties they faced growing up in single-parent families, and have provided valuable insight into their views of the world as a marginalised and relatively powerless group. The participants talked about their high levels of risk-taking behaviours, their perceived lack of accessible support and the ineffectiveness of their chosen coping strategies.

In compiling this issue we have included, for the first time, an Obituary Notice. This is to honour, in some small way, the life and work of Joanne Holmes (27 July 1954 – 15 May 2012). Joanne was a special person to so many people and leaves behind a legacy of empowerment – of family members, friends, colleagues and those with whom she worked in her roles as teacher and social worker. Her death earlier this year was a sad loss to us all and particularly to the Aboriginal communities of Victoria and beyond.

It is our pleasure to congratulate Emeritus Professor Freda Briggs, AO, of the University of South Australia, who is one of the longstanding supporters of *Children Australia*. An award-winning scholar and passionate advocate for abused children, Freda is the author and co-author of some twenty books on child protection and education, and has just published a definitive guide for educators and professionals on how to keep children safe. Titled *Child Protection*, this latest publication was launched by Ita Buttrose, patron of victim support, in Adelaide in October 2012. It has been endorsed by Robyn Layton QC, former Supreme Court Judge; Rick Sarre, Professor of Law at the University of South Australia; and Sue Vardon, former CEO of children’s services in South Australia. This book, targeted at all those working at the coalface, provides a comprehensive guide to child abuse and child protection. Freda’s book is available for purchase online at [www.jojopublishing.com](http://www.jojopublishing.com).

In closing, remember we are keen to hear from you if you are able to carry out reviews of manuscripts or have an idea for an article. *Children Australia* is now going to an international audience and covering an increasing number of topics.

Compliments of the Season from all of us involved in the production of *Children Australia*.

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