

REVIEW TO INFORM A BETTER AND FAIRER EDUCATION SYSTEM (The Review)

Submission by The Song Room (TSR)

2 August, 2023.

An essential requisite of the Alice Springs (Mparntwe) Education Declaration is that “*improving educational outcomes for all young Australians is central to the nation's social and economic prosperity and will position young people to live fulfilling, productive and responsible lives*”¹. The Declaration states that Australia's education goals must be achieved through partnerships between government, the education community, young people, families, and the broader community.

Alice Springs (Mparntwe) Education Declaration

Goal 1: The Australian education system promotes excellence and equity

Goal 2: All young Australians become: confident and creative Individuals, successful lifelong learners and active and informed members of the community.²

TSR supports excellence and equity by designing and delivering inclusive programs that create shared responsibility between stakeholder groups (including students, teachers, school leaders, parents, funders, and community members) to create sustainable, strength-based, responsive and tailored solutions to educational challenges.

The need to address social and educational inequities, and the wellbeing of young Australians, is essential if we intend to live in a truly prosperous society. The arts provide a powerful way to uplift, enrich and transform our communities. Arts education helps develop the full range of cognitive, emotional and social skills essential for young people to thrive. Arts education is a critical aspect of a quality education: it promotes learning, it can increase academic performance in other subjects, it can improve school attendance, it teaches students about other cultures and their own, and stimulates creativity and critical thinking.

ABOUT THE SONG ROOM

TSR is the only Australian education organisation delivering multi-year, multi-artform arts learning programs with student and teacher outcomes delivered in primary school classrooms.

Our mission is that all Australian children have the opportunity to participate in the arts to enhance their education, personal development and community involvement regardless of geographical, financial or social disadvantage. This is achieved by embedding arts learning programs in primary schools and their communities, tailored to their unique needs. Over 24 years, more than 450,000 Australian students have directly participated in our sequential arts education programs, and 32,000 teachers have subscribed to the digital arts education portal, ARTS:LIVE.

¹ Department of Education, Skills and Employment. (2019). *Alice Springs (Mparntwe) Education Declaration*, p.4. <https://www.dese.gov.au/alice-springs-mparntwe-education-declaration>

² *ibid.*



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In 2022, TSR delivered arts learning programs in over 220 schools in six states and territories across Australia. It employed around 100 people, the vast majority of whom are educators. TSR has developed a rigorous Program Logic underpinned by its expertise and evidence base. It delivers an integrated approach to arts education which includes curriculum aligned, sequential classroom and hybrid learning, professional learning for generalist primary school teachers in the arts and creative pedagogies, access to online Australian arts education resources via ARTS:LIVE, and community-driven art projects in schools.

The research study *Bridging the Gap in School Achievement Through the Arts*³ published in 2011, fortified TSR's reputation as a leading contributor to Australia's education ecosystem and a critical advocate for the arts in schools. The research provided evidence on the impact of a quality arts education for numeracy and literacy acquisition, school attendance and social and emotional wellbeing through participation in weekly classes.

The Evidenced Impact of TSR Programs

Through experiences in visual arts, music, dance, drama or media arts, young people can increase their understanding of artistic values, practices, processes and techniques and develop their creative and expressive capacities.

Key findings of independent research and evaluation of TSR's programs have been profiled and disseminated in a range of publications, most notably the research undertaken by leading independent educational researchers, Prof. Brian Caldwell and Dr. Tanya Vaughan in the report *Bridging the Gap in School Achievement through the Arts*⁴. Their research demonstrated that compared to control schools, participants in TSR's programs have significant educational, social and wellbeing outcomes, including:

- Higher school attendance: reduced absenteeism by over 65%
- Improved academic outcomes: 1-year improvement in numeracy and literacy
- Improved social and emotional wellbeing outcomes: reduced depression, anxiety and improved self-esteem, school engagement.

"The findings [in the CAIPE research] warrant the most serious attention on the part of policymakers because they are consistent with national and international research and because the differences in experiences of students in The Song Room's programs are consistently significant, and occasionally dramatic, compared to the general experience of students."

Dr Tanya Vaughan and Prof. Brian Caldwell.

³ Caldwell, B and Vaughan, T 2011, *Bridging the Gap in School Achievement Through the Arts*. Retrieved from: <https://www.songroom.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2022/04/Bridging-the-Gap-in-School-Achievement-through-the-Arts.pdf>

⁴ Ibid.



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As we look ahead, we seek to address the most critical priorities in Australian education through practical and impactful initiatives. These priorities are closely aligned to the Review's Terms of Reference, namely:

1. Meeting the needs of all students and shaping the nation's future; and Improving student outcomes – including for students most at risk of falling behind.
2. Improving student mental health and wellbeing
3. Our current and future teachers
4. Collecting data to inform decision-making and boost student outcomes

"The purpose of education is to help learners develop the knowledge, mindset, and toolset necessary to thrive in their transforming world and actively co-construct a flourishing, diverse and equitable society."

OECD Learning Compass 2030 Framework.

1. Meeting the needs of all students and shaping the nation's future; and Improving student outcomes – including for students most at risk of falling behind.

All students benefit from an education that explores diversity, nurtures inclusivity, provides positive representations of culture and identity, promotes equality and equity, and increases understanding, value and recognition of cultures, histories, knowledge and differing perspectives. TSR's programs can do all these things. Over 24 years, TSR has provided quality arts education in communities experiencing disadvantage to over 450,000 students. In 2022, nearly 50% of Song Room schools were based in regional and remote locations.

A quality arts education provides opportunities to develop empathy by considering diverse viewpoints and intercultural skills and knowledge. TSR works in partnership with schools to promote culturally safe teaching and learning practices. At TSR we respect, embrace and appreciate that we are all different. Diversity allows us to explore our differences in a safe, positive and nurturing environment.

Arts Learning at school can be important in building social inclusion and cultivating a sense of belonging, encouraging social and civic participation in young people. At TSR, every effort is made to ensure that young people can be active agents in their learning through the Arts, able to imagine new possibilities, reframe life stories and enact the change they want to see, rather than be passive recipients of learning pre-determined by others.

Not all Australian children are given this opportunity. A socio-economically disadvantaged student is five times more likely to be a low performer than a student from an advantaged background (low performance is defined by the OECD as those 15-year-old students who score below Level 2 on the PISA mathematics, reading and science assessments).⁵ NAPLAN and PISA results consistently demonstrate that a student's postcode matters and that the further a student lives from a capital city in each of Australia's states and territories, the less likely it is that they will achieve at a comparative level with their

⁵ Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) 2016, *Low-Performing Students: Why They Fall Behind and How to Help Them Succeed. Country Note Australia*. Retrieved from: <https://www.oecd.org/australia/PISA-2012-low-performers-Australia-ENG.pdf>



NSRA REVIEW SUBMISSION: THE SONG ROOM

peers in Metropolitan areas.⁶ Similarly, AEDC data reflects that rates of developmental vulnerability for young children increase for children who live in regional and remote areas, have diverse language backgrounds, live in socio-economically disadvantaged communities and/or are from Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander backgrounds.⁷

The Supplementary Census 2013 of Victorian government schools showed that students identified as having high levels of need based on the Student Family Occupation Education index (SFOE) were three times more likely to have no access to any music programs, either curriculum or extra-curricular, compared to students in low SFOE identified schools. Similarly, students in rural schools (primary and secondary) were twice as likely to have no access to quality music programs compared to students in urban/metro area schools.⁸

A tough economic outlook exacerbated by COVID means that families are struggling to provide for extra-curricular arts lessons, making participation in the arts at school a rare and important opportunity.

2. Improving student mental health and wellbeing

Participation in sequential arts education explicitly teaches the core competencies of social and emotional learning. This includes the intrapersonal competencies of self-awareness, self-management and responsible decision making as well as the interpersonal competencies of social awareness and relationship skills. TSR provides schools with a place-based, evidence-informed and curriculum-aligned sequential arts program that focuses on the explicit teaching of social and emotional skills to positively impact student learning and wellbeing and to nurture inclusive, connected and positive school communities.

Students participating in Song Room programs build their connections to friends, their learning environment and their school community. Through collaborative art-making projects, they develop increased feelings of school belonging and pride as valued members of a school community. Students are provided with opportunities to lead community arts projects which can build their confidence and motivation as learners, providing opportunities for them to experience success at school.

In 2021, the National Mental Health Commission developed the first National Children's Mental Health and Wellbeing Strategy due to increasing rates of poor mental health in Australia. The following statistics from the strategy evidence the need for increased wellbeing supports in schools for primary aged children:

- Half of all adult mental health challenges in Australia emerge before the age of 14
- More than 50% of children experiencing mental health challenges in Australia are not receiving any professional help
- Anxiety, depressive disorders and conduct disorders account for three of the five leading causes of disease burden for children aged 5 – 14 years
- 7 out of 10 of the most common presentations to paediatricians are for mental health
- Children who experience disadvantage are at increased risk of experiencing mental ill health.

⁶ Perry, L. Educational disadvantage is a huge problem in Australia - we can't just carry on the same. The Conversation. 2017. Retrieved from: <https://theconversation.com/educational-disadvantage-is-a-huge-problem-in-australia-we-cant-just-carry-on-the-same-74530>

⁷ Australian Government 2021, *Australian Early Development Census (AEDC)*. Retrieved from: <https://www.aedc.gov.au/resources/detail/2021-aedc-national-report>

⁸ Parliament of Victoria. Education and Training Committee. *Inquiry into the extent, benefits and potential of music education in Victorian schools*. 2013.



NSRA REVIEW SUBMISSION: THE SONG ROOM

Research suggests that the *“provision of sustained social and emotional learning programs makes a significant contribution to recovery”* and that *“the practice of positive relationships and the teaching of social learning should be a key focus within all schools supporting communities post emergency.”*⁹

Children living in the most socio-economically disadvantaged communities are twice as likely to be vulnerable on one or more AEDC domains and three times more likely to be vulnerable on two or more domains compared to children living in communities with high levels of socio-economic advantage.¹⁰ This means that many children experiencing disadvantage are already behind in their social and emotional learning needs before commencing school.

The role of the arts in supporting wellbeing has been understood throughout history and across cultures, resulting in the emergence of an interdisciplinary field of ‘arts for health and well-being’ in the last 60 years.¹¹ Furthermore, *“there is growing evidence that active participation in the arts can enhance social connectedness, confidence, self-esteem, mood, concentration, emotional development and mental health and wellbeing.”*¹²

TSR has actively contributed to this research base. Social Ventures Australia's Evidence For Learning's Teaching and Learning Toolkit notes, *“a higher proportion of students in TSR programs demonstrated much higher levels of Social-Emotional Wellbeing and resilience in comparison to their non-TSR counterparts.”*¹³ Independent research conducted on the impact of TSR's programs¹⁴ showed that through participation in sequential arts learning students experienced:

- Improved social-emotional well-being outcomes - reduced depression and anxiety, enhanced self-esteem, and improved school engagement
- Higher school attendance rates - reduced absenteeism by over 65%.

TSR is increasingly being recognised for its development of social and emotional learning skills in primary school children. In 2022, it received close to \$900,000 in funding from the Victorian government to run a semester long program in social and emotional learning in 100 primary schools in regional and metropolitan areas. TSR is currently delivering programs through the Victorian Mental Health Menu providing an evidence based, *“universal intervention to help schools to create a positive, inclusive and supporting school climate, building the preconditions for optimal student learning, development and wellbeing.”*¹⁵ We have been unable to meet the demand for social and emotional learning programs through the arts due to funding limitations. The quality and impact of Song Room programs to improve young people's wellbeing is highlighted in the following student testimonial”

⁹ Cahill, H, Dadvand, B, Shlezinger, K, Romei, K and Farrelly, A 2020, Strategies for supporting student and teacher wellbeing post-emergency. *Journal on Learning, Research and Innovation in Education*, 12(1), pp.23-38.

¹⁰ Australian Government 2021, *Australian Early Development Census (AEDC)*. Retrieved from: <https://www.aedc.gov.au/resources/detail/2021-aedc-national-report>

¹¹ O'Connor, P 2020, *Replanting Creativity During Post-normal Times*. Retrieved from: https://www.teritotoi.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/Replanting-Creativity-during-post-normal-times_FINAL-2021.pdf

¹² *ibid.*

¹³ *ibid.*

¹⁴ *ibid.*

¹⁵ Victorian Government. School's Mental Health Menu:

<https://www.education.vic.gov.au/school/teachers/health/mentalhealth/mental-health-menu/Pages/Menu.aspx?Redirect=1#:~:text=The%20Menu%20is%20a%20list,wellbeing%20outcomes%20for%20their%20students.>



"I am very grateful for your [Song Room Teaching Artist] presence... you have helped with almost all of my emotional struggles and being in the same room as you makes me so incredibly happy." Lucy.

3. Our current and future teachers

Adoption of Australian Curriculum: The Arts

The Australian Curriculum: The Arts, first launched in 2015 and recently reviewed and launched as Version 9, provides the requirements for Australian school children to develop skills in and respond to the arts across five artforms: music, drama, dance, visual and media arts. Recent revisions to the curriculum provide improvements, particularly where it draws tighter links between the Arts and First Nations Histories and Cultures curriculum areas, calling for *"truth-telling with greater respect for, and inclusion of, First Nations Australians histories and cultures"*¹⁶. Despite the strength of the curriculum, it is unclear whether it in and of itself has resulted in increased participation in the arts in Australian schools. To our knowledge there is little data available. TSR would argue that adoption of the arts curriculum is hampered due to the:

- Limited confidence and capability of generalist teachers to teach the arts
- Limited collaboration between State and Federal Governments to adopt a national arts curriculum
- Limited value placed on the arts at school leadership level
- Limited time to include arts lessons in a busy school day
- In more recent times and in some locations, three years of pandemic disruption saw schools under pressure cut arts programs and assign arts specialists to other duties.

TSR provides a critical service to Australia's education ecosystem through the design and delivery of educational programs aligned to the arts curriculum and across other learning areas. It also serves to develop quality teaching practice in the arts and creative pedagogical approaches which are urgently required to build the confidence and capability of generalist primary school teachers, and the capacity of the teaching profession.

Confident and Capable Generalist Teachers

"There is national and international evidence that teacher quality is the single most important in-school factor influencing student achievement."^{17 18}

Improving teacher quality has been identified in The Review an essential reform as part of Australia's efforts to achieve a world class education system. The Alice Springs (Mparntwe) Education Declaration states that *"all Australian governments and the education community...must work together to foster high-quality teaching and leadership"* and that this includes *"providing the opportunity and resources for ongoing professional learning, equipping educators with high-quality evidence and data, and developing well-prepared pre-service teachers."*¹⁸ The Alice Springs (Mparntwe) Education Declaration also states that *"as the importance of a high-quality education grows, so does the complexity of being*

¹⁶ Australian Curriculum and Reporting Authority (ACARA) 2022, *Australian Curriculum Version 9*. Retrieved from: <https://v9.australiancurriculum.edu.au/f-10-curriculum/cross-curriculum-priorities/aboriginal-and-torres-strait-islander-histories-and-cultures?organising-idea=0>

¹⁷ Hattie, J 2003, *Teachers make a difference: What is the research evidence?* Paper presented at the Building Teacher Quality: What does the research tell us ACER Research Conference, Melbourne, Australia. Retrieved from: http://research.acer.edu.au/research_conference_2003/4/

¹⁸ Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) 2005, *Teachers matter: Attracting, developing and retaining effective teachers*, 6th edn, Paris, OECD Publishing.

NSRA REVIEW SUBMISSION: THE SONG ROOM

*an educator.*¹⁹ This is one of the reasons why ongoing, responsive and AITSL aligned professional development is so important.

In primary school settings much of the delivery of the arts curriculum falls on generalist teachers who seldom have the expertise or confidence to teach the arts.

Initial Teacher Education (ITE) provides limited exposure to the arts¹⁹ resulting in early career teachers who lack the confidence and capability to teach the subject area. According to the Fading Notes Report (2023) Australian pre-service teachers receive on average 8 hours of instruction in music, and as little as 11% of respondent ITE lecturers agree that student teachers will be able to deliver music education on completion of their degree.

Generalist teachers who are given the opportunity to participate in 10 sessions of in-class professional learning and mentoring with TSR in music education make quick and considerable gains in their confidence and skills. For teachers who have been lucky enough to participate in TSR programs sustainable outcomes and communities of practice are developed to ensure that the capacity of the teaching professional is positively impacted well into the future.

Teachers need more time to teach,²⁰ this includes the arts curriculum. Given the complexities of this simple statement, schools should be able to rely on a learning ecosystem which provides access to expert organisations like TSR to support the delivery of quality educational outcomes for students and develop the skills of teachers within classroom settings, streamlining their preparation and approach, increasing the level of support they have in the classroom and increasing students' direct access to specialist teachers.

Increasingly, a Song Room program can include participation by generalist teachers and also Casual Relief Teachers (CRTs) who are increasingly assigned to Song Room classrooms due to teacher shortages. TSR is adapting the sequential nature of its programs when and where it needs to, to ensure that CRTs also benefit from the modelling and mentoring in the arts and creative pedagogies that occurs in Song Room programs. Given that CRTs often have limited access to professional learning, this activity is providing increased opportunities to build the capacity of the sector.

As a valued contributor to Australia's education systems, and an employer of approximately 100 arts educators and Teaching Artists each year, TSR has a responsibility to attract and develop great teaching talent and provide career pathways for early career teachers. TSR provides excellent opportunities to achieve this. It's professional learning offering is aligned to AITSL Standards.

Developing Sector Capacity and Communities of Practice

TSR successfully develops communities of practice within schools and across regions, examples include:

- Australian Council for Educational Research (ACER's) evaluation of TSR programs found that there is considerable transfer of knowledge and inspiration within participating schools. Those lucky enough to participate in the program shared their learning with other teachers at their school. In some cases, the activity and high levels of student engagement acted as inspiration for inquisitive teachers to seek out new techniques and classroom activities

¹⁹ Music Education: Right from the Start: Fading Notes Report. 2023 Retrieved from: https://www.alberts.co/wp-content/uploads/2023/06/Albert-Music-Education-Survey_15June_V2A.pdf

²⁰ Sonnemann J., Joiner R. Grattan Institute. Making time for great teaching. 2022.



NSRA REVIEW SUBMISSION: THE SONG ROOM

- TSR provides all teachers at participating schools with free access to its digital arts education portal, ARTS:LIVE, enabling these teachers to access quality lesson plans, classroom stimulus and assessment rubrics and share these with each other
- TSR provides practical online sessions and managed closed Facebook groups where teachers can share their learnings and success. Regular 'song swaps' are a great example of this
- TSR holds cluster events where teachers come together to participate in professional learning, share their learnings and get to know each other. They can then take these learnings and apply them in a classroom setting with the support of TSR experts.

4. Collecting data to inform decision-making and boost student outcomes

Internationally recognised and independent research on TSR's programs, shows that Arts Learning not only has intrinsic value, but when implemented with a structured, innovative and long-term approach, can provide essential extrinsic benefits, such as improved school attendance, academic achievement across the curriculum as well as increased social and emotional wellbeing. Since *Bridging the Gap in School Achievement Through the Arts* (Caldwell, Vaughan) was published in 2011 there have been few Australian studies.

There is an urgent need to update and expand the existing evidence base in Australia to provide data which can inform policy, advocate for the inclusion of the Arts in a quality education, articulate best practice approaches and inform continuous improvement.

There is also an urgent need for reliable information about the extent of arts education taking place in Australian schools to inform policy and enable equitable delivery of programs like TSR's in communities experiencing disadvantage.

*"In an Australasian context, there remains very little examination of the impact of arts participation on students' academic outcomes (Harris & Ammermann, 2015), with only one post-2008 article comparing arts participation to standardised measures of academic achievement (Vaughan & Caldwell, 2014)."*²¹

TSR plays a critical role in Australia's education ecosystem to provide a better and fairer education system closely aligned to the current agenda of the National School Reform Agreement Review. We provide evidence based, educational impact and sustainable outcomes for young people, teachers and system policy makers with the potential to scale. We are keen to meet the demand we are experiencing from school leaders, teachers and students to provide high quality educational and personal development outcomes for Australian young people through the Arts.

We are also keen to participate in the Review process in any way that is helpful to the expert panel steering The Review.

For further discussion please contact:

Anthony Mackay AM (Chair) or Alice Gerlach (CEO) [REDACTED]

²¹ Social Ventures Australia. Evidence for Learning Teaching and Learning Toolkit. Retrieved from: <https://evidenceforlearning.org.au/education-evidence/teaching-learning-toolkit/arts-participation>

