



## Public submission made to the Review to Achieve Educational Excellence in Australian Schools

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Submitting as a: Teacher  
State: NSW

### Summary

Have submitted a supporting document regarding the national Music Teacher Mentoring Program

### Main submission

October 6th, 2017

This submission is in two parts. The first part deals with the National Music Teacher Mentoring Program, (NMTMP) and the impact mentoring has had on schools.

The second part deals with the current circumstances in education and some suggestions for improving this circumstance.

### **NATIONAL MUSIC TEACHER MENTORING PROGRAM**

#### BACKGROUND

Apart from Queensland, where most State Primary schools and certainly all State Secondary schools have classroom music specialists and instrumental specialists, the rest of Australia suffers from an ad hoc approach to music education in spite of a constant barrage of findings nationally and internationally about the efficacy of music education in the life of a child.

The 2004 National Review of Music Education,(established by Senator Rod Kemp and the then Minister for Education Brendan Nelson at my behest in 2003), revealed that approximately 80% of Australian schools have little or no music education. Of the 20% where some music exists, it tends to be taught haphazardly and irregularly, generally favouring the playing of the latest hit songs to which children shout the lyrics and teachers call it 'having fun'. I have witnessed this behaviour first-hand in State schools in Western Australia, South Australia, Victoria and New South Wales.

Many so-called teachers of music make the claim that they can't read or write music but they still teach music. The absurdity of this claim does not deserve the dignity of a reply, but the Panel should be aware that in this modern world of education this

attitude from some teachers is worn as a badge of honour. The triumph of ignorance over knowledge is fast becoming a hallmark in public education. The Panel should also be aware that in some music departments in Australian universities, students are admitted to courses in music who cannot read, write or hear accurately.

On the bright side, however, there are pockets of excellence throughout the country in some State schools where a trained music teacher is in charge of a school's entire music program. These are the teachers we are targeting as potential mentors. At a music education conference in Adelaide in 2012, I proposed the ideas of a NMTMP to the conference attendees and that is how the program began. The concept took nearly eighteen months to go through a long bureaucratic process but results started to emerge after two significant meetings with Federal politicians Brandis and Pyne.

#### CURRENT CIRCUMSTANCE

The NMTMP was established in 2014 after meetings I had with Senator George Brandis, the then Minister for the Arts, and Christopher Pyne, the then Minister for Education.

The Federal Government agreed to fund a pilot program at \$600,000.00 for two years. The program was placed and indeed still is placed, under the auspices of The Australian Youth Orchestra (AYO), an organization into which federal funds could be paid. The funding came from both departments initially, that is Arts and Education. The funding now comes from Arts under the leadership of Senator Fifield.

The NMTMP staff consists of a National Project Officer, Ms Bernadette McNamara and myself. We do not have discrete offices, apart from AYO's premises in Sydney at which we meet very occasionally. Ms McNamara and I run the program through emails, and face-to-face meetings privately and in direct contact with teachers and Departments of education throughout the country.

I stressed to the Federal Government in 2014 that the money would not be spent on infrastructure or office space but would go directly to the program. AYO staff help us with Internet, web site, marketing and the like for which we pay a fee for service as this is work outside their purview as a youth orchestra organization.

The most recent progress report on this program is included as support information by way of an attachment. This document does not include the attachments mentioned on page 5. If Panel members are interested, the full report from The University of Queensland is attached as a link.

The NMTMP has been to date a huge success and has strong implications for mentoring in other disciplines such as Mathematics and Science where many primary teachers have no real depth of knowledge beyond basic arithmetical operations and Science is simply a word they have heard.

Activities of the program include:

workshops for mentors at which the mentoring concept is explained;

specific musical activities to aid in the teaching of musical concepts such as pitch, rhythm, harmony, dynamics etc;

workshops for teachers to be mentored which include activities for up-skilling teachers and building their repertoires of songs, games, dances and the like which they can incorporate in their teaching programs;

meetings with the appropriate authorities in each State and Territory to explain the NMTMP and its potential place in their State;

publication of resource material for mentors and teachers;

curriculum and syllabus advice pertinent to the needs of each mentor and each group of teachers;

organisation of a National conference at which mentors and teachers exchange ideas and techniques, this year's conference having been generously hosted by MONA in Tasmania;

up-date and maintenance of the web-site and publication of a newsletter for teachers used to exchange ideas and repertoire.

The nature of the program is collaborative. There is no specific method imposed on mentors or teachers. The idea is to make the mentors and teachers autonomous and have them teach to their strengths and to work on their weaknesses so they, in turn, become strengths.

#### LIMITATIONS OF MENTORING

It is important for the Panel to understand that this program, like so many other programs schools can buy into, is a band-aid treating a symptom and not a cure eliminating disease.

The single most important matter is one of quality control with programs emanating from outside the school. Quality control in the mentoring program is the greatest point of differentiation between the NMTMP and other programs. All our mentors have to be approved practising teachers, pass a suitability interview to check on musical credentials and teaching history and ultimately report to a supervisor for checking on progress throughout the period of mentoring.

Australia has a huge industry of programs into which schools can buy including pre-school music studios, instrumental teachers for hire, orchestra and band instructors for hire for most of which there is no specific quality control.

As I visit schools nationally I am appalled at the overall standard of this type of hired-in teaching. While there are some very good bands and school orchestras, mainly in the private system with a sprinkling in the State systems, the majority of them are sub-standard.

That a school has a band or an orchestra or a choir is, if well directed and properly taught is a good thing. However, it is also important to remember that an orchestral, band or choral program does not constitute a music education program for every child in the school.

A school music program means that every child has access to a qualified teacher of music on a regular basis. The program should be vocally based and include a wide repertoire of songs, games and dances leading to an understanding of notation and ultimately improvisation.

The implications for this are that we need more qualified music teachers.

The research on music education, which is properly taught in a sequential way by a professionally qualified teacher, is abundantly clear. The one subject which has the most powerful impact on learning is music. This is now common knowledge in the world of music education specifically and in the world of education generally. In Australia, that message, it would seem apart from a few enlightened pockets throughout the country has not been received or understood.

### **FROM MENTORING TO SPECIALISATION**

As the mentoring program grows, I am hoping to make the case that beyond Grade Two within a Primary School, a generalist classroom teacher is ill-equipped to teach music to higher grades without intense and highly specialised training. If Australia is to be in a position of having an excellent education system, then a restoration of music education as a mandatory subject, taught by specialists is essential, as is the case in Queensland and indeed has been so for some considerable period of time.

### **QUALITY SCHOOLS**

The nature of the work which has been given to this committee is perhaps the single most important event in Australian Education and has provided this group, quite possibly, with a chance to find solutions to the current crisis in education.

In Australia, so far as music education is concerned, some undergraduate teachers in Primary training courses receive approximately twelve (12) hours of music training in the four years of their course. Others receive as little as four (4) hours in courses known as Creative and Performing Arts where lecturers blend all the arts together. Compare this with South Korea's one hundred and eighty (180) hours and Finland's four hundred and eighty (480) hours both over four year periods. These statistics are known internationally and are the source of a national embarrassment among music educators in Australia.

It is genuinely disturbing to read the second paragraph of the Quality Schools document which states:

**'Australia has an excellent education system but our plateauing or declining results... etc etc.'**

If that statement were true, which it isn't, why would we have plateauing or declining results? This is a complete failure by the current Federal Government to recognise what is actually happening in education at the teacher training level and the State departmental levels.

The third paragraph of the Quality Schools document reads:

'Through the implementation of the Teacher Education Ministerial Advisory Group recommendations, we now have revised and strengthened course accreditation standards.....'

Where is the evidence for that statement? I made it my business to contact several of my university colleagues who indicated that students are taken into their courses if they have the correct ATAR and they then simply turn up on day one for lectures! This is hardly rigorous selection.

In State jurisdictions, teachers are not autonomous. They have to follow curricula determined by people who haven't been in a classroom for years and have little or no idea of the subjects for which they are writing. Often, they employ teams of writers who produce pages and pages of meaningless busy work. An example, from an unidentified Australia State is included here. The wording, including all the errors of syntax and grammar have been preserved as this is a verbatim extract.

MUR004

React to music

Elaborations

- exposed to and experience various forms of music and characteristics for example music and sounds, beats, rhymes, cultural; music, different instruments etc
- reacting to music and various physical and gestural ways
- experience and respond to a range of musical sounds, including live and recorded music, for example maintaining attention, visually tracking
- exposed to music from various cultures and purposes especially pieces which create a specific feelings, or settings
- listening to and reacting to music and musical instruments from different contexts and cultures

Apart from the fact that there are no real sentences and that what is there is essentially meaningless and makes no sense anyway, the Panel should be aware that this is a sample from hundreds of so-called elaborations following this model in the document which teachers are expected to read and understand and then implement

and assess! The document by the way, is considered to be excellent by the State authority!

*(I am certainly prepared to reveal the name of the State if required as I have spoken to them about this directly and told them that it is a national disgrace. It is on the web for everyone to read, including colleagues of mine from the USA, the UK and Europe who read it in utter disbelief. It does make us in Australia look very stupid when this sort of tomfoolery masquerades as rigorous academic content).*

#### **ASSESSMENT OF STUDENTS**

Australian education is obsessed with assessment. Teachers spend as much time assessing as they do teaching and often more time in writing assessment documents which have little or no meaning to the student or the parents. In many cases teachers simply use the convenient drop-down box on a report so that the child and parents are not offended or upset by any negative comments.

This obsession with assessment creates tensions in teachers, students and parents. The advent of standardised testing (NAPLAN) in Australia has seen a steady decline in our standards nationally and internationally, leading to a manipulation of results and a series of rationales for why we are doing so badly.

By manipulation of results is meant that many schools require poorly performing students to remain at home on NAPLAN days. Grade Four children are often asked to re-take a Grade Three test to boost the school's results and profile. Many Principals require that Music, Art Dance and Drama are suspended during the weeks leading up to NAPLAN tests. I have been in the circumstance of giving a workshop to teachers in the far west of New South Wales and suggested some courses of action which might be taken to improve music education and the teachers have responded by saying it would have to wait until all the NAPLAN preparation and tests were over.

#### **COMPETITON VERSUS COLLABORATION**

Education is not, or should not be, about competition. In Australia, education is competitive.

Competition prevents collaboration as schools vie to improve their My School standings.

The most powerful aspect of the mentoring program is the collaboration of like-minded professionals. Mentors and teachers feel re-vitalised after a long period of mentoring and teaching

The obsession with literacy and numeracy has hijacked education in a spectacular way.

Some Principals and teachers believe that literacy and numeracy are subjects in and of themselves and make statements such as; 'we teach literacy here to a very good level'.

I have visited schools where they have books strewn about on a table called a 'literacy table'. The word 'library' seems to have been replaced with literacy table. Children even talk about doing literacy and numeracy and we are supposed to be educating them? We are supposed to be teaching them how to use language?

This obsession with literacy and numeracy brought about by the introduction of NAPLAN is a gift to the lazy teacher who simply provides his or her class with trial test books which can be purchased at Target and K-Mart. These lazy teachers simply encourage their classes to complete practice tests so that their literacy and numeracy will be up to scratch on the all-important NAPLAN day.

The gifted teacher is in a constant state of frustration knowing that NAPLAN has to be served and also knowing that NAPLAN is essentially a waste of time.

We are in a very serious state when it comes to education in this country. The seriousness of our current condition remains largely unrecognised by Federal and State Governments who have politicised NAPLAN to such an extent that many people think it is a good thing to have.

How can it be good when it proves to be constantly failing? Who knows more about a child's progression at school? – the My School site or the classroom teacher?

### **TEACHER TRAINING**

Providing more resources to schools is not always the answer.

Providing quality teachers who are thoroughly scrutinised at point of interview and who are submitted to training which eliminates the politically correct subject matter to which they are now exposed and replaces this with serious subject content, method, examination of pedagogical practices and the like.

On graduation these teachers should be paid properly and should be autonomous. They should not be accountable to a Federally imposed system of standardised testing but should be responsible for creating their own curriculum based on the needs of their students who they themselves have assessed.

As a still practising teacher and one who gives workshops and teaches children's classes on a regular basis, I can say that our Australian children are, in essence, no different from the children I have taught anywhere else in the world including Asia, the USA, Europe and the UK.

However, we are in clear and present danger of destroying the minds of these children if we continue to insult their teachers with NAPLAN and encourage

everyone to perform to the lowest common denominator. Mediocrity is perceived to be acceptable.

Resourcing this mediocrity will surely create more mediocrity. Is mediocrity what we want to see from Quality Schools?

We go to school to learn how to learn and to learn how to think. Currently, that is not the philosophy being promoted. We go to school to pass endless tests and assessments.

Surely creativity is at the heart of education and this creativity, which leads to the making of new work, is essential to the way in which we function as human beings. That is to say, using the brain in a creative way has an impact on the way in which we view the world and how we use our imaginations, stimulating thought and reflection and subsequently forming our senses of enquiry, curiosity and thirst for knowledge and learning. Is this the way we want to go?

It is the way we are going with the NMTMP and the way in which we will continue, come what may.

Richard Gill AO