The National Review of School Music Education: What is the present state of music education in schools?

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Abstract
In November, 2005 a landmark government report entitled the National Review of School Music Education was released. The report found that there was a great variability in the quality of music education in schools. It was acknowledged that although there are some excellent music programs in schools, there is “cycles of neglect and inequity” and greater support is required for teachers and the subject itself. The report acknowledged the influence of recent curriculum developments in Australia including integrating the arts into one subject. The paper will discuss issues arising from the report and how it has impacted music in Australian schools twelve months later.

Background
The National Review of School Music Education: Augmenting the Diminished was released on 21 November, 2005. It was an investigation into the state of music education in Australian schools. Chaired by Professor Margaret Seares AO Deputy Vice Chancellor of the University of Western Australian and with a steering committee of eight, the report has been referred to as the Seares Report.

The Honourable Brendon Nelson, MP, Minister for Science and Training and the Honourable Rod Kemp, Minister for Arts and Sport announced the Review in March, 2004. Funding was provided by the Australian Government Quality Outcomes Programme. (Seares et al, 2005, p.1) The need for this investigation was prompted by a “widespread recognition that music is an important part of every child’s education. There is also a general perception that Australian school music education is approaching a state of crisis” (Seares et al, 2005, p.2). There have been past reviews in music education in Australia. For instance the Stevens Report (2003) was a study of music in schools and displayed the need for further research in this area.

The Review discusses how it is designed for the benefit of individuals and organisations including:

- Commonwealth and State Territory Ministers of Education and Ministers for Arts and Culture;
- Australian Government Departments such as DEST, DCITA;
- State and Territory Departments of Education and Training, and Departments of Culture and the Arts;
- State and Territory Assessment Authorities (ACACA);
- School sectors and individual schools;
- School Principals, Administrators and Leaders such as School Council and School Management group members;
- Teachers;
- Parents;
- Musicians and those who support music education including those in the music industry;
- Professional Associations, especially those providing for music education;
- Music conservatoires and similar institutions of learning;
- TAFE, University and other education sectors particularly those involved with pre-service and in-service music teacher education; and
- The Australian community. (Seares et al, 2005, pp.2-3)
Individuals and music interest groups were invited to provide submissions for the Review. There were two forms of submissions the first being open submissions up to five pages in the style of pro-forma petitions. Here 4,586 open submissions were received as well as 180 letters of support. The second form was the structured submission where respondents answered set questions. (Seares et al, 2005, p.53) There were 1,170 structured submissions with a total of 5,936 submissions. A common theme in the submission was “the belief in the value of school music for all students” (Seares et al, 2005, p.ix). Submissions were invited from February to 30 April 2005. There were four aspects which participants were requested to focus on:

1. The current quality of music education in Australian schools;
2. The current status of music education in Australian schools;
3. Examples of effective or best practice in both Australia and overseas; and
4. Key recommendations, priorities and principles arising from the first two aspects (Seares et al, 2005, p.53)

The Review also investigated schools in Australia to provide a snapshot of the current state of music programs. This was known as the National Survey of Schools. Surveys were sent to the principals of 525 schools (Sample Schools) where they were asked to respond to a set of questions about music programs at their schools (Survey of Schools). Music teachers at these schools were also sent a questionnaire (Survey of Teachers). There were an additional 147 schools who were sent a survey after the submission process. These were catagorised as “effective music” schools (Music Schools). In all 672 schools, around Australia were contacted as well as visiting an additional 20 school sites. (Seares et al, 2005, p.64) The response rate for the survey was only 47.6% and as not all sections of the survey were completed the Review stated that the “findings need to be treated with caution” (Seares et al, 2005, p.ix).

**The National Review of School Music Education**

The National Review of School Music Education has provided a snapshot of music education in schools in Australia at the beginning of the twenty first century. In the Foreward letter to Nelson, Seares stated that although it “revealed some fine examples of school music programs, they also reveal cycles of neglect and inequity which impacts to the detriment of too many young Australians, particularly those in geographically and socially disadvantaged areas” (Seares et al, 2005, p.i). The “status of music in schools is patchy at best, and reform is demonstrably needed, with strong support from your government” (Seares et al, 2005, p.i). Pertinent issues raised include scope and delivery of curriculum documents, the provision of services of music to schools, participation and achievement data, accountability, partnerships in provisions and teacher education. (Seares et al, 2005, p.xxv)

There are six sections in the Review followed by extensive appendices. Part 1 introduces the Review and provides a rationale for the study, Part 2 is the literature review, Part 3 provides a current snapshot of music in schools, Part 4 discusses the Guidelines of Effective Music Education developed by the committee, Part 5 provides issues, challenges and recommendations and Part 6 is the conclusion.

**Part 1 - Introduction**

Part 1 outlines the three areas of the Review which were:

- The current quality and status of music education in Australian schools;
- Examples of effective of best practice in both Australia and overseas; and
- Key recommendations, priorities and principles arising from the first two aspects. (Seares et al, 2005, p.1)
Music is classified as one of the arts which comprises dance, drama, media, music and visual arts. (Seares et al, 2005, p.6) The Review found that the delivery of music in the primary schools was usually by generalist teachers whereas in the secondary schools it was by music specialists. (Seares et al, 2005, p.12)

Part 2 – Contexts for the Review
The literature review comprises Part 2 and has divided the information into common themes. These were:

- The context of the arts as a learning area;
- The value of universal music education and community expectations and commitment to it;
- The accessibility, equity and sustainability of effective music programmes;
- The leadership roles of governments and agencies;
- Understandings about the current quality of music education in Australian schools with a focus on the appropriateness of current school music activities to meet student needs;
- Role of music teachers and the effectiveness of teacher preparation through pre-service courses and their ongoing professional development;
- Teaching approaches necessary for school music education in the 21st century;
- The role of co-curricular music in schools – instrumental music and vocal music;
- The importance of technology to contemporary music education;
- Recognition of the impact of Australia’s diverse and complex cultural factors on school music including cultural diversity, musical giftedness and talent, music and students with special needs, and gender issues in music;
- Adequacy of curriculum guidance and support;
- Levels of resourcing and provision; and
- Impact of music and arts organisations on the status and quality of school music. (Seares et al, 2005, pp.35-36)

Part 3 - A Snapshot of School Music Education in Australia: The Current Situation
Part 3, *A Snapshot of School Music Education in Australia: The Current Situation* is a discussion of the submissions and surveys. As explained there was a “stark variation in the quality and status of music education in this country” (Seares et al, 2005, p.63). The Review found that 66% of schools offered music to all students, 16% to certain year levels, 24% as a music elective and 6% to gifted students. The quality of music programs was variable according to 50% of respondents with 21% believing it was high, 13% satisfactory and 16% poor. (Seares et al, 2005, p.55)

The low status of music in schools was believed to be hindering the quality of music education. Factors which influenced the status of music in schools included; quality of teacher education, teacher issues, resources, opportunities for professional development, community support and a sequential and balanced curriculum. (Seares et al, 2005, p.63) The Review found that from the schools sampled, 80% offered classroom based music, 61% instrumental music and 63% had a choral and vocal program. Here, 55% of music classes were given by music specialists, 41% by itinerant specialists, 36% by classroom teachers, 29% by teachers with an interest in music and 8% by parents. The situation was brighter with music schools where 92% offered classroom music, 96% instrumental music and 90% offered choral and vocal music. (Seares et al, 2005, p.65) In the music schools, 88% of music was taught by music teachers, 72% by specialists, 24% by classroom teachers, 8% from interested teachers but none by parents. (Seares et al, 2005, p.65)

A worrying statistic was that 9.4% of the sample schools did have a music program at all which calculated into an estimate 900 schools around Australia. (Seares et al, 2005, p.64)

The qualifications of teachers were discussed in the Report. It was found that 59% of music
teachers had music education qualifications, 75% had music educations, 79% had teaching qualifications however 13% had no teaching qualifications and 20% had no music qualifications. Sixteen percent of the teachers surveyed were new to the school and 57% had been teaching at that school for over five years. (Seares et al, 2005, p.66)

Teacher training and pre-service education had suffered a time reduction. The implementation of the Curriculum Standards Framework (CSF) had resulted in music being absorbed within the arts category. “In many cases music has been submerged in an Arts Learning Area construct. As a result teachers emerging from these programmes indicate that they lack sufficient knowledge, understanding and skills and the accompanying confidence to teach music” (Seares et al, 2005, p.78). There was a perception that the quality of music teachers was poor “linked to a large perception that teacher training in music education is inadequate at present” (Seares et al, 2005, p.60).

**Part 4 – Guidelines for Effective Music Education**

Part 4 is the *Guidelines for Effective Music Education*. There were two key questions which the guidelines were designed to answer:

1. How will we know if and how students are learning music?
2. How will we know if Australian schools are maximising that music learning? (Seares et al, 2005, p.81)

From this a series of guidelines were designed under five categories which were guidelines for; student learning, inputs to music education, teachers and classrooms, the broader community supporting music in schools and a discussion. They “are intended to blueprint the future of music education in Australian schools rather than be used in looking back over the shoulder at the past” (Seares et al, 2005, p.104). The Review presented the guidelines in two columns entitled Focus for Learning and Key Questions.

**Part 5 – Issues, challenges, and opportunities for School Music Education**

Part 5 is a discussion of the issues, challenges, opportunities, strategic directions and recommended actions. The recommendations were grouped into issues which were; status; access and equity leading to participation and engagement; teacher education; curriculum policy; support services; partnerships; facilitating effective music in schools and accountability. (Seares et al, 2005, p.105)

The Review identified what was unique about the work of music teachers. They recognised the diversity of work involved including face-to-face-teaching as well as after hours work including ensembles, performances, camps, excursions, public relations, looking after music equipment, resource management and when applicable managing itinerant staff. (Seares et al, 2005, p.135)

An issue was the decline in music education in schools during the past two decades. This was attributed to; the crowded curriculum; curriculum reform, lack of training, erosion of system support, lack of funding, high cost of music education, music is seen as extra-curricular, tyranny or distance and differing philosophies of what constitutes an “appropriate music education” (Seares et al, 2005, pp106-107).

**Part 6 - Conclusion**

Part 6 is the conclusion. The Review painted a bleak picture on the state of music in Australian schools. Music in schools had diminished, suffered a loss of identity and the status had diminished. (Seares et al, 2005, p.142)

**Press Releases**

The press releases on the Review discussed the issues with the state of music in Australian schools.
Westwood’s (2005) article in *The Australian* discussed how music in schools was “disturbingly inadequate”, 10% of Australian schools had no music at all and in 66% of schools the standard was “variable, poor or very poor” (Westwood, p.3) Dr Nelson affirmed that “state governments had starved schools of funds for arts and sport” and that “he would present the report to state and territory education ministers and write to every school principal”. The concluding statement was how a “national summit on music education next year would discuss the report’s recommendations.” (p.3)

Green’s (2005) article from *The Age* gave a bleak view of music in Australian schools stating “[m]usic education is in crisis and Dr Nelson commented how access to a music education should not depend on “where you live, your circumstances or the economic means of your family” (p.4). A music summit would be convened in the first half on next year and the opposition education spokeswoman Jenny Macklin urged Dr Nelson “to act now rather than wait until next year” (p.4).

**Future Directions**

The Review stressed that urgent reform was needed in music teaching in Australian schools. Twelve months down the track, very little has been implemented which has been attributed to a number of factors. The timing of the release of the Review in late November slowed the momentum for change with the winding down of the academic year and the school holidays a month later. At the end of January Dr Nelson’s portfolio was changed to Defence in which his departure together with many of his support staff involved in the Review has had a detrimental effect on implementing reform. Julie Bishop has been appointed the Minister of Education after being Aged Care Minister.

Organisation including the Australian Society for Music Education (ASME), Music Council of Australia (MCA) and Australian Music Association (AMA) have worked on trying to move forward on the Review.

There have been articles published on the Review which have provided exposure to the document. In the *Education Review* Dagarin and Temmerman discussed the issues associated with the Review. Dagarin (2006) stated how the Review “has indeed caused a stir, but the stir consists of a messy scramble to either duck, divert or stand up and grin” (p.6). Another issue was “squabbling over funding and responsibility”. As a result of the Review Teaching Australia has directed funding of $100,000 a year over four years to the Australian Society for Music Education so that they can offer awards to outstanding music teachers.

Temmerman (2006a) focussed on the issue of pre-service education and stated how the teacher trainees “responsible for teaching music in very many primary and middle schools in Australia are generalist classroom teachers, who quite openly admit their own lack of confidence and competence to teach music well” (p.7). She further commented how this is attributed to the severe cuts in the number of hours devoted to music education. In the last ten or so years: “four-year degrees replace 110 to 120 total contact hours of music-specific education with a single creative arts (not music-specific) subject totalling just six to 12 hours of contact time” (p.7). As a result many graduates feel overwhelmed and consequently don’t teach the subject at all.

She also published an article entitled “Improving school music education: We all have a part to play” in *Professional Educator*. Here she discussed the current state of music education as explained in the Review, the issue of quality music teaching, music education and life skills and collaborations with school, community and university collaborations. Under life skills, she brought in recommendations from *New Learning: A Charter for Australian Education* namely broadening the environment in which one learns to include home and community environments and beyond factual content so that education is “durable, transferable, autonomous and generic” (Temmerman, 2006b, p.38). Under school, community and university collaborative partnerships, through the
integration of the arts “strengthen the link between abstract pedagogical theory and the practical content” (p.38). Using the resources available can also have a positive effect on music in schools.

At the end of August, approximately 160 people participated in the National Music Education Workshop. The key recommendations of the Review were discussed which were grouped into four themes; teacher education - training and professional development, curriculum policy and content, curriculum implementation and partnerships in music education. (Montague, 2006, p.1)

Tina Broad who participated in the workshop discussed the outcomes. She discussed how for the recommendations to be effective, it is curriculum provision and access that will have the most impact. “The issue of music’s place in the curriculum needs to be resolved and school leaderships need to be more effective in supporting music learning...(Broad, 2006, p.29).” She continues on to state “What we need most is great teachers – lots more. (Broad, 2006, p.29)” Through curriculum reform and an increase of music teachers, the state of music in Australian schools would notably improve.

Conclusion
On the first anniversary of the Review, there has been an increased awareness of the state of music education in Australian schools. It is hoped that in the future, the situation will improve so more students can experience the joy of music.

Acronyms
ACACA – Australasian Curriculum Assessment Certification Authorities
AMA – Australian Music Association
ASME – Australian Society for Music Education
DCITA – Department of Communications, Information Technology, and the Arts
DEST – Department of Education, Science and Training
MCA – Music Council of Australia
TAFE – Technical and Further Education

References