An education for the soul

Too many pupils miss out on the well-attested advantages of making music in class

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THE benefits of a music education for young people are increasingly clear. So many scientific studies point to the conclusion — self-evident, surely — to anyone who has learned an instrument — that music is inhere-ently good for the mind, body and spirit.

I am yet to come across a reputable study that says music is itself is harmful! As a Mozart effect of academic failure, crushing self-esteem and antisocial behaviour. Generally the report card on music is all good news, even if the deeper relationship between music and wellbeing is still to be fully understood.

A recent study into general arts education was done by researchers at the University of Sydney, and published last year in the Journal of Educational Psychology. The study looked at 643 primary and secondary students from 16 schools across two years, taking into account their involvement in arts activities at school, at home and in the community.

Students who are most actively involved in the arts — music, dance, visual arts and music — were better motivated in their academic work and had a strong sense of satisfaction in their lives. The report emphasises the quality of arts activities, not simply the quantity — it’s the doing, playing and creating — that’s important, not just being a seat-sitter.

And positive effects were recorded when young people are actively at school, according to the study’s authors.

For Michael Anderson, one of the study’s authors, the implications for arts and education policy are interesting. "This study provides new and compelling evidence that the arts should be central to schooling and not left on the fringe." More facts and figures are provided by the Music Trust, which is running a campaign for music in schools. The lobby group is headed by Richard Letts, former executive director of the Music Council of Australia.

Music appears to prime students for learning, especially in the case of young children, as it activates and integrates activity across many parts of the brain. Studies suggest it can enhance students’ ability for abstract thinking, visual and spatial awareness, verbal understanding and motor skills. Learning a musical instrument has positive side-effects that may benefit numeracy, literacy and concentration, as well as learning management.

Music is an outlet for personal expression, but also encourages students to co-operate and co-operate with other especially in group activities such as school bands and choirs. These activities may give students a reason to stay at school, and generally help enrol student morale and the school’s reputation in the community.

Music is one of the arts subjects in the national curriculum now under review. But the Music Trust argues that much depends on how the music curriculum is taught. In its campaign called The Full Deal — which aims to pass the standard and distribution of music education — it points out some shortcomings in the practice of music teaching. Australian primary school teachers, on average, receive just 17 hours of music training in their undergraduate degree, barely enough to equip them for any sophisticated form of class music-making. By comparison, student teachers in Finland — probably the world’s leader in music education — receive up to 350 hours of music instruction.

The statistic reflects poorly on past decades in Australia, when students were hourly paid 200 hours of music.

Independent schools do much better, where specialist music teachers are employed in per cent of classrooms. Only 31 per cent of government schools have music specialists. According to one survey, 63 per cent of government schools have no classroom music at all.

There is some excellent work being done around the country by arts organisations to give children access to quality music.

Since 1981, Musica Viva in Schools, run by the chamber music presenter, has given concerts for hundreds of thousands of students. Each year its special events, with trained musicians and educators, and teachers at schools, reaching about 240,000 students. Its Music Staff Room program offers music resources and training for teachers.

Other organisations, such as the Melbourne and Sydney symphony orchestras and several smaller concerts, are also doing terrific work to get students access to music at school.

The Victorian government has recently responded to a state inquiry into music education, which found that the quality of school music varies widely and is low in poor or rural areas are more likely to fail.

The inquiry recommends a systematic approach to music, with proper teacher training and support.

Local body the School Music Action Group says the government has agreed to the report’s 17 recommendations in full or in principle, and should make the plans part of the state education policy, backed by ongoing research and evaluation.

The Music Trust’s campaign includes a petition addressed to education ministers calling for universal music education, delivered by specialists with skill and imagination. Such Blassa, Richard Tognetti and Richard Gill have supported the campaign, and 65000 signatures have been added since it was launched.

"Let’s, Director of the Music Trust, says every Australian student should have classroom music lessons for 45-60 minutes a week through the school year.

"That could be provided to every child without breaking the bank," he says.

There is no reason why Australia couldn’t be a great musical nation, just as we are a great sporting nation.

A music education doesn’t detract from important lessons in reading, maths and the sciences, but may enhance students’ capacity to learn. Music teaches everything: music — and the arts generally — helps produce balanced individuals. Imagine the nation’s future with such a well-rounded populace."