

MUSIC EDUCATION: RIGHT FROM THE START

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Anita Collins delves into her area of expertise – neuro musical research - and gives an explanation as to why quality musical education for all students is an essential part of their academic development ...

THE TEACHING VALUE OF MUSIC EDUCATION

For primary teachers, music education is just one subject area on a long list of subjects that must be fitted into the timetable, effectively taught and appropriately assessed. However, for the majority of primary teachers, teaching music can be a very daunting task.

Why is it daunting? The overwhelming reason that I hear from primary teachers in NSW sounds something like this: “I’m not musical” or “I can’t sing”. These reasons are not about the curriculum, the need for equipment or the need for teaching resources. These reasons are centred on the primary teacher’s confidence and competency to make music themselves.

This is nothing to be ashamed of or embarrassed about. This is something that needs to be addressed promptly, for both NSW students and NSW teachers. We need to make sure that every NSW teacher feels confident to teach music in their classrooms and has the necessary personal and professional skills and knowledge to do so.

Importantly, this step will lead to teachers feeling a greater sense of efficacy in their everyday work. More than this, research has shown it will also lead to improvements for students in their ability to learn, their general wellbeing, self-regulation skills and sense of safety, and capacity to engage in learning. Teaching music in the classroom is not just teaching students how to sing in tune and read the notes on the board, it is about teaching HOW to learn.

TEACHING STUDENTS HOW TO LEARN

There is a field of research that lives predominantly in the neuroscience area called neuromusical research. This field used music listening and music learning to understand how the human brain grows and learns. In the mid-1990s, researchers using then new technology that could monitor brain functioning in real time somewhat

accidentally discovered that listening to music engaged more parts of the brain simultaneously than any other activity.

In the early 2000s, neuroscientists used music listening as a way to understand how the human brain processed all information; made, sorted and retrieved memories, and how the brain healed itself after traumatic injury (Peretz & Zatorre, 2003)¹. Music was a vital tool in this process as it showed that the auditory processing network processed all sounds for their musical qualities, and our auditory processing network is our largest information gathering sense.

In the late 2010s, the same researchers began to look at children between the ages of 6-12 years who had learned music. Why did they focus on this group of students? The reason was that musically trained students seemed to have brains that learned faster, were more consistently reliable, had greater connectivity and brain density, and displayed greater synchronisation (Hallam & Himonides, 2022).² This final aspect was possibly the most important one for teachers to understand – students who have brains that exhibit higher levels of synchronisation take less time to incorporate new knowledge, are better at problem solving, can maintain their attention for longer, and can manage frustration in their learning far more effectively (Miendlarzewska & Trost 2014 p279).³

The obvious question arose, was it just the more able and high-performing students who were attracted to music learning; those you might expect to be exhibiting the higher levels of brain function? In short, was it the smarter students who happened to be learning music who were the ones being researched? The answer was no. Randomised control studies were conducted using music learning as the experiment, and improvements in brain structures and functions were observed in all students (Martin-Requejo et al, 2024 pp1 -15).⁴

The neuromusical research is about to move into its third decade, and the findings have been replicated and rigorously examined. The consensus is that music learning has a small to moderate effect on a student's ability to learn effectively (Guhn et al, 2020 p308.)⁵; it can mediate disadvantage and trauma (Hille & Schupp, 2015)⁶, and can significantly support learners with ASD (Sharda et al, 2018 p231)⁷, ADHD (Puyjarinet et al, 2017 p11550)⁸ and Dyslexia (Hornickel & Kraus, 2013 pp3500-3504)⁹.

It follows that, with this new neuroscientific research pointing to music education as both an enhancement and intervention tool *for all students*, shouldn't we be ensuring that every NSW student is receiving a quality, ongoing and sequential music education? Such a focus could have the potential to improve literacy and numeracy levels, help teachers to manage complex learning needs in their classroom, and – possibly the most deeply needed improvement – to make the act of teaching easier, more enjoyable and even more fulfilling.

WHAT IS HAPPENING WITH MUSIC EDUCATION IN NSW?

The answer is many things are happening in NSW.

In June 2024, the NSW parliamentary [Joint Select Committee into Arts and Music Education and Training](#) was established and calls for submissions were made. The Committee is specifically inquiring into the quality and effectiveness of music education and training.

In July 2024, just as the new Creative Arts Syllabus hit the stands, the first public hearing was conducted with key education, music industry, music providers and philanthropic experts appearing before the Committee. A second hearing was held in late August. On 29 November 2024, the Committee is due to release its final report into the current state and future needs of music education in NSW government schools.

The results from this Inquiry will be important for every NSW teacher who has ever thought or said, "I'm not musical" or "I can't sing". This Inquiry could prove to be a game-changer: recognising that primary schooling should be much more than numeracy and literacy rankings; actively encouraging and providing tailored, substantial support for classroom teachers; enhanced

opportunities for specialist music educators; classroom resources, and improved facilities.

We know that every primary teacher can be supported to bring quality music education to their students with all the benefits that this offers.

The Inquiry is one significant development, delivering the baseline knowledge to inform change is another. And where better to go for this information than to go direct to those in the know: primary teachers themselves.

The Music Education: Right from the Start initiative, in collaboration with the Australian Council for Educational Research (ACER) and the NSW Department of Education, ran the NSW Primary Teachers Survey. This survey resulted in a statewide picture of the current state and future needs of NSW teachers in the area of music education. The results from this survey are in the process of being publicly released. The aim is to support the NSW Department of Education and school principals to get a better handle on your experience and circumstances for the express purpose of better supporting you in the classroom.

This survey was not for the shelf; it was an opportunity to inform change. It was released into NSW schools during Term 3 2024, and as a NSW primary teacher, you might have seen a request from your school principals to complete the survey. The survey took less than 20 minutes and could have been your contribution to improving not only music education in NSW, but also the use of a tool to improve an enormous number of issues that teachers face every time they enter their classroom.

It is hard to think of a time when you had the Parliament, the government, the department, Teachers Federation, industry, researchers, educators, organisations like ours and those we work with all in sync on the value of a quality, sequential and ongoing music education – and willing to look at what it's going to take to deliver on the promise. It's early days, but it's a pretty good start.

ENDNOTES

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Dr. Anita Collins is an acclaimed educator, researcher, and writer renowned for her groundbreaking work in the intersection of brain development and music education. She is the creative force behind Bigger Better Brains, an initiative aimed at bridging the gap between neuroscience and practical music education globally.

Recognized for her leadership as the inaugural Creative Chair of Learning & Engagement at the Melbourne Symphony Orchestra, Anita drives innovative educational programs and was instrumental in the acclaimed “Don’t Stop the Music” documentary.

Through her influential writings and advocacy, including the seminal book “The Music Advantage,” Anita continues to shape music education policy and practice, ensuring its integration from the grassroots to national strategy levels.

